



HISTORY OF THE GREAT SALT POND SERIES

A Question of Access: A Harbor-less Block Island

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A key feature of the geography of the island, which differed greatly from Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket, was the absence of a natural harbor. The European settlers envisioned a growing community centered around a manmade harbor. The Great Salt Pond, again a brackish water feature separated from the ocean by a thin sandbar, had been utilized by the indigenous populations for thousands of years. Thus, with some elbow grease and engineering,

these Europeans envisioned a breach deep enough to allow a bustling town and harbor.

However, repeated efforts to create a permanent breach in the sand bar separating the pond from the ocean were unsuccessful. While nearby Nantucket in the late eighteenth century was not only the whaling capital of the world but also one of the richest communities in the United States, in contrast, Block Islanders scratched out a living utilizing only the resources at hand. Skillsets in running households, farming and fishing operations were refined and honed over the generations.

The Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century changed everything. In a brief fifty-year period from 1850-1900 new products dumped into the American economy radically altered how Americans did pretty much everything. From what they ate to what they wore, the Industrial Revolution produced tools that transformed how Americans did business. Such implements included sewing machines, farming implements, cash registers, and typewriters. Considering the growth of rail transportation nationally in this mere fifty-year period boggles the mind with just 10,000 miles of track constructed by 1850 and over 200,000 miles in 1900.

Cities became larger, dirtier, noisier and contained a denser population. Smokestacks belched unknown toxins into the urban skies. The transformation of where Americans lived also transformed how they viewed locations devoid of these aspects of modern life such as the still rural landscapes of New England. Of this shift one author wrote, "In the eyes of nostalgic urban Americans, the seemingly timeless landscapes of rural New England came to represent the values that guided the nation since Puritan times."¹ This same scholar proposes that the railroad created the first American tourists.

Migration is at the core of the identity of all Americans from the first indigenous bands crossing the Bering Strait to the waves of Irish seeking relief from the potato famine in the 1840s immigrating to the U.S. However, for the first time the railroad ushered in movement for the average person for fun and entertainment. While no railroad depot would ever connect to Block Island, the ever-growing length of the American railroad system increasingly linked them to such New England towns as New London and Providence where steam powered ferries transported them to the island. As the Industrial Revolution yielded not only economic efficiency but free time for Americans, locations such as Block Island deemed "untouched" became more and more attractive as the nineteenth century drew to a close. Additionally, the ever-denser populations of these cities as a result of the Industrial



The business environment of the Island transformed quickly with the Federal investment in constructing Old Harbor. In this image a early rendition of the Ocean View Hotel is seen.

Expanding business resulted in an expanding Ocean View Hotel, which sadly burned to the ground in July 1966.



Revolution sparked epidemics in the summer months making locations such as Block Island ideal for those with the means.

Coastal New England was radically transforming during this time. For example, in just the two years between 1871 – 1873, Fall River added twenty-two mills and an additional 20,000 residents. Nearby New Bedford quickly transitioned from processing whale oil to textile manufacturing and from 1800-1910 the city's population increased 300 percent.² For Block Island, the lack of a natural harbor such as those on Martha's Vineyard, Nantucket and Fishers Island, would yield a bit of irony. Lacking the commercial and business opportunities of the aforementioned islands, the possibility of tourism sparked the interest of those looking for a means of making a living beyond small scale farming and fishing.

Of this situation, one group of authors wrote, "Within the context of the four islands, however, it is significant that Block Island was the first, and in some ways the only, one of the group to encourage summer visitors on a large scale."³ The first large public hotel, the Spring House, opened its doors on Block Island in 1852 and still stands and holds a commanding view on the east side of the island looking toward Newport. The history of the Island's built environment, which up until this time was just small farms and government buildings such as lighthouses, would be radically altered. The embrace of tourism in the nineteenth century transformed many communities in ways both large and small in the United States and Block Island would be no exception. Of the appeal of communities to embrace tourism one author succinctly wrote, "The embrace of tourism triggers a contest for the soul of a place."⁴

As the New England landscape was radically transformed via the Industrial Revolution, so too would the tourists' view of rural landscapes that remained mostly untouched by the transformations launched by this movement. This is seen in one of the first articles written about Block Island as a tourist destination in 1858. The author called the open farm ground and pastures of Block Island "a great defect in the landscape, and a drawback to its pleasantness as a summer resort."⁵ This view of what this landscape would represent transformed in the decades that would follow. By 1882 this same rural New England setting was transformed in the eyes of the increasing numbers of summer visitors. One description read, "Its normal state for two hundred years was isolation. Its inhabitants had little intercourse with the mainland ... and formed a sturdy, self-sustained little republic, independent of their neighbors and careless of the great world without."⁶

The shift in these two perspectives spanning just twenty-four years not only includes how rural New England was viewed by outsiders but also in the numbers who sought the uniqueness of the island's sea and landscape. When the 1858 article was written the island had no harbor. When the 1882 article was published, the U.S. Government had invested in the construction of a harbor on the middle portion of the eastern side of the island. Upon the completion of Old Harbor in 1876 the island would never be the same. Commerce shifted as a result, away from the center of the Island (at the intersection of Center Road & Old Town Road), and toward the manmade harbor to the east. Another shift was soon coming, this of course being the creation of the second harbor known today as New Harbor, a hybrid environment, part natural and part man-made. The successful opening of the permanent cut in 1895, in the sandbar between the Great Salt Pond and the Atlantic, formed what we call New Harbor.



The Block Island fishing fleet at Old Harbor at its peak before the Hurricane of 1938. The fishing buildings seen (on center right) would be knocked down in the late 1950s.

¹Judd, *Second Nature*, 140.

²Judd, *Second Nature*, 213.

³Historic and Architectural Resources of Block Island, Rhode Island (Providence: Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, 1991), 6.

⁴Hal K. Rothman, *Devil's Bargain: Tourism in the Twentieth-Century American West* (Lawrence: KS: University of Kansas Press, 1998), 11.

⁵Henry T. Beckwith, "The History of Block Island," *Historical Magazine*, April 1858.

⁶Charles Burr Todd, "The Island of Manisses," *Lippincott's Magazine* 30 (December 1882): 530.

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