



Belle Isle News

Newsletter of the Friends of Belle Isle Marsh

December 1985

MAKING CONNECTIONS

When the first European Colonists settled in this region they found that the topography of the area consisted basically of drumlins or hills, surrounded by a vast network of natural tidal waterways and salt marshes, including Belle Isle Marsh. Initially, roads were non-existent. Therefore, these waterways and salt water marshes became their principal avenues of transporting themselves and their goods.

Deane Winthrop claimed Boston as his home, although he spent some time in Ipswich and Groton, Massachusetts, and New London, Connecticut. His father, the Governor of Massachusetts Bay, held a tract of land for him at Pullen Poynte (Winthrop). In 1647 the son inherited all of Governor Winthrop's land in Winthrop.

In 1687, Judge Samuel Sewall became a neighbor of Deane Winthrop, claiming Hog Island (Orient Heights), by the ancient rite of "taking livery and seised of the lland by Turf and Twigg and the House." Here he built a wharf and planted various kinds of trees, and kept a large flock of sheep.

In 1697, Judge Sewall states in his diary that he made several visits to his neighbors at Pullen Poynte. He describes the families as living very well. For example, on 1 October 1697: "A luncheon of bread and butter, honey, curd and cream. For dinner, a very good roast lamb, turkey, fowl, and apple pie. After dinner

sang the 121st Psalm. A glass of spirits . . . stood upon a joint stool, which Reverend Simon jogging it, fell down and broke all to shivers. I said it was a lively emblem of our fragility and mortality."

On 11 July 1699 Sewall again visited with Winthrop, who was now 77 years old. This time it was a wedding he attended with



Hog Island and Pullen Poynte: 1775

Reverend Willard. After the marriage vows and psalms were sung, Sewall and the reverend left for Hog Island. Sewall

states "the wind was against us so 'twas nine o'clock before we landed. Were four hours on the passage."

The people of Winthrop commonly went to church by boat, sailing up Belle Isle Inlet and down what is now the upper part of Boston Harbor, near the modern site of the oil farm wharves and gas tanks in Revere, as near Beach Street as possible. It was there, on Beach Street, near the present corner of School Street behind the Revere Public Library and the high school (now a park), that the first church, the oldest in Suffolk County, was built in 1710. Before the church was built, seivices were held in private homes, or else people would sail across the harbor to attend the churches in Boston.

For the first two centuries after the settlement of the area, travel and transport to Boston was either by water, or overland through Beachmont, Revere, Everett, Medford, Somerville, Cambridge and Brookline, down Roxbury Neck to Boston. This overland route was all of 20 miles -- a day's trip each way.

The minister, teacher, school children, and many other people going by foot to

Winthrop, as most people did prior to 1839, commonly went via Belle Isle (Orient Heights). By planning to arrive at Belle Isle Inlet at low tide, men could walk across the gravel bottom by just taking their shoes and socks off.

In 1835, the General Court granted permission for a bridge to be built connecting Winthrop with Orient Heights. The bridge opened in 1839; the Winthrop end of of the bridge was at what is now the western extremity of Main Street. The bridge was twenty feet wide and was built with money raised by subscription.

Winthrop at this time had a population of 156. Belle Isle (Breed's Island or Orient Heights) had but one farm (John Breed's) and two houses. Noddle's Island (East Boston) had about 1400 people, most of whom lived in the Maverick Square and Central Square areas. Beachmont was Sale's Farm and had two houses.

In 1848, Breed's Island (Orient Heights) and Winthrop became accessible to the people of East Boston and vice versa when Saratoga Street was extended over "Crooked Lane," the inlet that ran from Chelsea Creek to what is now known as Constitution

Beach. It was another thirty years or so before Bennington Street was also brought over to Breed's Island. About 1870, Breed's Island was connected to Beachmont by a bridge that passed over Belle Isle Inlet.

Victor F. Casaburi

[With increased population and traffic in Winthrop, the day may not be far off when once again it takes "four hours on the passage" from Pullen Poynte to Hog's Island. --Editor]



Belle Isle Creek: 1893

A Winthropite writes:

As a Winthrop resident, I am concerned with the many problems facing our town: the sewage treatment plant, Deer Island Prison, Logan Airport and the steady expansion of apartment complexes on the remaining open space within our boundaries.

The negative implications of continued construction on Winthrop are vast: encroachment upon already scarce open space; added stress on an inadequate sewerage system; increased threats to a delicate ecological balance; and a certainty that the present traffic crisis will become even worse. We are approaching the point where the number of registered vehicles in Winthrop (13,760) will match the population (18,298). Our town cannot allow more construction without degrading our quality of life.

Arthur T. Cummings

[Editor's note: The following articles concentrate on Mr. Cummings' concern and related issues facing Belle Isle communities.]

RISING SEAS

Two and a half years ago, in a letter to the Winthrop Planning Board, Friends of Belle Isle raised the issue of rising sea level and its effect on low-lying building projects. At the time, the Planning Board was holding hearings on Mr. Zoppo's proposed subdivision of his Belle Isle land. This land has a maximum elevation of 19 feet above Mean Sea Level (MSL). Normal Boston high tides rise 6 feet above MSL, while storm tides often peak at 9 or more feet above. We sent the Planning Board an excerpt from *The Boston Globe* quoting Dr. George Woodwell, a scientist at the Woods Hole Marine Biological Laboratory, to the effect that in the next century sea levels could rise by as much as 15 to 20 feet. This would completely inundate Mr. Zoppo's development -- except that by then it wouldn't be owned by Mr. Zoppo but by the descendants of those he sold the property to. Our letter to the Planning Board expressed the opinion that it was the responsibility of governing bodies in towns and cities to make sure that poor planning did not saddle the public with thoughtless developments that would not last a century. Ultimately, the public would have to absorb the cost of the destruction wrought by nature if such ill-planned projects were allowed.

At the time we brought up this problem, there was an atmosphere of disbelief regarding any such matter as the melting



High tide at Short Beach

of the polar ice-caps due to the "greenhouse effect" and the subsequent rise in sea-levels. But according to a recent *Boston Globe* article by Diane Dumanoski (*Globe Magazine*, November 3, 1985, page 28), "the federal Environmental Protection Agency is undertaking a program to educate coastal communities and encourage them to consider this possibility in their planning." The EPA is conservatively projecting "a one-foot rise in the next 30 to 40 years and three to five feet in the next 100." At that rate, we estimate that 10 percent of Mr. Zoppo's buildings will be flooded in thirty years and 75 percent in 100 years!

Is there a better argument for leaving coastal wetlands alone?

THE FINAL HEARING

Mr. William Zoppo, of Neponset Associates, left the Winthrop Planning Board meeting on September 30 after discussing the details of what may be his final set of obstacles in obtaining a special permit for construction on land adjoining Belle Isle Marsh. Mr. Zoppo's aim right now is to build about one hundred residential units on seventeen acres of filled marshland.

The special permit process requires that the intended use of the land satisfy the following:

1. It should be essential to or desirable for the public convenience or welfare.
2. It should not create traffic congestion nor impair pedestrian safety.
3. It should not impair the dignity or character of the district or adjoining districts.

The opponents to Zoppo's development will have an opportunity to voice their opposition after the Planning Board receives and accepts Neponset Associates' site plans. The Board will review the plans, providing copies to the Board of Selectmen, the Board of Health, and the Building Inspector. A two week notice of a public hearing will be inserted in the local press. The notified officials will have this two week period to respond to the Planning Board with recommendations or conditions before the scheduled hearing. This hearing, which culminates with the Board's final decision on the proposal, will give area residents their chance to prevent Zoppo's construction.

The usual Planning Board hearing lasts only one night, but this is tradition, not regulation. If at the end of the night issues remain unresolved, or those in attendance still have issues to raise, the hearing would continue until all interests are satisfied. After the close of the hearing the Planning Board has ninety days to

decide, and must vote 80% in favor of Zoppo to approve the permit.

Town residents need merely to visualize the traffic nightmares the Zoppo project will inflict upon Winthrop; or the extra pressures on town services imposed by one hundred new households; or the disaster of a fire in one of these buildings, when the entire development can only be served by one access road. Loud and eloquent voices at the hearing will increase the chance that town officials will find fault with the project.



RUNOFF AND FISHING

James Hoyte, Secretary of Environmental Affairs, in an interview reported in *The Boston Globe* on October 31, indicated that his office will soon hold hearings in coastal communities to investigate the problem of industrial runoff into salt marshes. Such runoff inevitably contaminates the natural nursery areas of most fish and shellfish. The focus of the hearings will be commercial fishing, but the testimony of concerned private fishermen will be pertinent. Those who fish at the Belle Isle or Bennington Street Bridges can attest to the decrease of smelt and other catch in Belle Isle Creek over the last two years.

Secretary Hoyte is also seeking an agreement with the City of Revere and the MDC regarding the use of the Sales Creek Pumping Station. The goal should be to maximize flood control for the affected residents of Beachmont and minimize the threat of toxic industrial sediments raised and spread to surrounding plants, animals, and human beings.

A REALM OF FANTASY

Bundled in layers of wool and down, rubberized and plasticized against contact with water, I venture forth into a harsh, pristine world -- Belle Isle Marsh in winter.

Buffleheads bob up and down; small ducks, crisply marked: the male, white-bodied and dark-headed, with a large white patch on its head, the female, brown (to protect its young), with a small white patch behind the eye. Diving to feed on small marine creatures, they pop back

unexpectedly, then quickly dive again. "Now you see me, now you don't! Try counting us if you wish, but each time your count will be different."

An owl glides by on silent wings, hunting prey. Light brown with dark marks on its wrists, the Short-eared Owl is often found here in winter. From northerly climes, it hunts by day. In certain years its cousin, the Snowy Owl, may also appear:

"The ghost of the tundra" comes south when lemming populations crash. Disguised as a block of ice, the owl picks up and floats on outstretched wings above the frozen marsh. White wings against a clear

blue sky, it reveals itself to all, then lands and, folding its wings, becomes a block of ice once more.

Snow clothes the marsh. Drifts pile high among the reeds. Etched patterns, windblown, change as the snow swirls round and round. Dried Salicornia stalks, crystalized, glisten -- a fairyland in ice.

Frozen forms dot the marsh. Blocks of ice jumbled together, bridges left astride the creeks, single sentinels along the banks, all left by the receding tide. Shaped

by the pendular rush of water and by the melting power of the sun, they form a western landscape -- eroded buttes standing above a desert plain, rocks thrust about by flooding torrents, stone bridges sculpted by the wind.

A land harsh, yet beautiful, serene yet vibrant, it beckons. Snow driven by north-west winds is its messenger, inviting all. "Come out of your houses,

feel the touch of winter's breath, and renew your soul in winter's bosom." Will you heed its call?

Craig Jackson



BELLE ISLE PHOTO COMPETITION

Time is getting short for entering our 1985 Photo Competition. The contest is open to all amateur photographers. This year we have extended the deadline for entering to January 31, 1986. The winners will be announced at our Annual Meeting in March.

Enter as many photos as you wish; you may only win once, however. Entries should be 3 x 5 prints, color or black-and-white. Only photos taken at or of Belle Isle Marsh should be submitted. Photographic gift certificates will be awarded as prizes in five categories: Best overall; people, scenery; plants; animals. (Prizes courtesy of HUNT DRUG CO., 500 Main Street, Malden, MA, "New England's most unusual camera store.")

Please write your name, address, and phone number on the back of each entry and mail to: Photo Competition, Box 42, 265 Bryant Street, Malden, MA 02148.

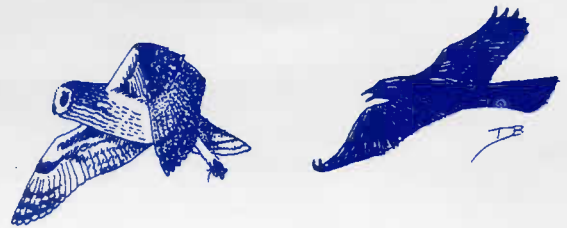
FIELD TRIP SCHEDULE

The following field trips have been scheduled to start at 1 PM. Please meet at the entrance to Belle Isle Marsh Reservation on Bennington Street, East Boston. Dress warmly and wear waterproof footwear.

Sunday, December 1
Saturday, January 11
Sunday, February 16

Field trips are free and open to the public. Please call the following trip leaders for further information.

David Desmond	324-7527
Kermit Norris	567-2339
Soheil Zendehe	628-8990



Friends of Belle Isle Marsh

P. O. Box 575
East Boston, MA 02128

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MEMBERSHIP INFORMATION

Printing and mailing this newsletter, as well as all other activities of Friends of Belle Isle Marsh, is financed by membership dues and donations from generous members.

Membership dues are as follows:

Individual:	\$3
Family:	\$5
Seniors:	\$1
Under 16:	\$1

Please join today. Any amount you can contribute above and beyond membership dues will be highly appreciated.

This newsletter was produced by Soheil Zendehe, with assistance from Tim Driscoll, Esther Fich, and Craig Jackson. Graphics by Denise Braunhardt and Marian Merullo. Historic pen-and-ink drawing from Mr. Casaburi's collection. Photo by Arnie Jarmak.

