



## HISTORY OF THE GREAT SALT POND SERIES

### The Long Tradition of the New England Town Meeting Protects the GSP

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The New England town-meeting is a centuries long tradition in the American experiment with democracy. Before the Declaration of Independence (1776) and the ratification of the U.S. Constitution (1789) residents of the New England colonies (mostly white males of course) retained a public forum to discuss a range of public topics such as school and bridge construction. Unlike the English subjects, the colonists of New England carved out a space to begin ushering in the concept of freedom of expression, known as the New England Town Meeting. Such meetings taking place before the Revolution laid the foundation for the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights. This New England tradition of the town-meeting proved critical to the residents of Block Island in protecting the Great Salt Pond (GSP) increasingly under threat in the 1970s and 1980s.



*A color postcard circa 1950 of the GSP as seen from the Champlin Farm on a summer's day with the view of a single vessel in the entirety of the western section of the Pond. (Charles E. Hayes Collection)*

Since the consumer culture of the decade of the 1950s, the number of boat owners has been on an upward trajectory. Postcards of the GSP over time demonstrate this larger national trend in private boat ownership in miniature. Postcards with images taken from the summers of the 1950s, with less than a hundred craft docked or anchored, appeared more and more nostalgic in the decades that followed. Power and sailboat owners in the 1960s and 1970s increasingly came to view Block Island's GSP as an amazing place to visit.

The GSP, like the land of the Island itself, is a hybrid environment. Part natural and part human, the GSP ecosystem was altered from a brackish pond in 1895 when the Federal government successfully carved, and reinforced a cut in the sandbar which had separated the pond from the open waters of the ocean. Once opened, not only did Block Island gain a second harbor, but the rhythms of the ocean's tides also commenced to ebb and flow into the GSP. This new and altered land and seascape proved an ideal location for the harvesting of a range of shellfish pieces. At 484 acres, or .756 square miles, with an average depth of twenty-three feet, the GSP was an ideal harbor for a day's sail from marinas stretching from New Jersey to Massachusetts. As private boat ownership mushroomed, the ecological impact of these vessels on a global scale was seen in miniature on the GSP.

By the mid-1980s the GSP was increasingly under threat in the summer months as the numbers of individually owned pleasure craft docked and moored inside it. Most distressing for the residents of Block Island was the overboard discharge of raw sewage into the GSP. With no law against the practice, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) estimated the



maximum limit of craft in this finite body of water to be just 108 vessels for the safe harvesting of raw shellfish. On a single summer's day in 1985, the number of vessels in the GSP reached 1,400. In the spring of 1986 both the State of Rhode Island and the Federal government called for the closure of shell fishing in Block Island's GSP.

For both year-round and summer visitors, harvesting clams and oysters in the GSP was a family tradition. Kids with parents and grandparents purchased a shell fishing license, then waded into the waters with clam rakes and buckets and gathered mother nature's bounty. In the Great Depression this provided key calories for Block Island families surviving the sharp economic downturn. After World War II many summer visitors developed family traditions around gathering clams, shucking these, and making such dishes as white clam sauce over linguini. The ever-increasing numbers



*A view of flowers on the Champlin Farm circa mid-1980s, the background of which undoubtedly captures the explosion in recreational boat ownership during the decade of the second half of the 20th century.  
(Kathryn Champlin Collection)*

of vessels moored and anchored within the GSP, which then discharged raw sewage into this fragile maritime environment, endangered the practice of safely shell fishing in the GSP.<sup>1</sup> On the macro level the United States in 1980 had just over eight and a half million registered recreational boats. By 1986, this number was just short of 10 million.<sup>2</sup> The citizens of Block Island could not ignore the GSP any longer. While the 1970's & 80's saw successes in saving open space on Block Island, citizens realized the Island resource known as the GSP also needed protection.

The Block Island tradition of the heated town meeting played a key role in addressing the pressing environmental issue. And now all citizens (including minorities and females) were allowed to attend. One such female resident of Block Island made her point crystal clear at the meeting that took place on April 2, 1986. She stated, "If that means boating will have to go, boating will have to go!"<sup>3</sup> This statement was made not just by any ordinary citizen, but Edith Littlefield Blane, the First Warden of the Town of New Shoreham. *The Block Island Times* reported that Blane's statements, "expressed the general Island reaction to the unexpected move of state and Federal agencies to close all of the Great Salt Pond to shell fishing this summer because of the large number of pleasure craft harboring there."<sup>4</sup>

As this series draws toward its conclusion our final article will look at the progress made in protecting our beloved water feature. As early as 1979 citizens were increasingly growing concerned about the state of the GSP in the summer months. As expressed in the [Block Island Newsletter](#), a publication of the Block Island Residents' Association (BIRA), "The phenomenal nationwide growth in recreational boating is leaving its mark on the harbors of Block Island."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>"B.I. Unites To Defend Salt Pond," *The Block Island Times*, April 11, 1986, 1-2.

<sup>2</sup>"Number of registered recreational boating vessels in the U.S. 1980-2020," Website Statista, accessed on May 13, 2022.

<sup>3</sup>"B.I. Unites To Defend Salt Pond," *The Block Island Times*, April 11, 1986, 1.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Block Island Newsletter. January 1979. "New Harbor Exploitation" Block Island Residents' Association, 2.

**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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