



HISTORY OF THE GREAT SALT POND SERIES

Bringing Historical Perspectives on What Makes the Great Salt Pond so Great

By Dr. Benjamin J. Hruska, Collections Administrator of the Block Island Historical Society



Over the past six months I have worked as the Collections Administrator of the Block Island Historical Society, which has been funded by a grant from the Annenberg Foundation. Thus far we have scanned and entered over 3,000 historic photographs taken of Block Island. I must admit that in viewing

some of these early images of the island, which show a landscape before the bayberry consumed so many island views, it feels like a treasure hunt. While I know these were taken on Block Island, for some of these digitized images it has been difficult to locate the exact location of the photographer. This is not the result of too little information seen in these views from the past, but rather too much.

One hundred years ago you could see so much more of the island due to lack of vegetation. Locations on Center Road, which in 1940 offered simultaneous views of the Ocean View Hotel, the Hygeia and the Weather Station, now barely offer you a view of your neighbor's porch. One tried and true landmark however, in these historical investigations of the past Block Island landscapes found in these photographs, is the Great Salt Pond. Much like the concept of true north, this unmistakable water feature has proved invaluable in the pinpointing and orientation of historical Block Island photographs.

The story of the Great Salt Pond is a microcosm of humanity's relationship with coastal environs. Many of the major themes of survey courses in history at the college level are reflected in the history of



A summer's day in August 1937-the Great Salt Pond appears vast as only one vessel is seen cruising in New Harbor. As recreational boating increased in the decades of the postwar period, this increase in American boat-ownership would be reflected in future visitation to the Great Salt Pond. (Elizabeth Ann Evans Collection)



A nearly empty Great Salt Pond in the summer of 1957. This image, which was one of several, was donated in 2006 by Robert Dwight Nostrand. (Scanned image funded by the Annenberg Foundation)



this water feature, including the Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions, World War I & II and America's postwar economic and political dominance of the 20th Century. Reflected in these waters also is the waking in the American consciousness and understanding of needs for humans to place environmental limits on what we can construct. Just like in many locations around the nation, the early 1970s witnessed citizens rallying to protect environmental treasures that attracted tourists. Distinctive places were endangered by being loved to death. The story of the Committee for the Great Salt Pond, like its predecessor on the island, the Block Island Conservancy, is a story of residents (full time and part time) who sought to retain a balance of nature and human usage in enjoying the outdoors.

In our December issue we will launch our first article considering the natural forces of ice and rock that produced the ecosystem of the Great Salt Pond. Subsequent issues will address a range of topics, including but not limited to, the relationship of the first indigenous population with the Pond, tourism on the island and the Hurricanes of 1938 & 1954. The overall goal of these issues is presenting differing historical perspectives on the Great Salt Pond with a mixed bag of geology, archaeology and history. These differing historical angles, it is hoped, will shed light onto the greatness that is the Great Salt Pond.



A Block Island landscape devoted to agriculture not tourism, yet, the Great Salt Pond still commands attention.



From the archives of Harvard, a vision of New Harbor that never happened. To learn more about this 1952 Harvard study on Block Island, look for the article in the Block Island Times called "Try bringing the old swimming hole up to date" in the November 25, 2022 issue.

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.

FUNDING: Individual contributions, membership dues, special events, program grants. IRS 501(c)3 non-profit. Contributions are tax-deductible to the extent allowed by law.

Please consider becoming a member of The Committee for the Great Salt Pond. For information and details, visit our website at cgspbblockisland.org.