



HISTORY OF THE GREAT SALT POND SERIES

Amelia Earhart's Block Island Adventure

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A July afternoon in 1929 appeared like any other summer day on Block Island's Great Salt Pond. The first indication of the uniqueness of this day came from the drone of an aircraft engine. As this was an amphibian plane, meaning

it landed on water, several passes were made to position for the best water landing into the wind on the surface of the Great Salt Pond. The craft, which was part of the fleet of New York Suburban Airline, had left Rye, New York only 80 minutes earlier and landed on a nearly empty water feature.

It was no overstatement to say one of the passengers onboard the plane was one of the most famous people in the world. She was a bestselling author noted for recounting her adventures in flight. It was ironic that Amelia Earhart was a passenger on this craft and not the pilot as she was the first female pilot to successfully fly across the Atlantic. But this adventurous woman was not visiting the Great Salt Pond to fly but to dive.

Born in Atchison, Kansas in 1897, Amelia sought out adventure from an early age. In 1904, after attending the World's Fair in St. Louis and seeing a roller coaster for the first time, the seven-year-old Amelia constructed a homemade version involving the top of her parent's home. The experience of surviving the improvised car tipping over on the edge of the roof of the house she later recalled felt "just like flying." In 1928 she successfully became the first woman to fly across the Atlantic, becoming a global celebrity. She wrote about her adventure in the book *20 Hrs. 40 Min.*, which was the time of the flight. Three years after her visit to Block Island she would cross the Atlantic again in under 15 hours. Later, she would become the first person (woman or man) to cross the Pacific Ocean from Hawaii to California solo.

The answer to the reason for her Block Island vacation was an experimental submarine docked in Connecticut which was headed to the Great Salt Pond the next day. Constructed in 1907 by an eccentric millionaire, the 92-foot-long submarine named the *Defender* was rumored to be the result of a daydream after reading Jules Verne's 1872 classic novel *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. The craft was an experimental submarine designed with salvaging shipwrecks in mind. While salvaging Block Island had a long-storied history, this craft proposed to salvage not from the surface but from a platform on the bottom of the ocean.



A man stands atop the Defender. Constructed in 1906-1907, this radical design concept was decades ahead of standard submarine development.

Source: Public Domain.



The owner, in seeking to attract attention to his concept, enlisted the persona of the world's most famous female pilot. The term "aviatrix" was used in contemporary articles covering her visit. One newspaper started the article covering her visit with, "Miss Amelia Earhart, famous transatlantic aviatrix, who arrived at New Harbor, Block Island, with a party of friends late yesterday afternoon, will exchange her trim flying suit for a heavy diving outfit this morning when she temporarily assumes the role of a deep-sea diver."

Once the boat was docked, a car transported her to the Narragansett Inn where a celebratory dinner was held in her honor. After dinner island resident Sam Mott gave her a VIP tour of the island. She settled in early in her room at the Narragansett as the next day included several Block Island adventures. The following morning began with a sword fishing trip with islander Capt. Harry Smith on the vessel *Carnegie II* at 6:30am. With the fishing trip completed, Earhart boarded the experimental submarine the *Defender* and this cohort cruised out of the Great Salt Pond toward the westside of Block Island. Donning a diving suit and large bell helmet, she successfully completed a 12-minute dive off Block Island's western shore. When reporters attempted to elevate her status as a female diver, she quickly retorted, "It was absolutely nothing. Many women have gone deeper and stayed longer."

After Earhart's brief Block Island adventure, which commenced and concluded with the massive amphibian aircraft on the surface of the Great Salt Pond, she continued pushing the envelope. In 1937 she disappeared in New Guinea in attempting to circumnavigate the earth. She was just 39 and 3 weeks short of her 40th birthday. While multiple efforts have been made to recover her body and portions of her aircraft, these have never been successfully located. She perished as she lived, which was pushing the boundaries forward, whether as an aviatrix or vacationing on Block Island.



Earhart on the Defender getting assistance in putting on the diving suit. This took place off Block Island's west coast. Her voyage on the Defender started and concluded on a dock at the Great Salt Pond. Source: History of Diving Museum.



Smiling with the suit on, Earhart waits for the final portion of the suit, the diving bell helmet. Her dive to the bottom of the Atlantic would last 12 minutes. Source: History of Diving Museum.

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.

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