Introduction to the Bass Islands

Little is known about the history of the Bass Islands prior to the 1800s. Scientists tell us that these and the neighboring land masses were formed by glaciers during the Ice Age; grooves left by the huge moving masses of ice can still be seen in some of the islands’ limestone surfaces. Thousands of years later, members of several Indian tribes, including the Ottawa, Wyandot, Miami, and Delaware, frequented the islands, especially during the hunting season, when fish and fowl were abundant and fat raccoons were plentiful.

By 1700, the four islands of the Bass group—South Bass, Middle Bass, North Bass, and Gibraltar—had probably been sighted by the French-Canadian fur trader and explorer Louis Jolliet, who in 1669 was one of the first white men to sail on Lake Erie. Ten years later, in 1679, the French explorer René de la Salle may have landed at Middle Bass Island during one of his lake voyages, accompanied by another Frenchman, the explorer and missionary Father Louis Hennepin, who reportedly offered the first Catholic mass on Middle Bass and named the island Isle de Fleur, or Island of Flowers.

During the next hundred years, the island group was visited by numerous explorers, trappers, and military men. The islands were charted in the late 1700s by the British, who subsequently relinquished their claims as a result of the Revolutionary War. After the Revolution, the lands were designated as part of Connecticut’s Western Reserve, and by 1795 the ownership of the islands had passed from the state of Connecticut to a group called the Connecticut Land Company. This company began selling off parcels of its land three years later, and by 1807 a man named Alfred Pierpont Edwards had purchased South Bass, Middle Bass, and Gibraltar for approximately $25,000.
In 1811, Edwards's men drove off the French-Canadian squatters who were the first white inhabitants of the area. The following year, about thirty of Edwards's employees cleared three hundred acres of forest on South Bass, erected a building near Put-in-Bay harbor, and began to raise sheep, hogs, potatoes, corn, and wheat.

Meanwhile, the British renewed their claim to the Bass Islands at the onset of the War of 1812, and together with the Indians (who had, by treaty, retained hunting privileges on the islands), they routed the members of the Edwards settlement, burned buildings, and destroyed crops.

The British claim to the Bass Islands was but part of a larger interest in all of the Northwest Territory, and as a result, a number of important battles were fought in northwestern Ohio. One of the most significant of these was the Battle of Lake Erie. This three-hour naval confrontation, on 10 September 1813, resulted in the defeat and capture of a British naval squadron by the American commodore, Oliver Hazard Perry. During the conflict, giant clouds of cannon smoke were easily seen from the Bass Islands, and Perry used South Bass's Put-in-Bay as a base of operations, while nearby Gibraltar Island reportedly served as a lookout. Six British and American naval officers were killed during the battle and buried at what now is known as the Island Park. According to local legend, a single willow tree sprouted from a tiny sprig dropped on the gravesite. After the willow died, the Cannonball Monument was erected.

Two years later, as a result of the Treaty of Ghent, the British permanently gave up all claims to the Bass Islands. In the meantime, Edwards's heirs continued to employ agents to settle and farm the area, especially South Bass, where the first permanent settlement was established in 1822 near Put-in-Bay harbor. Timbering began on all the islands, which were rich in oak, walnut, and cedar, and by 1837, Edwards's representatives had begun cutting and selling cedar wood as steamship fuel. The islands' native limestone also was sold as ship ballast.

Yet although habitation and commerce had begun, development of the islands was slow to occur. Ships came and went, a few docks were built, and passengers occasionally stopped to view the pleasing island scenery. By 1853, only five or six families lived permanently on the islands in a handful of cabins.

In 1854, settlement began in earnest when a Puerto Rican
named José de Rivera Saint Jurgo bought South Bass, Middle Bass, and Gibraltar from Edwards's heir, Alice Edwards Vinton. De Rivera, as he is commonly known, had toured America's southern states with the intention of buying land for a plantation, but was put off by the idea of slavery. Hearing of the beauty of the Lake Erie islands, he chartered a boat to Put-in-Bay and within forty-eight hours owned the three islands that the Edwards family had held for nearly half a century.

De Rivera first raised sheep on South Bass, but he soon became interested in cultivating grapes. Expounding on the islands' favorable climate and soil conditions, he managed to interest several German wine-growing experts from Cincinnati and the old country in his scheme. The first vines were planted in 1858, and by 1865, grape varieties such as Concord, Niagara, and Amber Queen were cultivated in the islands, and sixty thousand pounds of grapes were being harvested annually. As the island wine industry prospered, land prices soared to $1,500 per acre. In 1871, the Put-in-Bay Wine Company was formed to represent no fewer than forty local vintners, shippers, and distributors. And by 1878, South Bass alone boasted seventy-one grape growers cultivating 550 acres.

Among the pioneers who purchased land for grape growing from de Rivera are important names in Bass Island history such as Ruh, Mueller, Burggraf, Wehrle, Dodge, Vroman, and Cooper. But perhaps the name most known outside the islands was that of John Brown, Jr., son of the famous abolitionist and Harpers Ferry raider. He settled and began raising grapes on South Bass after his father was executed in 1859; he is buried in the island's Crown Hill Cemetery. Today several of the old-fashioned wine cellars built by the pioneer families still stand, but many of the family vineyards have been bought by large companies such as Meier's. A few family vineyards do, however, remain in operation.

As the mellow local wines gained in reputation, so did interest in the islands' pleasant scenery. Soon passenger steamers from Toledo, Sandusky, Detroit, and Cleveland began to dock at various wineries and shaded inlets, and especially at Put-in-Bay harbor. The island area became known as a restful summer retreat, and wealthy and prominent figures including Presidents Hayes, Cleveland, Harrison, and Taft visited the Bass Islands. Stores, restaurants, hotels, and taverns were built for the eager tourists, who crowded the steamers daily in warm weather, and the rich
built lavish summer homes, joined elegant private clubs, or frequented exclusive resorts.

The palatial Hotel Victory on South Bass, which opened in 1892, represented the height of the islands' popularity with tourists. In its day the world's largest summer hotel, the massive structure burned to the ground in 1919; the grandeur of its Victorian-style architecture and its prominence as a summer haven, however, are still well remembered.

Although the days of their turn-of-the-century glory are past, the Bass Islands, and South Bass and Put-in-Bay in particular, have retained their popularity. Today, attractions such as Perry's Monument, the Viking Longhouse, the Lonz Winery, and the Crystal Cave continue to draw visitors, who delight in the relaxed yet festive atmosphere found in the area.

Renewed interest in fishing and boating also have helped fill the hotels, restaurants, and taverns of South and Middle Bass, while the local scenery, quaint architecture, and historic sites add to the region's appeal. As soaring travel costs keep vacationers close to home, tourists are rediscovering the Bass Islands and their fascinating heritage.