

12-2001

A History of Washburn Island

Donald L. Keay
Bridgewater State College

Follow this and additional works at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

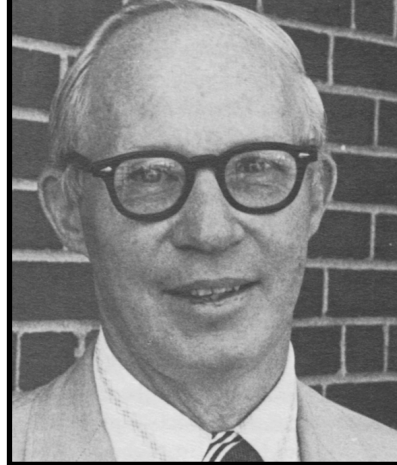
Recommended Citation

Keay, Donald L. (2001). A History of Washburn Island. *Bridgewater Review*, 20(2), 22-25.
Available at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol20/iss2/10

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

The History of Washburn Island

by Donald L. Keay



Washburn Island, located in Falmouth, Massachusetts, is one of the last undeveloped coastal properties on upper Cape Cod and a remarkable example of the Cape's shoreline ecology. The island, over 300 acres, consists of pine and oak forests, extensive systems of sand dunes, tidal flats, marshlands, and salt ponds. It is bounded on the east by Waquoit Bay, on the north and west by the Seapit River and Eel Pond, and on the south by Vineyard Sound. The importance of Washburn Island extends beyond its scenic beauty and physical resources. Its geographic location affects natural processes, making it an integral component of the Waquoit Bay estuarine system.

After my retirement from Bridgewater State College, my wife and I moved to Falmouth where I became a volunteer for the Waquoit Bay Reserve, a part of the National Estuarine Research Reserve System established to create a network of protected coastal sites for monitoring and research. When the Director of the Reserve learned of my academic background, she requested that I research and write a history of Washburn Island. It was interesting to learn about the military training in amphibious warfare which had taken place in the Waquoit area during World War II. As a teenager, I had summered with my family in Wareham and, although aware of the existence of Camp Edwards on Cape Cod, I had never heard of Washburn Island and its unique role in the preparation of special units for overseas invasions. During my research, I became interested in increasing efforts on the part of governmental agencies and private organizations to preserve the dwindling natural resources of Cape Cod.

Although now protected in its natural state, Washburn Island has been utilized for a variety of purposes, some of which have brought permanent changes in its ecology. Archaeological surveys have failed to discover evidence of any long term residential patterns prior to the nineteenth century. Remnants from stone tool makers have been found, but in the absence of more definitive information, it is believed that the artifacts were left by itinerant hunters and food gatherers. It has been speculated that Washburn Island was the site of Vinland, a colony founded by the Vikings around 1000 A.D., but there is no corroborating evidence.

European settlers arrived in the seventeenth century and purchased lands along the shores of Waquoit Bay. Specific sites are difficult to trace, but records show that Reverend Richard Bourne of Sandwich acquired ownership of several parcels which might have included Washburn Island, then known by the Indian name Menauhant. Over the years the island was partially cleared of trees and brush, providing grazing lands for cattle and sheep. In the mid-nineteenth century there were three working farms on Menauhant, two of which had disappeared by the end of the century.

From 1893 to 1895, Menauhant was acquired by Henry Bryant, a retired sea captain and businessman, through a series of negotiations with several members of the Bourne and Davis families. Bryant commissioned Ignatius Sargent to design and construct a residence overlooking Waquoit Bay and Vineyard Sound. The house was three stories, flanked by two ells. Built as a seasonal retreat, the house was lighted by kerosene lamps and heated by several fireplaces. To facilitate crossing to the mainland, Bryant obtained a permit to operate a hand ferry linking the island with a landing on the Seapit River.

Henry Bryant died in 1904, leaving the estate to his widow Alida. In 1912, she sold the property to a corporate group of investors and bankers including Albert Henry Washburn. To recoup their investments, the partners planned to sell parcels of land for private development. The only sale to materialize was an area of approximately 4.5 acres along the southern beach to Fred and Fannie Collins, who built a summer home, a guest house, and a garage in front of a glacial outwash still known as Collins' Hill.

The corporate members changed their plans and Henry and Florence Washburn purchased the rest of the island for their own use. They moved into the Bryant house, which they did not change except to bring in electric and telephone lines. To improve access, a narrow-bridged causeway was constructed across the sandspit separating Eel Pond from Vineyard Sound. The Washburn family

enjoyed the peace and tranquillity of the island where they spent extended summer vacations. During this time the property became known as Washburn's Island.

On October 26, 1926, the residence was destroyed by a spectacular fire which lit up the skies of Falmouth. Shortly before midnight a maid discovered smoke and flames and alerted other members of the household. As the fire enveloped the upper floors, alarms sounded at the Menauhant Village fire department. Firefighters responded and rushed to the scene, but their trucks bogged down in soft sand as they crossed the causeway. Upon arrival, the firefighters found no adequate water supply and had to pump from a nearby pond. The wing housing the servant quarters was the only section which could be saved. The cause of the fire was traced to a defective chimney in the den.

Henry Washburn died of food poisoning in Vienna in 1930. During the succeeding years in which Florence Washburn owned the Island, she never posted her property or restricted recreational use by visitors. Washburn Island became increasingly popular as a picnicking, camping, and swimming site. As more people took advantage of her generosity, vandalism became a serious problem. Thieves stole anything of value and wantonly destroyed what was left. Beer and bonfire parties increased the danger of fire and left the grounds littered with rubbish and garbage.

In September 1938, a severe hurricane hit Cape Cod. A tidal surge washed out the sandspit and causeway, opening up a channel 125 feet wide and seven feet deep between Vineyard Sound and Eel Pond. Washburn Island was now truly an island, to the delight of yacht owners. Boats could navigate through the breach into the Sound without having to travel the two or three miles formerly required to circumnavigate through Waquoit Bay.

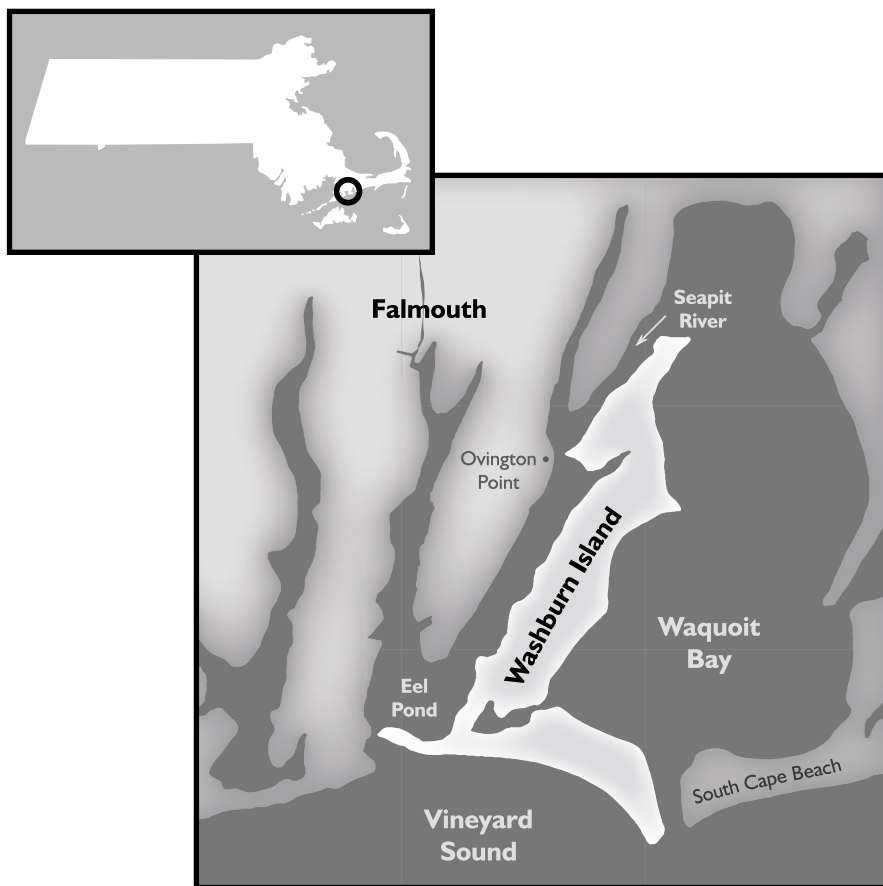
The entry of the United States into World War II brought many temporary displacements on Cape Cod, but nowhere were they greater than in the Waquoit Bay region. It was obvious to military strategists that winning the war would require specially trained amphibious forces. The shores of continental Europe were held by the Axis troops and vital islands in the Pacific occupied by Japanese forces. Successful invasions would require transportation across stretches of rough water to land troops on enemy territory and secure beachheads for larger follow-up units.

The U.S. Navy announced that it could transport troops to invasion sites but lacked the manpower to carry out landing operations. The army took over responsibility for preparing special units for amphibious warfare. Soldiers

would be trained as boat operators working in teams to establish techniques and skills required for storming enemy shores.

Navy personnel designed and supervised the construction of various types of shallow draft, ramp-loading landing craft for transporting troops, supplies, and heavy equipment. Camp Edwards on Cape Cod was chosen to be the headquarters for the unit primarily because it had suitable billeting and support facilities. A few miles away were the bays, beaches, and islands of Nantucket and Vineyard Sounds, which provided ideal conditions for development and training.

The federal government leased several tracts of land around Waquoit Bay, including Washburn Island, for the duration of the war. To gain access to the island, the Army Corps of Engineers filled the breach in the sandspit and constructed an asphalt road across the sand. A pontoon bridge that spanned the Seapit River from Waquoit was later replaced by a permanent drawbridge linking the island to Ovington Point.



Washburn Island, with Falmouth to the left.

Construction proceeded rapidly. A network of paved roads criss-crossed the island. Cement slabs were laid as platforms for necessary buildings. There were also parade grounds, drill fields, and an obstacle course. Five 12-foot wide finger piers stretched almost 900 feet into Waquoit Bay, augmented by smaller service docks along the shores. When the base was ready for operation, training continued day and night for almost two years. Boat handlers were taught navigation skills, the use of signalling devices, and methods of avoiding anti-landing armaments.

The Waquoit training area was one of the most closely guarded installations on Cape Cod. Despite efforts to maintain secrecy, residents and visitors could easily observe training activities from the surrounding shores. They became accustomed to the sight of landing barges making their way up and down the beaches and soldiers swimming or wading with full packs, rifles held overhead.

The units demonstrated their readiness by launching a full-scale training exercise on Martha's Vineyard. Successive waves of landing craft plowed through the rough seas, landed at designated sites, unloaded troops and equipment, and established beachheads. The mock invasion was a great success, on target and schedule. Although it was a relatively small maneuver, and no one was shooting at the "invaders," the lessons laid the groundwork for techniques later used in battle. Soldiers trained on Cape Cod spearheaded campaigns in North Africa, Sicily, Salerno, Normandy, and many islands in the Pacific. Local residents proudly referred to Washburn Island as the "Cradle of Invasions" and the troops as "Cape Cod Commandos."

Over the winter, weather became a serious impediment. The War Department decided to transfer the program to Carrabelle, Florida. Washburn Island was nearly deserted by March, 1943. The military maintained a presence but, for the most part, tents were gone and buildings barred and locked. The federal government announced plans to restore leased properties to the owners after all military construction had been demolished. Bids were accepted for the razing of the buildings, the piers, and the drawbridge.

In September 1944, another hurricane roared into the region, washing out the causeway, again opening the channel between Eel Pond and Vineyard Sound. It was

agreed that the breach would not be refilled and that nature should be allowed to take its course.

The army then announced a change in plans. At the request of the commanding officer of the hospital at Camp Edwards, the leases were extended, demolition halted, and plans developed to create a recreation and recovery center for convalescing patients. A large cement block bathhouse was constructed. During the summer of 1945, as many as 800 soldiers a day were transported to the island, where they could swim, fish, go boating, or just relax. They had the use of exercise equipment, barbeque pits, and basketball and volleyball courts.

With the end of the war, the army again announced that Washburn Island would be returned to its owner upon completion of demolition. Special consideration was given to the only remaining crossing to the island, the bridge at Ovington Point. The army had planned to demolish it before the leases were cancelled, but with easy access from Route 28, it would provide means by which visitors could cross to a potential park and/or residential area. It was argued that the drawbridge did not seriously interfere with river traffic. Town officials attempted to persuade the State Waterways Commission not only to allow the bridge to remain, but to maintain it. The request was rejected and the bridge was quickly torn down.

When Washburn Island was restored to Florence Washburn, it had changed considerably. Most of the forests had been cleared to make room for military facilities or had been destroyed during the hurricanes. Cement pads dotted the landscape. Four structures remained: an old farmhouse, a barn, an icehouse, and the bathhouse, all of which were later abandoned. With no maintenance, they deteriorated badly over the years and were eventually razed.

There was a move among the selectmen of Falmouth to purchase Washburn Island and restore it as a park commemorating the soldiers who had trained there. Mrs. Washburn asserted that she would never sell the estate. Over the years she received offers from potential buyers, but consistently rejected them.

Although not able to utilize the estate herself, Mrs. Washburn gave permission for visitors and campers to continue using her property. Day trippers, arriving in small boats, had free access for hiking, swimming, camping, berry picking, shellfishing, and other leisure activities. The Falmouth Rod and Gun Club, the Falmouth Beagle Club, and scout units were among those who

benefited from her generosity. The island remained in an undeveloped state. There were no facilities, so visitors had to bring their own supplies, including water. At times there were problems. Out of towners (according to residents) held noisy parties and often left the area covered with litter and debris.

Florence Washburn died on January 27, 1953, leaving the estate to her son, Dr. Lincoln Washburn. The future of the island was again a source of speculation. Among the townspeople there were lingering hopes that Falmouth might be able to purchase the property, but the new owner said that the island was still not for sale. He stated that he intended to continue his mother's policy of maintaining it as a natural, recreational preserve open to everyone.

In 1976, town property reassessments resulted in a huge increase in taxes, causing Dr. Washburn to offer to sell his estate to the town of Falmouth, but proposals failed to materialize when funds were not made available. Two development companies negotiated agreements to purchase the property for the construction of luxury homes and recreational and support facilities, subject to government approval. In the meantime, state and local agencies had issued stringent regulations for land use which made it next to impossible to build in areas deemed environmentally sensitive. Washburn Island had been designated as a crucial barrier beach and a fragile buffer which helped protect inland areas from storm damage and flooding. The federal government declared that such designated regions are not suitable for development because of erosion and shifting sand patterns and should be preserved for both ecological and aesthetic reasons. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts had issued directives which did not prohibit construction but granted wide discretionary power to local conservation and planning authorities. Despite carefully prepared plans by the development companies, local opposition from municipal boards and private organizations prevailed and permits were not granted.

The Commonwealth then appropriated sufficient funds to seize Washburn Island by eminent domain at the appraised evaluation. Nearby South Cape Beach had been recently purchased and the two properties were combined into a new state park. Washburn Island was to be maintained in its natural state to be used for passive

recreational purposes with provisions for limited camping, swimming, hiking, and nature studies. Access is difficult since the island can only be reached by small, private boats, part of a deliberate policy

The Bryant-Washburn House on Washburn Island. Built in the late nineteenth century, it was destroyed by fire on October 26, 1926.



to discourage visitors from venturing into sensitive areas, a policy geared to protect the ecology rather than to accommodate large numbers of visitors.

The Falmouth Enterprise editorialized in 1951 that Washburn Island had been so badly violated that it could not be rehabilitated without huge expenditures of time, energy, and resources. This gloomy outlook proved to be unduly pessimistic. The island has regenerated into a beautiful and peaceful refuge, providing evidence that whatever damage human beings or natural disasters might inflict on the landscape, the dynamic forces of nature will ultimately prevail, not necessarily by restoring previous conditions, but by creating new ones which can prove to be equally productive and beneficial.

—Donald L. Keay is a retired member of the History Department. He lives in East Falmouth.