



HISTORY OF THE GREAT SALT POND SERIES

A Unique Design for a Unique Seascape: Block Island’s Double-Ender

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The deforestation of the island in the decades after European settlement resulted in the creation of a town ordinance in 1714 curtailing the cutting of the remaining.¹ As a result, islanders would adapt and turn to peat for home heating and cooking. Thus, with limited access to lumber, islanders needed a tough little vessel to mirror their livelihoods which were multiple.

Like each family on Block Island, no two double-enders were exactly the same. However, common characteristics linked all these craft. This boat design symbolizes the passing down of knowledge from generation to generation taking place in the colonial era on this speck of coastal New England. The Block Island double-ender embodies the environmental factors of this topography. Namely, no natural harbor. Thus, once the harbors arrived on Block Island with Old Harbor starting in the decade of the 1870s and the opening of the Great Salt Pond in 1895 (which created New Harbor) this design would no longer be practical. However, the Block Island double-ender still functions today as a symbol of the rugged, and yet refined, way of life on this island before changes of the Industrial Revolution were unleashed onto American society.

Ranging from eighteen to twenty-four feet in length, these double masted sailing craft had in mind a two-man crew. Many times, fathers and sons not only operated these vessels but constructed them. Round stones on the beaches of Block Island provided a system of ballast in these open hulled vessels, which could be easily jettisoned, thus allowing the craft to be pulled ashore by a team of oxen if inclement weather threatened. This system of ballast also allowed for beach stones to be tossed overboard while fishing to displace weight from fish hauled into the vessel. One author described the development of the Block Island double-ender as, “Evolution driven by practical needs informed by long hours on the sea in all weather. Practicality, common sense, and lack of hard cash, birthed ingenuity in meeting needs using materials at hand.”² While this summation is written for the design of a boat for a specific corner of New England, it would also apply to the residents who were behind the design. While resourcefulness is a Yankee trait, this was especially so on this little island. The usefulness of double-enders did not end after decades of use and she was no longer seaworthy. One Block Island family dragged the worn down double-ender onto the farm. Once her masts were removed, she was then flipped over, then promptly cut in half to create two improvised henhouses.³

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The Block Island double-ender is still a symbol of the uniqueness of this seascape and the people who have lived here over the centuries. This half scale model was constructed for the 1961 Tricentennial events, which was towed in a parade down Water Street in August of 1961 by Thomas Littlefield.

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shipwrecks, only two double-enders were ever lost. Beyond fishing, these vessels provided a means for Block Island farmers to transport farm products to the mainland. Also, before the first U.S. Post Office opened on the island in 1832, and after as well, double-enders transported written communications back and forth between Newport two to three times a week in all seasons. Like the conveyable knowledge involved in constructing double-enders, fathers taught sons the means to read and navigate the dangerous waters and shoals in all seasons and sea conditions.

While all coastal New England residents could look to both the land and the sea for livelihood, a key aspect of the history of Block Island was the combination of these dangerous waters with unfamiliar sea captains. In the age of sail, before the internal combustion engine transformed maritime technology, the shoals of Block Island claimed many vessels. In close proximity to routes either starting or concluding in the ports of New York City, some historians estimate that the shoals of Block Island claimed half of all the total shipwrecks in all of New England. The term shipwreck can be deceiving, as many times these vessels simply ran aground. Most of these shipwrecks did not result in the destruction of the vessel as the next high tide, or the unloading of cargo from the vessel, or a combination of both, could result in getting the vessel underway again.

Wrecking, being the action of assisting crews in the lightening of vessels, was another profitable maritime occupation for island residents. Forward looking companies, who may have experienced the financial strain caused by the shoals of Block Island, looked for and hired local pilots whose intimate knowledge of the dangerous waters assisted sea captains in navigating the waters off Block Island. Thus, the shoals of Block Island provided not only construction materials but also the formation of myths about the island and the islanders themselves. Destroyed vessels for centuries provided building materials for an island lacking access to the means to acquire wood and metal. Some of this repurposed lumber was transformed into Block Island double-enders.

The shoals around Block Island along with dense fog provided ample opportunities for ships to run ashore from the colonial era well into the twentieth century. Islanders, in addition to farming and fishing, added wrecking to their diverse skillset. From the 1660s – 1940s islanders completed a range of tasks associated with vessels running aground including saving lives of crew and passengers, unloading vessels, salvaging cargo before a vessel broke apart, and using wood and metal from wrecked vessels in the construction of new buildings on the island. Resourcefulness was a necessity, even after the opening of both harbors caused the usefulness of the double-ender design to end.



This half scale reconstruction of a Block Island double-ender was led by Fred Benson. In this photo, she is launched on her maiden voyage on the Great Salt Pond near Payne's Dock. The Interstate ferry vessel Quonset is seen docked in the background.



An undated black and white photo of a hull from another era decomposing. Some Block Island families, with the need for resourcefulness with lumber, would saw old double enders in half, place them upside down, thus creating two improvised hen houses.

¹Ritchie, *Lore and Legends*, 41.

²John Amaral, "Saudades – a Block Island Double Ender," *Wing & Wing: The Official Newsletter of the American Schooner Association*, Spring 2014, 1.

³Ritchie, *Lore and Legends*, 44.

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