

Portrait of the Harbor: An Introduction

As the crowd boards the ferry at Boston's Long Wharf, a sense of anticipation mingles with the smells of salt water and suntan lotion filling the air. Young children tote their sand pails. Their parents carry coolers with picnic supplies. Intrepid campers haul their gear and tents. The women of the Red Hat Society scour the itinerary for their afternoon outing. It's a diverse crowd, to be sure, but they all have one thing in common: they're embarking on an island adventure.

Within moments, the ferry is underway, passing the burgeoning South Boston Waterfront and gliding underneath the bellies of jumbo jets landing at Logan International Airport. Seagoing vessels of all varieties crowd the harbor. The spire of the Old North Church, the tower of the Custom House, and the rest of the city skyline dissolve in the mist, and a cool sea breeze tempers the sultry summer heat.

In no time at all the passengers arrive at their destination: Spectacle Island. It's a completely different world from the one they just left. The canyon walls of Boston's skyscrapers have been replaced by open skies. The chaos of the city streets has been supplanted by the tranquility of island life.

What is it about islands that speak to the adventurer in each of us? Why do we experience such a thrill at being surrounded by water, cut off from the rest of the world? Isolated and remote, romantic and invigorating, islands offer the promise of solitude and exploration as well as an intimate communion with the natural world in one of its most extreme designs. Few landscapes possess the same drama, magic, or mystery, and as the waves crash along the shoreline, life and its innumerable routines are somehow put into perspective. Perhaps the mystery lies in the voyage itself—whether you opt for the ferry, a kayak, or you are the captain of your own ship—the effort required to land on an island is integral to the overall experience. These miniature worlds, formed by a complex of geological forces, call on us to interact with our environment in ways that are increasingly less frequent.

Spectacle Island is just one of the jewels in the Boston Harbor Islands national park area, which includes thirty-four islands and coastal peninsulas in a twelve-mile radius from downtown Boston. And it is just one of thirty-four chances from which to see Boston in a new light. Long before Frederick Law Olmsted conceived of his Emerald Necklace of parkland ringing Boston, the Boston Harbor Islands formed a "Sapphire Necklace" draped around Boston Neck—the narrow peninsula on which Boston was originally built. No other major city in the United States is blessed with such an island-studded harbor. Yet, despite their proximity and the wide array of recreational opportunities, the Boston Harbor Islands are relatively unknown to millions who live within their easy reach. This is a shame, as the harbor islands offer a rare opportunity to visit unspoiled landscapes and wildlife features within the confines of an urban center. This urban oasis is an area of breathtaking beauty and spectacular vistas. Filled with colorful tales of hermits, ghosts, pirates, shipwrecks, and buried treasure, the ruins of forts and summer estates fascinate explorers of all ages. Like the ebbing and flowing tide, the city's history laps up on

their shores, and the harbor islands are a prism through which we can view the history of Boston and, to a large extent, America.

It's not too grand a statement to say that Boston would not be the city it is today without its harbor islands. In fact, the islands built John Winthrop's nascent "city upon a hill." Timber from the mature forests that grew on the islands was used to construct homes and wharves. The slate quarried from their shores paved the city streets. Once denuded, livestock that grazed and crops that grew on the harbor islands fed the growing colony. What's more, the islands afforded Boston protection from nature's fury and enemy attack, creating one of the safest and most commodious harbors in the world, which in turn allowed Boston to become a thriving maritime power.

Indeed, nature proved to be a fine engineer when she designed Boston Harbor and sculpted its island cluster. The massive glaciers that engulfed Boston during the Ice Age more than 15,000 years ago left behind smooth mounds of sand, gravel, and rock called "drumlins"—in profile, they've been described as upside-down teaspoons.

As the ice sheets melted, the water level rose, and the drumlins were surrounded by Boston Harbor, formed between the two outstretched arms of Winthrop and Hull that seem to clutch the islands in their warm embrace. (Bunker Hill and Beacon Hill are both drumlins as well.) Afloat within the vast estuary ecosystem formed by the salty Massachusetts Bay and the freshwater of the Charles, Mystic, and Neponset rivers, the Boston Harbor Islands are a geological rarity, forming the only drumlin "swarm" in the United States that intersects a coastline.

While the harbor islands have created natural breakwaters that bear the brunt of ferocious gales and the open sea, they have also provided easily defensible locations to protect Boston from enemy attack. From the establishment of a fort on Castle Island in 1634 until just after World War II, the Boston Harbor Islands were home to active military fortifications that deterred potential naval incursions, trained soldiers, and housed prisoners of war. In their darkest moment, the islands were used during King Philip's War in 1675 and 1676 to intern Native Americans.

For centuries, the Boston Harbor Islands have served as a gateway to Boston and America. For nearly three hundred years, the towering beacon of Boston Light on Little Brewster Island, the oldest light station in America, has been a welcome sight for thousands of tempest-tossed mariners arriving from around the world. Today, of course, most visitors to Boston arrive by air, but the islands outside the cabin windows still greet this new generation of travelers who touch down along the harbor shores at Logan Airport.

Beginning in the 1840s, for the tens of thousands of immigrants starting a new life in a new land, the first piece of American soil on which these "huddled masses" stepped was often at the quarantine and immigration stations on the islands. In fact, so many immigrants passed through the Boston Harbor Islands that they were considered as an alternative site for the Statue of

Liberty when New York City was having trouble raising money to build its pedestal in the early 1880s.

The rise in immigration nearly doubled the population of Boston between 1840 and 1860, and those seeking relief from the congested city sought out recreational activities in the harbor and on its islands. Island inns and resorts popped up during the nineteenth century. Summer colonies took root. And steamships crisscrossed the harbor bringing day trippers to and from island destinations. While most Bostonians took to the harbor to enjoy its cool, salubrious breezes, others sought out activities that were frowned upon by puritanical Boston. These remote, offshore locations provided the perfect venues for unsanctioned boxing matches, gambling, and opium parties.

Boston also turned to its harbor islands as a place to exile its sick and downtrodden and house its social institutions. The islands provided faraway places to sequester undesirable people and material that Bostonians didn't want in the city proper. In this regard, the history of the islands is very much the history of Boston's reform impulse. Reformatories, asylums, poorhouses, hospitals, and prisons were situated on many of the harbor islands. Likewise, as many as four islands were the home to quarantine stations, which protected the city from outbreaks of smallpox and other deadly, contagious diseases. Many victims of those diseases died on the islands, and today these forgotten cemeteries are as common as the ruins of old military installations.

Of course, as Bostonians know all too well, long before the colonists dumped their tea into the harbor, they were draining their sewage into it. The city also sent its garbage to the islands, and the Spectacle Island landfill is perhaps the most notorious example of the disregard Bostonians had for their islands and waterways. Centuries of this environmental degradation took their toll on the health of the harbor and its aquatic life, and by 1987, the water quality in Boston Harbor was so poor that the federal government identified it as the dirtiest in America. The banner headline across the top of the Boston Herald on April 28, 1987, said it all: "Harbor of Shame."

Though it's hard to fathom given the level of pollution, the islands were the last open frontier available for the continuing sprawl of Boston and under the threat of development throughout the 1960s and 1970s. The most sweeping proposal called for the construction of a high-rise apartment community—connected to downtown by subways, ferries, and bridges—that could house as many as 150,000 people. There were also proposals, building on Boston's long tradition of land-making, to fill in the harbor around some of the islands to build a new airport and a world's fair site. Islands—such as Apple, Bird, and Governor's—were indeed lost to this practice, and now remain buried somewhere beneath Logan Airport.

Luckily, the Boston Harbor Islands had their champions who fought to prevent development, clean up the harbor, and preserve their exquisite natural beauty. One of the most significant was the late Edward Rowe Snow, the master storyteller and historian who wrote over a hundred books on New England maritime history, many of which included stories about Boston Harbor and its islands. Through his writings and radio programs, Snow brought the lively history

and legends surrounding the islands to the attention of a new generation of Bostonians. No one who followed Snow on his tour through the dark corridors of Fort Warren will forget his tale of the Lady in Black. Snow's legions of fans and friends continue to hold a birthday party for him on Georges Island each August, and the Hull Lifesaving Museum sponsors its annual Snow Row each March on a course from Hull around the harbor islands.

Taking up Snow's mantle, advocates of the harbor and the islands successfully pressed in federal court during the 1980s for the \$4.5 billion cleanup of Boston Harbor, the centerpiece of which was the new wastewater treatment plant on Deer Island that opened in 2001. Ruling that "the law secures to the people the right to a clean harbor," Federal District Court Judge A. David Mazzone served as a mighty force overseeing the cleanup project for nearly two decades. The project has transformed the harbor from one of the dirtiest to one of the cleanest, and it has led to a rebirth of the islands. Likewise, another major Boston construction project, the Big Dig, has transformed Spectacle Island from a garbage dump to the national park area's newest jewel.

The cleanup of the harbor played a pivotal role in the creation of the Boston Harbor Islands National Recreation Area in 1996. (Native Americans objected to the term "recreation area" to describe the islands where their ancestors were incarcerated and died during King Philip's War, so the islands are now referred to as a "national park area.") The national park area is unique in that the National Park Service owns none of its 1,600 acres, and the islands are owned and maintained by a complex partnership of federal, state, city, and nonprofit agencies, which seeks to maintain the right balance between the islands' role as a source for recreation and a preserve for scenery, wildlife, and historic sites.

With the completion of the Big Dig and the blossoming of the Rose Kennedy Greenway, Boston is rediscovering its waterfront and its nautical heritage. Inside the new Boston Harbor Islands Pavilion on the Greenway, interactive exhibits and interpretive panels enlighten a new generation to the endless number of adventures that can be found just a short boat ride away. History buffs can explore lighthouses, ruins, and the military installations that have protected Boston from the time of its founding through the Second World War. Adventure seekers can scuba dive amid centuries-old shipwrecks. Boaters can venture to the outer islands, a breathtaking ocean wilderness that marks the edge of civilization. Anglers can fish for striped bass, bluefish, and flounder in the revitalized harbor waters. The wandering trails on many of the islands are perfect for day-hikes, and several islands are available for overnight camping. Summer weekends provide a wide variety of cultural and educational programs—from old-time baseball games, jazz concerts, and art installations, to children's programs, citizen science activities, and ranger-led tours.

Nature lovers will be enthralled by the islands' diverse flora and fauna that thrive in a range of habitats from tidal salt marshes to rocky shores to woodlands. In many regards, the Boston Harbor Islands are New England's backyard Galapagos. With the loss of biodiversity on the planet at an all-time high, the harbor islands provide a natural laboratory for scientists and the

public to explore nature's evolution and how multiple, diverse human impacts affect natural systems.

Botanists have identified more than five hundred plant species on the islands, many of them non-native due to changes in habitat caused by human deforestation or the introduction of invasive species. With more than 130 species of birds, including sixty-seven that have been found to breed on the islands, the Boston Harbor Islands are considered an Important Bird Area by organizations such as the Massachusetts Audubon Society. Small mammals, such as rabbits, raccoons, and foxes, have been found on the islands, and—thanks to the cleanup of the harbor—seals and porpoises have returned to the outer islands. Even tide pools along the shores are teeming with a micro-wilderness of aquatic life. These habitats serve as unique living classrooms for Boston-area schoolchildren brought to the islands by nonprofit groups and summer camps.

In some respects, the undeveloped landscapes on many islands make it easy to imagine what this part of the world looked like when the first group of Puritans aboard the *Arbella* passed by in 1630. Since then, these islands have had a front-row seat for some of the most seminal moments in the long sweep of American history: A tea party in 1773, which rippled through the harbor and grew into waves of freedom washing over America. The departure of the last British troops driven out by a band of colonists in 1776. The arrival of the first “coffin ships” carrying Irish famine victims in Black '47. The launch of Donald McKay's fleet clippers, such as the *Flying Cloud*, that would rule the seas in the 1850s. And the return of the celebrated 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment from bloody Civil War battlefields.

But there is a quieter history of the islands, too, though no less important, and it speaks to the bond between Bostonians and the sea. As the last frontier in the Boston area, the islands tell us about the peopling of New England. From the Native Americans who seasonally camped on the islands, to the Portuguese fisherman who lived in shanties on their shores; from the Brahmins who built unapproachable estates high above the crashing waves, to the hermits who lived like castaways—the harbor islands are awash in the history of hearty New Englanders drawn to the ocean.

Each island of Boston Harbor has its own distinctive personality and its own story to tell, and this urban archipelago offers a unique chance to journey into nature and back into time—all within the shadows of the city skyline. So set sail. Pack your imagination and your love of adventure. There's an island out there, waiting for you.