



HISTORY OF THE GREAT SALT POND SERIES

Block Island is Unique, but not Special

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Community history can wear many hats. It can explore questions surrounding issues of race, technological transformations, or commerce, just to name a few. However, one warning label should be placed on all public history products connected to local history, whether an exhibition, educational program, or oral history initiative. "Warning:" should read, "The

consumption of community history invites a myopic fascination." This history series has been a deep dive into all things connected to the Great Salt Pond (GSP). From the glacial origins of the island to the impact of the rapid rise of private boat ownership at World War II, and the subsequent ecological damage that followed, we have covered a wide intellectual purview with just these 673 acres.

While Block Island truly is unique, the various ecological threats that accompany any community embracing tourism as the main economic engine are nothing but typical. From the ski slopes of New Zealand to the hiking trails of Hong Kong, the challenge is balancing sustainable tourism with the threats from overdevelopment. This is the central question for a tourist community in the 21st century. In 1973, an author named Anne W. Simon wrote a book about an island in New England that included the sentence, "Change will homogenize it, grind its character to mediocrity, and make the place indistinguishable from the brutally overdeveloped mainland coast."¹ These words apply to coastal areas I have visited in Taiwan, Australia, England, and Japan. Her detailed study in fact examines Martha's Vineyard. In her book *No Island Is An Island*, of the 1970s she writes, "Sudden change, the virulent American phenomenon peculiar to this era, which rages through rural places across the country, swift, planless, and devastating, has now jumped the seven miles of water from mainland to island threatens to alter the Vineyard for all time."²

Her central argument is that the love of the land, that had developed for centuries on the Vineyard, needed to be codified. "People with an inbred devotion to the remarkable place had to learn to express it in unfamiliar ways, and many did, firmly putting into action the land ethic they had always held." This codification at times developed into the formation of non-profits composed of concerned citizens addressing aspects of their community that they feel are detrimental to the charm of their place. In considering the similar circumstances of island communities we only need to look at Narragansett Bay. Locals, on the islands of Conanicut (nine square miles) and Prudence (five square miles), experienced parallel feelings of technological innovations swallowing their former island life.

Much like Block Island's GSP, all these changes found on these 2 island communities stemmed from a single factor, the rise of public access. Life on Conanicut Island radically changed via two bridges. In 1939, the Jamestown bridge opened to the west. In 1969, the Newport bridge to the east, in-essence made it part of the mainland. One resident of nearby Prudence Island, in discussing her time as a kid in the 1920s, stated she grew up "essentially in the nineteenth century." She recalled a time when just eight families resided on the



Dirigibles & blimps in the 20th century overhead served as reminders that one was in fact not taking a time machine when arriving on Block Island. This black and white image was taken during World War II, when the platform of the blimp offered expanded surveillance for the U.S. Navy in defending Atlantic coastal waters from German U-boats.



island and farmed only with horses. Starting in 1984 ferry service brought up to five cars at once, thus Prudence Island became just another casualty of the internal combustion engine. Bridge construction, expanded ferry services and the explosion in the numbers of privately owned pleasure craft increasingly allowed the technological innovations of the 20th century, and the humans that accompanied these new modes of transportation, into these island environs.

For generations, residents on all three of these Rhode Island islands, Conanicut, Prudence and Block, felt isolated from events on the mainland for centuries. Wars, technology, and social pressures transpiring on the rest of Rhode Island's communities were insulated to a certain extent by the barriers of water separating them from the mainland. A true sense of independence from these mainland factors evolved. Modernity in the second half of the 20th century, however, morphed this feeling of island separateness. In 1986 interviews with long timers on these three islands were done and one wrote, "But on the islands, with their geographic limits so clearly defined by the waters of the bay or ocean, with access in times past so obviously restricted to travel by boat, and completely cut off in stormy weather, the consciousness of change appears to be enhanced."⁵

This article in the Block Island Times in 1986 discussed the specific transformations taking place on Block Island and noted the expanded ferry service. The size of vessels, and the increased numbers of daily runs in the summer season, facilitated more and more day-trippers. One year-round Block Island resident stated, "I don't blame them for coming, but they're coming too fast, that's all."⁶ The article also pointed to the impact on Block Island's GSP. With its proximity to the mainland, Block Island appealed to those private pleasure boaters seeking an introduction to overnight trips involving a short cruise. While Block Island escaped some of the pressure due to being outside of Narragansett Bay, and thus the bulk of the Ocean State's population, the internal combustion engine, either on sail or powerboats, it offered the opportunity of open ocean cruising requiring just a few hours. These changes on all three island revealed an inner resourcefulness that one reporter described with, "Timeless, too, is the sense of pride in their ability to cope, the sense of independence, of somehow being almost a breed apart."⁷ However, a hint of sadness concluded the piece as the author wrote, "Yet there is a special sense of being besieged that comes through in the interviews with many long-time residents of the islands."⁸



Bookends of technology on display on the GSP in the summer of 1961. Representing the 18th century, the half scale doubled ender, constructed by Fred Benson and students at the Block Island School, plows the waters of New Harbor on her maiden voyage. The docked Quonset in the background demonstrates the increased visitation impacting the island by the early 1960s. What had been a journey in the 17th century, or even a quest in winter weather, by the 1960s transformed into a pleasant day outing.



While the 1989 Block Island escaped some of the noisier aspects of modernity, the waste produced by expanded American consumption was not one of these factors. This image taken by Pamela Littlefield Gasner of the dump demonstrates the increasing environmental concerns of waste management as the summers clicked by.

¹ Anne W. Simon, *No Island Is An Island: the Ordeal of Martha's Vineyard*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Press, 1973), 1.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid, 3.

⁴ William D. Metz, "Wars, Storms, Transportation Bringing Changes To Islands," *The Block Island Times*, August 1, 1986, 16.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 17.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

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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