

## HISTORY OF THE GREAT SALT POND SERIES

### Early Pond Settlements

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Humanity's oldest tool is fire. The first indigenous residents of Block Island purposely set ground fires. Cleared areas around the shoreline eased transporting protein from the ocean, in the form of fish and shellfish, into the villages. In particular, the areas adjacent to the Great Salt Pond witnessed the human use of fire for centuries. The use of fire greatly increased across southern New England with the introduction of maize (originally from Central America) as a food source in roughly 1000 CE.

Native fire use certainly caught the attention of Europeans sailing past New England. The Italian explorer Giovanni da Verrazano in 1514 was the first European to see Block Island. On the same voyage he also noted the vast treeless expanse along Narragansett Bay, in the area that would become Providence, which he estimated to be twenty-five to thirty leagues (one league being roughly three statute miles). The regular employment of fire on Block Island cleared areas of undergrowth while retaining the larger trees. Over the centuries this method exposed future areas for permanent villages, fresh water, and access to the sea. Native Americans shaped ecological environs which English settlers would inherit. Far from a true wilderness needing taming, the first English settlers landed on a landscape in southern New England not only shaped by humans but in some cases well managed for centuries.

In 1975 Francis Jennings published *The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and The Cant of Conquest*. Just as America was preparing for the Bicentennial, Jennings's book presented a challenge to America's colonial mythology in rejecting the notion of New England as a "virgin" landscape. He wrote, "The American land was more like a widow than a virgin. Europeans did not find a wilderness here; rather, however involuntarily, they made one." By "involuntarily" he is referring to the transfer of Eurasian diseases to the Americas.

For decades before the Puritans landed at Plymouth Rock in 1620, fisherman and explorers landed on shore to trade and barter with the native population along coastal New England. Physical interactions encouraged transmissions and epidemics soon followed. Thus, Jennings argues, "The so-called settlement of America was a resettlement, a reoccupation of the land made waste by the diseases and demoralization introduced by the newcomers." Rejecting the myth that English settlers carved out a civilization from a wilderness, Jennings asserts the English colonists inherited a landscape predesigned for European agriculture. Use of annual ground



Stone marker noting the site of a Manissean village over two thousand years ago. The archeological dig conducted at the location, on the north side of the Great Salt Pond, was dated as occupied from 500 BCE. This dig granted a window into Manissean life before the influx of maize into the region around 1000 CE.

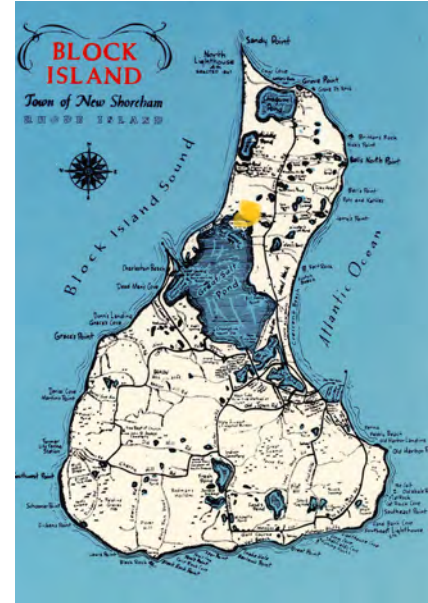


View of the marker looking toward the south and the Great Salt Pond. For those first Block Islanders, the immediate areas surrounding the Great Salt Pond attracted permanent villages that lasted for centuries.

fires to kill off rodents and encourage the growth of grasses and using wood to heat their dwellings, Native Americans, had for centuries, shaped and reshaped the landscape known today as southern New England.

The single largest water feature on the island was the brackish water of the Great Salt Pond, which, at 670 acres, equated to roughly 10 percent of the island's mass. Located on the western edge of the center of the island, only a thin sliver of land separated it from the Atlantic. Surrounding the island was habitat for a range of shellfish such as clams, oysters and mussels. While the island did not have deer, the combination of shellfish, sturgeons and seals produced an amazingly rich range of calories. Even in comparison to other native villages in coastal New England, the natives that lived on the island had an incredibly high levels of protein available from this maritime ecosystem. Over the centuries, collective knowledge improved on tactics for fishing and hunting seals. As a result, previous to European contact, Block Island had one of the highest population densities in southern New England. Archaeological digs in the 1980s led by Dr. Kevin McBride, of the University of Connecticut, centered on possible village sites on the land to the north of the Great Salt Pond. These digs forty years ago yielded a tremendous amount of data on the indigenous inhabitants known as the Manisseans, and in doing so shed light into how life on Block Island was different than the mainland. In particular, the burial practices of the Manisseans were very different when compared with other groups in southern New England, thus pointing to the distinctiveness of this indigenous group. Evidence gathered from digs conducted over the decades since, combined with primary source materials from the mainland, points to far-reaching ecological change caused by humans on Block Island before the arrival of Europeans in 1661.

Archaeological digs around the perimeter of the Great Salt Pond confirmed it contained multiple settlements spanning centuries. However, the influx of the farming of maize into the region around 1,000 CE not only transformed how the Manisseans lived on the island but also where they resided. A European survey of the island in the 1630s points to not one, but six main villages, each of which is estimated to have a population of 100-120 people. Unearthed middens piles provided a rich window into not only what was consumed but also tools and tactics used in carving out an existence. Broken tools, bones from seals and sturgeons, shells from hickory nuts, when combined with other data paints a picture of a well-managed landscape. McBride, in talking of what he believes is the largest population density in southern New England, stated, "it is a testament to the richness of the ecosystem around and on Block Island to support so many people." McBride points to the earliest land deeds of the seventeenth century granting a snapshot of a landscape well-managed by the Manisseans for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Those European settlers landing on Block Island in 1661 were not stepping into a virgin wilderness.



*Yellow dot on the map indicating the north end of the pond where the village site was found.*



*Excavated Site*

**OUR MISSION:** To protect and enhance the environmental quality of the Great Salt Pond, including its shorelines and wetlands, and to promote appropriate and productive uses of the Pond's resources by residents, visitors and local businesses.

**FUNDING:** Individual contributions, membership dues, special events, program grants. IRS 501(c)3 non-profit. Contributions are tax-deductible to the extent allowed by law.

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