

# Waquoit Bay: Prehistory, History, and Natural History

by Nancy Church



Ellen Little and her brother Edward fishing from the beach on Washburn Island in the 1890s. Photo possibly by Edith Little. Courtesy D. W. Bourne. (Reprinted from *The Book of Falmouth*.)

Anniversaries are milestones and cause for celebration and reflection. 2013 marks the 25th Anniversary of the creation of the Waquoit Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve (WBNERR), an organization which manages almost 3,000 acres of land and water in the towns of Mashpee and Falmouth. Work to establish the Reserve first began in 1974 yet it wasn't until 1988 that the deal was complete and Waquoit Bay Reserve became part of the National Estuarine

Research Reserve System. WBNERR uses the local estuary system as a living laboratory to conduct and support research and to educate community members and decision makers across the region. Improvements to the headquarters are underway now. This is an ideal time to revisit the long history of human activity around the Bay and the Reserve's role in protecting coastal resources for future generations. The Reserve is a state and federal partnership between

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the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). It consists of the Headquarters and Visitor Center on the former Sargent/Swift Estate, the 300 acre Washburn Island, the 462 acre South Cape Beach State Park, 453 acres of land along the Quashnet River, 19 acres on the Childs River and 35 acres at Abigail Brook in Mashpee. An 11 acre parcel on Caleb's Pond near the head of the bay was added several years ago, and a newly acquired wetland site bordering Eel River will soon be added to Reserve maps. In addition, there are 135 acres of privately owned salt marsh within Reserve

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boundaries that are protected. Much of this land adjoins other conservation acreage, greatly increasing its value as wildlife habitat and for attenuating the effects of extensive development in nearby coastal areas. The Reserve also provides public access for recreation including hiking, birding, fishing, hunting, boating, and camping.

Archeological evidence suggests that sites along the Quashnet and Childs river were used as far back as 8,000-6,000 years ago. During the 1950s, amateur archeologists collected Wampanoag artifacts from later time periods, including stone tools, a pestle and a pendant from areas bordering the bay and Washburn Island. Over the years, shell middens and a Native woman's burial site have emerged from eroding shorelines. These items reflect what has been found

across the Cape with increased settlement over time, especially during the Woodland period 1500 to 1,100 years ago when Native people lived in small villages or seasonal camps near abundant fresh and salt water resources. They hunted, fished and collected shellfish from the bay, activities that Wampanoag Tribe members and others continue to this day. Recently, at the Reserve's request, a local tribe member constructed a traditional wetu or wigwam overlooking the bay outside the Reserve Visitor Center, serving as a reminder of the long standing relationship that the Wampanoag community has had with this estuary.

Land use changes occurred rapidly with European settlement which began in Falmouth in 1660. Forests were cleared as farms and small hunting and fishing communities took shape. Concerned with the situation, Reverend Richard Bourne helped to secure the Mashpee land grant for the Wampanoag people, which at the time included the entire Quashnet River valley to Waquoit Bay. Small industries grew in the Waquoit area and by the late 1700s there were eight separate mills in the village, several of which utilized nearby water power. The increased commercial value of the waterway led to the Moonakis section of the river being incorporated into the Town of Falmouth in 1775, despite the Mashpee land grant.

In 1832, a new grist mill and dam were built where today Martin Road crosses the river and the trailhead begins. This blocked the passage of the fish migrating between the salt and freshwater to feed or spawn. Tons of local herring were loaded onto sloops to be used as bait on the rich offshore fishing grounds. Overharvesting and alterations to the river's natural flow impacted once healthy populations of herring, sea run brook trout, and eels, important species for many local residents.

Despite these obvious negative impacts to the fishery, reports of abundant natural resources in the Mashpee, Childs and Quashnet rivers and the surrounding woodlands attracted recreational hunters and fishermen, including President Grover Cleveland and noted statesman, Daniel Webster of Marshfield.

Throughout the 1800s many villagers continued to live off the land, hunting deer and ducks, planting gardens, and selling wood. Detailed notes tell of numerous shorebirds shot from boats and shore, including rare species like piping plovers and terns that are protected by state and federal laws today. Salt hay was harvested from the marsh to feed livestock

carried passengers and freight to and from New Bedford and took mail, lumber and other goods to Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard. In 1964, *The Falmouth Enterprise* reported a right-of-way dispute between locals over access to the bay where Captain Peter Lewis's wharf had been located. Several people were concerned that "weekend riff raff" and less desirable elements would invade their quiet summer colony. Simeon Collins thought things should stay the same since there's "very little beach and the water's nothing but seaweed." Today, similar conflicts continue along the coastline as development and private property rights encounter the growing demand for public access to coastal resources.

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and eel grass was used to fertilize garden plots. In the late 1800s and early 1900s a booming cranberry industry claimed much of the land along the Childs, Quashnet and Moonakis rivers. Cranberry farming altered the course of the rivers, slowed and warmed the water, and further blocked the passage of anadromous fishes. Many years later, the introduction of fertilizers and pesticides enhanced the crops but further damaged the ecology of these fresh water streams.

For 30 years packet ships loaded up at Peter Lewis's wharf in the north east corner of Waquoit Bay. They

Train service to Falmouth in the 1870s led the Cape to become a favorite vacation destination, thereby fueling this demand for public access. Large waterfront hotels hosted scores of visitors; some kept their catboats secure in the Eel River ready to sail into Waquoit Bay. Wealthy families began building summer houses along the shore, including the Victorian shingle style mansion that now serves as the Waquoit Bay Reserve Headquarters and Visitor Center. Sitting on a 30-foot bluff overlooking the bay, the 16 room house was built by Ignatius Sargent during the late 1880s to serve as a summer cottage for a wealthy family. In 1900, Dana and Alice Munro and

their friends Dr. and Mrs. Alexander Abbott rented the house for the season while they built their own modest cottages on the east side of the bay. Alice Munro Haagensen was born in the house that summer and documented her memories in a taped interview at the Reserve. She recalled her mother saying there were only two other houses on the bay at the time. Relatives of both these families still live on the bay. Over the years several people owned the 23 acre estate, including Norman Rutherford whose name is on the deed from 1914 to 1929. This colorful character was known for cruising around town in his Franklin touring car and bringing electricity to the estate in 1915. Around 1920, he built the boathouse with space for entertaining upstairs that included a large granite fireplace. He was also responsible for the stone walled entryway on Route 28 and most likely added the garages to the carriage house for his three automobiles.

Rutherford mysteriously disappeared sometime after 1920 and the estate went into receivership in 1928. In 1929 it was sold to Charles L. Swift, a cranberry farmer who also dealt in real estate and whose family owned many acres of bogs in the area. After the hurricane of 1938 heavily damaged the mansion, the Swifts began using the front gatehouse, once the caretaker's quarters, as their residence. Failing health and financial losses prevented the restoration of the main house which sat empty for almost 50 years. Charles died in 1966, his second wife Mamie died in 1974, passing ownership to her daughter, Ethel Trapp. In 1982 Ethel entered into an agreement with developers for both Washburn Island and the Swift Estate.

#### *Washburn Island*

An early hand-drawn map of Washburn Island from 1853 shows three structures: a barn and house on the northern end and a house on the west side owned by Sylvester Bourne. Scattered remnants of their foundations were found during a 1983 archaeologi-



Bridge to Washburn Island from what is now Seacoast Shores, East Falmouth. Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

cal survey. From 1891 to 1892 Sargent built a large house on Washburn Island for Captain Henry Bryant who used a hand pulled ferry to access the site. The island, called Menauhant by the Native Americans, for a time became known as Bryant Island. Captain Bryant died in 1904 and his wife retained the property until selling it to Albert Henry Washburn in 1914. He and his family used the house as a summer retreat. The Collins family bought 4.5 acres at the South end of the island and built a house overlooking the sound.

The Washburn house burned down on the night of October 26, 1926, leaving just the servant's quarters standing. Most of the family was away at the time but Mr. Washburn's 83 year old father was in the house with four servants. He had to be rescued by the island's long time caretaker, Captain Charles Fisher. The fire was later found to have started in a faulty fireplace. In 1930 Mr. Albert Washburn, then Ambassador to Austria, died while away on assignment. Ownership of the island passed to his wife.

After the caretaker Captain Fisher took ill, the island was left unmanned and the property was looted and vandalized. Mrs. Washburn reported in 1941 that, "there is nothing left to be taken, our cabin cruiser has been gradually dismantled; the engine walked off piece by piece. There is nothing of value left upon the place; they are destroying all the property they can get their hands on." She felt it was foolish to rebuild under such circumstances, although she continued to allow visitors access to the area.

## WWII

From 1942 to 1944 the island was leased from Mrs. Washburn to the army. The land was cleared and a military installation for amphibious vehicle training was built, complete with roads, mess hall, piers,

latrines, and tent accommodations for thousands of troops. Trucks traveled across a floating pontoon bridge from Seacoast Shores or across a connecting causeway at Menauhant. The troops learned to maneuver specialized vehicles on land and sea while "storming" Washburn, South Cape, and Martha's Vineyard beaches in preparation for later invasions of Normandy, Sicily and North Africa, battles which were instrumental to the outcome of the war.

Over the years there was continued interest in acquiring the island. In 1944 *The Falmouth Enterprise* urged the town to buy the island for a park and garnered support among members of the planning board. "There is no exaggeration in calling Washburn's Island the cradle of our European invasion. Falmouth should seriously investigate the possibility of buying the island. We should be glad to create here a memorial to brave men. It isn't good for anything except vacationing." The army engineers urged the town to accept as a gift the \$15,000 bathhouse they had built there after the war for returning troops who used the island to convalesce. While a limited amount of concrete and asphalt rubble remains, most evidence of the military occupation was removed from the island and pitch pine and oak forest covers much of the area.

## *Thoughts of the Future*

In 1951 Sidney Shurcliff, a planning expert hired by the town, recommended that the "natural characteristics of the area be maintained in perpetuity." Some saw the need to accommodate the growing numbers of tourists to the Cape but, as *The Falmouth Enterprise* reported in January 1953, others disagreed. Mr. Charles L. Swift organized Waquoit property owners and presented 182 signatures in opposition to the finance committee stating, "We feel town taking of the island and development of a park there will



Training exercise on Washburn Island. Courtesy of Falmouth Historical Society.

devalue our properties.” With Mrs. Washburn’s death in 1953 talk intensified and representatives of the Commonwealth expressed the state’s interest in the island. A study of the marine resources in the bay from 1967-1968 documented the economic value of the estuary including 46 species of finfish, several shellfish species, and the private shellfish grant adjacent to the island in the Seapit River.

In 1975 Falmouth Town Meeting voted to purchase the island from Mrs. Washburn’s son for the appraised price of \$2.5 million. Dr. John Teal, a Conservation Commission member, said, “there are ecological reasons to acquire and protect Washburn’s

Island and maintain the health of Waquoit Bay and its systems.” Dr. Alfred Redfield, a scientist from the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, pointed out that, “It is significant, the only island of any size along the Massachusetts coast that is not developed or lived on.” Despite the favorable town meeting vote, opponents successfully argued for a special town-wide vote at which the proposal was defeated.

#### *Progress Towards Protection*

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In 1981 a proposal by the Washburn Island Preserve Limited Partnership to develop both Washburn Island and the Swift Estate really got people's attention. The proposal called for up to 50 residential houses on the island, while the mainland estate would become a ferry terminal with parking for at least 150 vehicles. Island facilities would include a club house, outdoor pool, three tennis courts, decks, docking facilities, and a helipad for emergencies. The developers proposed to leave much of the island in its natural state and said their project would end the destructive use of the island by the public that continued to take place.

Citizens for the Protection of Waquoit Bay (CPWB) was organized in 1981 by Winnifred Woods and Deborah Williams to oppose the effort to develop Washburn Island and to urge support of its acquisition by the state. At the urging of local citizens DEM acquired South Cape Beach in 1982 and Washburn Island in 1983. Many state and local officials joined CPWB to support the creation of the Estuarine Research Reserve and the purchase of the Sargent/ Swift estate as an ideal spot for the Reserve Headquarters.

It was acquired by the Commonwealth with help from NOAA through eminent domain in 1987. In June of 1988 WBNERR officially joined the other 19 Estuarine Research Reserves around the country. Today there are a total of 28 Reserves, mostly in coastal states and on the Great Lakes.

The first leader, and sole employee at the time, was Mrs. Ilo Howard who got the organization off the ground. She served for a short time until Christine Gault was named Manager of the Reserve. Gault served for 17 years in that capacity overseeing the successful growth of research and education programs such as the Tuesday Evenings on the Bluff and Summer Science School which continues to this day.

Gault was able to form partnerships across the region working closely with CZM, Woods Hole Sea Grant and the Boston University Marine Program among others to enhance the visibility and impact of the Reserve. She included Wampanoag tribe members in the Reserve's programs from the earliest days. The Reserve's ongoing System Wide Water Quality Monitoring or "SWAMP" program also began during Gault's tenure. This program built on the work of Dr. Ivan Valiela who had been studying the effects of nitrogen in the 1970s. Additional research was conducted in Waquoit Bay on the impacts of nitrogen flowing in the groundwater from septic systems and

fertilizers and airborne nitrogen deposited from fossil fuel emissions. This research demonstrated how human behavior impacted the health of the bay.

When Ms. Gault retired in 2005, Stewardship Coordinator Brendan Annett was elevated to the role of Reserve Manager. Using his passion for native brook trout and his skills in land management, Annett worked to study and restore brook trout in Salter River and to expand the Reserve's land holdings near the Quashnet River and Caleb's Pond. Annett worked closely with the Mass. Division of Fisheries and Wildlife and with Fran Smith who had devoted decades of volunteer time to restoring the Quashnet River under the auspices of Trout Unlimited.

In 2009 Alison Leschen left the Mass. Division of Marine Fisheries and Wildlife to become the current manager of the Reserve. Under Leschen's leadership the Reserve has received state and federal funding to upgrade the facilities and grounds. There will be a new eco-friendly maintenance building, increased laboratory and classroom space, and a new solar electric array. Visitors will soon see new signage and outdoor exhibit features like a climb-aboard research boat and giant horseshoe crab model.

Over the past 25 years, the Reserve has hosted hundreds of visiting scientists, coordinating and supporting their research projects along with its own. The Reserve was awarded a \$1.3 million, 3-year grant from the NERRS Science Collaborative to examine the relationship between salt marshes, climate change, and nitrogen pollution. That relationship is complex and evolving, hard to quantify but vital to understand for the sake of present and future inhabitants of this lovely estuary.

## About the Author

Nancy Church grew up in Lawrence, Ma. and earned a BA from University of Massachusetts Boston and a Masters of Education from University of Massachusetts Lowell. She worked as a high school teacher in New Hampshire before moving to the Cape in 1990. Nancy served as the Education Director at Cape Cod Museum of Natural History and later worked for Mass Audubon's Wellfleet Bay Sanctuary, leading natural history tours, school programs, and field studies. Since 2006, Nancy has worked at the Waquoit Bay Reserve, currently as the School and Interpretive Programs Coordinator.

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