



Belle Isle News



BELLE ISLE PARK CELEBRATION SEPTEMBER 12, 1987



Story-telling at the Park

THE BATTLE OF CHELSEA CREEK

It is difficult to imagine tranquil Belle Isle Marsh as the site of Revolutionary War activity. Today the verdant *Spartinas* and graceful egrets seem far removed from such conflict; in 1775, they were not.

Hog Island (Orient Heights and Belle Isle), was important to the British because of its location in strategic Boston Harbor. It was also vital for its livestock fattened on salt marsh hay. The British obtained fresh meat and produce on Hog Island, Noddle's Island (East Boston), Snake Island, and coastal Chelsea (Revere and Winthrop). If farmers would not sell

it, the British took the meat.

In order to cut off this food source, on May 14, 1775, the Committee of Safety ordered (actually "resolved that it be recommended to Congress") that all stock be removed from or destroyed at these coastal locations. Accordingly, on May 26, 1775, Colonel John Stark, on orders of General Artemas Ward, set out from Cambridge with approximately 400 men. They were joined at the old town meeting house close to the old church in Chelsea by Captain Samuel Sprague, the commander of the Chelsea company. Hog Island was their first destination, since it "was the nearest of these islands to this part of Chelsea; and of all the surrounding waters, the only fordable place was across the marshes lying between it and Sale's Farm . . ." (now Beachmont).

On May 27, Colonel Stark ferried 400 sheep from Hog Island across Chelsea Creek to safety. The colonials then crossed to Noddle's, where a few British guarded the stock. After the colonials had seized some cattle and killed many more, the British, alerted by burning marsh hay, sent the schooner *Diana* around the bend of East Boston and up Chelsea Creek. The ship dispatched 11 barges of marines to supplement the small force already on Noddle's and sent 400 regulars across the harbor to attack the patriots from the rear. The colonials, who could not advance amid *Diana's* fire, hid in a ditch on the marsh at Noddle's and fired on the British, then retreated to Hog Island under fire.

The patriots then went over to Chelsea Neck where they were met by General Israel Putnam; their number was now about 1000. Putnam, Stark's senior, took command on shore against the British, who all the while had been fortifying the open water and Noddle's with more barge loads of marines. For two hours *Diana* fired on and withstood fire by the patriots, after which the British still left on the schooner fled in small boats down the creek. The barges tried to tow *Diana* down the creek, but the incoming tide thwarted them. The

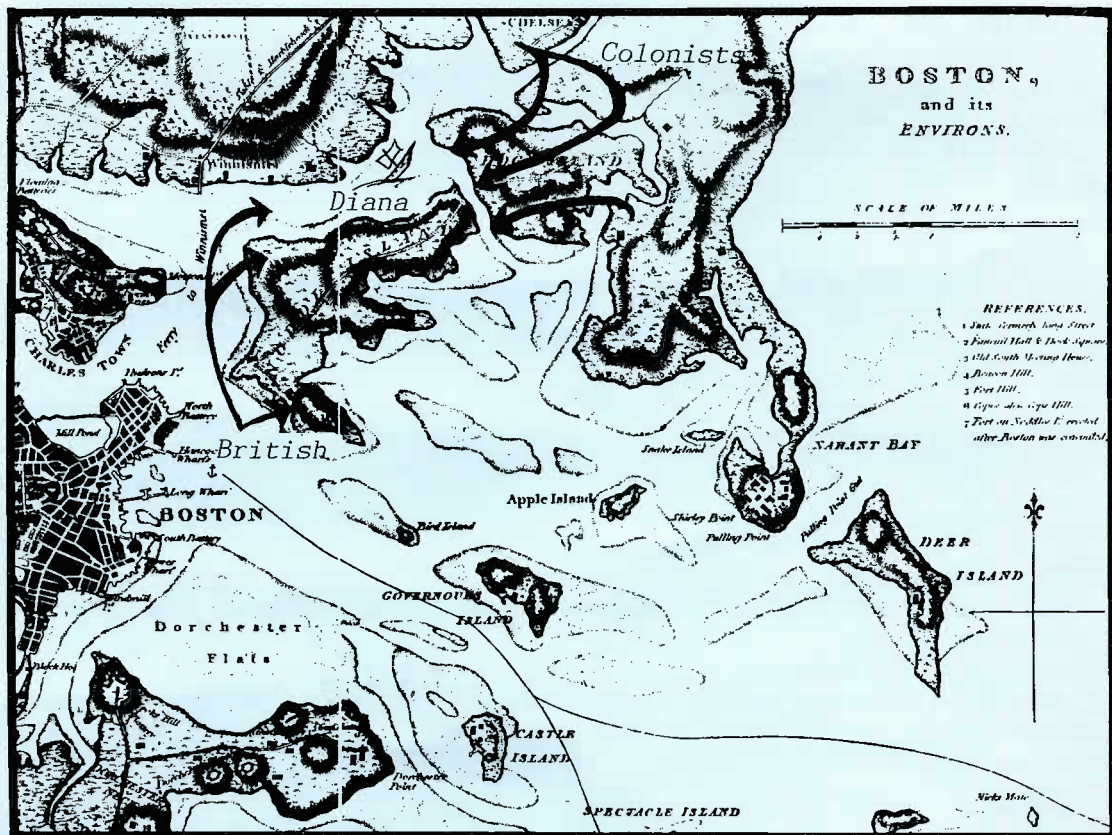
abandoned ship was later looted by a band of patriots led by Isaac Walton, then burned. The battle continued until noon the next day, with gunfire illuminating everything around.

The Battle of Chelsea Creek claimed no American lives, while British losses are said to have been heavy. This, the second battle of the American Revolution, is largely overlooked by history books, but historians agree that there were few if any battles where the patriots fought with more courage and determination.

And to think that this battle was fought because of the location and productivity of the marsh! Do not let the tranquility of the marsh deceive, for it once was full of human activity, and remains an important landmark in our cultural history.

Ian Ogilvie

[The author researched and wrote "The History of Belle Isle" while an assistant interpreter at the park this summer. The above is excerpted from his report.]



Battle of Chelsea Creek: May 27, 1775

CALLING CAMERA BUFFS

The Fourth Annual FBIM Photo Contest is underway. The competition is getting better each year, so be sure to send in your entries by January 31, 1988.

MDC's guided nature walks have brought many new faces and many cameras to the park. Traditional events such as hawk watches, heron censuses, and informal week-end birding trips have also been photo opportunities for many of us. For the winter season, we look forward to the first snow-fall, Buffleheads, mergansers, Snowy Owls . . . ah, the seasons at Belle Isle Marsh!

All formats, including 35MM, disc, slides, black and white and old photos, will be appreciated. Photos will be displayed at our Annual Meeting in March. Winners will be awarded gift certificates from Hunt Drug of Melrose, "New England's most unusual camera store."

For more information contact Barbara Bishop at 846-7418.

NEWS BRIEFS

EAST BOSTON

An anti-dumping fence has been installed behind Osco Drug to prevent truck access to the back of the marsh. The rest of Mr. Lombardo's property remains an eye-sore.

REVERE

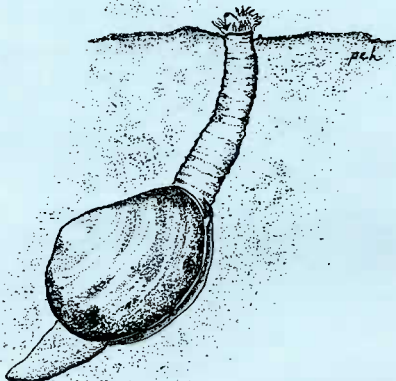
Mr. Robert DiPasquale's new house at Crystal Avenue, Beachmont, is built right on Belle Isle Marsh. The Department of Environmental Quality Engineering was alerted to the situation by Beachmont marsh-lovers. On July 22 the DEQE, finding that the work was being conducted without a valid waterways licence, issued a Cease and Desist Order.

Mr. Emmanuele Scata owns the debris-strewn lot at the end of Summer Street in Beachmont (on the right as you enter the marsh), a total of 11,903 square feet. Measurements taken last month show that Scata has fenced off 14,520 square feet. That includes over 2500 square feet of Belle Isle Marsh that he does not own! We have sent the Revere Conservation Commission a request for a Determination of Applicability under the Wetlands Protection Act to stop further illegal work at this site.

WINTHROP

A \$6,000 fine and a court-order to clean up the marsh adjacent to his property are what Mr. Anthony Bonacorso has been handed by the Attorney General's Office. The fine has been paid, but completion of the rest of the court-order is still in question.

Our concerns about possible toxic leaching into Belle Isle Inlet and Boston Harbor from the old Winthrop Dump (and future



cemetery) were presented to DEQE at the Citizen's Accountability Forum organized by Clean Water Action Project on November 10. Answers to those concerns should be available at the December 1 Forum.

Wooden boat cradles, believed to have originated from a Winthrop boatyard, continue to be scattered all up and down Belle Isle Inlet.

T-TIDINGS

The planting of trees along the fence separating the MBTA Yard at Orient Heights from Belle Isle Marsh is scheduled for next spring. This good-neighbor gesture by the T will mask the unsightly machinery at the yard and provide natural habitats for perching birds.

Bulletin boards at Suffolk Downs and Beachmont Stations now announce activities at Belle Isle Park; and the nearest station has been renamed "Suffolk Downs/Belle Isle Marsh."

Age

Belle Isle Marsh is at least 3,445 years old, according to carbon-dating of the 15-foot core sample taken last summer. (This method has a 150 year margin of error.) The marsh is probably much older in the areas where peat is known to extend down to 29 feet. The core sample was taken by Park Interpreter Chris Rodstrom and members of the Boston University Geology Department; the analysis was done by Geochron Labs of Krueger Enterprises, Cambridge.

MDC Park Staff

Over this winter, Chris Rodstrom and Sarah Elkind will continue with interpretive programs for the general public and for school groups. Current activities are listed on the bulletin board in the parking lot. The staff can be reached at 727-5350.

MDC is planning more trails and observation spots in the marsh.

Lisa Vernegaard, first Park Supervisor for Belle Isle, has gone on to a higher MDC position in Dover. With her go our best wishes and congratulations for a job well done.

October Clean-Up

The results of the October 4 clean-up were: 2 30-cubic-yard dumpsters and 8 truckloads of trash removed; over 100 satisfied participants; 50 merit badges for the hard-working Winthrop Cub Scouts.



Sweeden's Swamp

Destruction of this red maple swamp in southeastern Massachusetts has been thwarted by the most recent Federal court ruling. Any new Attleboro Mall will have to be built on an ecologically less fragile site. FBIM is one of many environmental groups who joined in the Coalition to Save Sweeden's Swamp to protect its wildlife resources.

Fall Sightings

October 10 was a fine hawk-watch day at the marsh: 13 Ospreys, 4 Sharp-shinned Hawks, 2 Northern Harriers, and 2 Peregrine Falcons were reported.

In November there were sightings of 9 Great Blue Herons, a Snow Goose, Buffleheads, Red-breasted Mergansers, a pair of Northern Harriers, two American Kestrels, Yellow-rumped Warblers, Eastern Meadowlarks, Snow Buntings, and Song and Savannah Sparrows.



BIRDFINDER

David Williams



[We received this account last March but decided to share it now in anticipation of the return of Short-eared Owls.]

On Sunday, January 25, I came to Belle Isle Marsh to look for a Short-eared Owl, since I had found two rather fresh owl pellets there the week before. The sun was shining brightly when I arrived at about 2 PM. From the parking lot I thought I saw a Northern Harrier gliding low over the perimeter of the marsh, but, as the bird turned, I realized it was an owl.

I double-timed it toward the marsh, slip-sliding over the ice. On reaching the edge, I sat down in the grass and scanned with my binoculars. There it was! The beautiful shades of brown stood out boldly and the streaked breast was very conspicuous, as were the the black wrist-marks under the wings. Suddenly a second owl appeared. For over half an hour I watched one, then the other hunt, hovering and then diving into the grasses, each time unsuccessfully. Only once did an owl perch, and then only for two minutes. At one point the owls converged, faced each other and rose together until they seemed to brake with their talons out toward one another. Later, one owl made an incredible 180 turn. While gliding along, it suddenly dipped a wing, rolled, then seemed to be going in the opposite direction. Given my distance and angle of viewing, maybe it wasn't 180, but it sure was a spectacular turn.

I followed the birds in my scope at 25X with superb clarity because of the light. Just watching them slowly swivel their heads back and forth, looking for food, was a joy. Eventually I lost them across the inlet, behind Winthrop Dump. This was a super way to spend Superbowl Sunday.

ON THE EDGE

In summer an empty quarter dull to eye and pale to ear, in winter the sea gleams: green dark and jade deep, it rises to the touch of the beach approaching, raises veils of brilliance high into an opposing wind, as intricate of pattern as antique lace, as delicate of filament as the finery of herons.

At the gatherings of waves, the dark round stones of the shingle chatter. To landings, the sand whispers, to partings, sighs.

Come myriad Snow Buntings pale brown of back, flashing white in black wings, all talking at once, all tumbling over and over each other, like children just let out of school, impelled along the shore by a gale of their own making, a meteor shower, a squall of music boxes playing -- leaving behind them a memory of careless elfin anarchy.

Close by, two pairs of Horned Larks dance the top of a sandbank, their faces painted, masked for a *beaux arts* ball or *mardi gras* parade. They call to each other faintly, sounding very far away -- shiny ornaments, softly conversing on a Christmas tree.

Quietly a solitary Ipswich Sparrow walks about the stands of beach grass, looking for seeds, secure in its winter habitat of dune and high beach that ever advances inland upon us with hurricane and northeast storm, from Nova Scotia to Georgia. But what cares he or she for the houses we have built on sand?



Named for Ipswich, Massachusetts in 1868, considered a species for a century thereafter, the Ipswich Sparrow now is regarded as a geographic race of the Savannah Sparrow, the latter named in 1811 for the city in Georgia, says Terres, not for the fields and plains where often it is found in summer throughout North America. Large and pale, a winter ghost of the Savannah, the Ipswich Sparrow nests on a 20 mile strip of Sable Island 90 miles south of Nova Scotia. "A desolate, treeless stretch of shifting sand," Godfrey calls it, "a tiny fog-shrouded dot."

People have much abused the island. They brought in rabbits that ate up the plants. To eat up the rabbits, they brought in cats. That failing, they brought in foxes. In one season, Godfrey reports, the foxes "obliterated both the cats and the rabbits." Now the Ipswich Sparrow alone remains, "maintaining its numbers satisfactorily," flying accurately to find the island in the fog, and also flying strongly -- to "combat buffeting winds that would carry it off-target to its death."

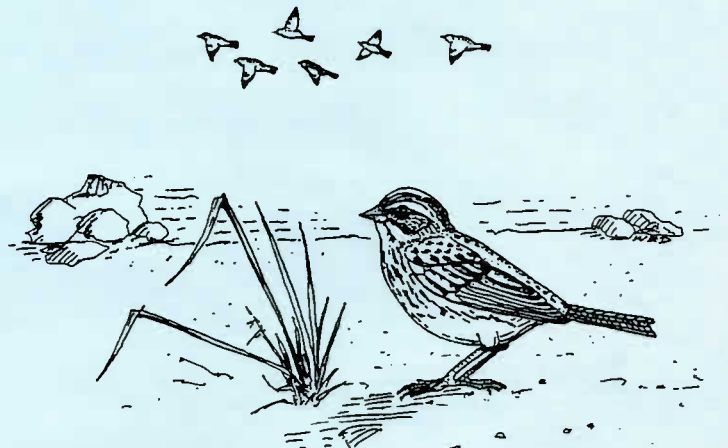
Sable Island, from the French *sable*, meaning sand, is slowly washing away.

J. Barton

Sources:

Godfrey, W. Earl, *The Birds of Canada*, 1966, 1979.

Terres, John K., *The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds*, 1980.



WINTER PROGRAMS AND FIELD TRIPS

Saturday, January 9 -- SLIDE SHOW: VISIONS OF BELLE ISLE MARSH. Winthrop Public Library, 2 Metcalf Square, Winthrop. Preregistration advised.

Sunday, January 17 -- BIRDS OF WINTER.

Saturday, February 6 -- FIELD FORUM: VANISHING MARSHES. Meet at Osco Drug's parking lot, Saratoga St., East Boston.

Sunday, February 21 -- SEASONS OF A SALT MARSH: WINTER.

Saturday, March 12 -- THE HONEST-TO-GOODNESS MARSH MUCK. Preregister.

Sunday, March 13 -- ANNUAL MEETING, FRIENDS OF BELLE ISLE MARSH. 2 PM. Lady of Lourdes Church Hall, Beachmont.

Saturday, March 26 -- MARSH TREK. A three hour walk around marsh boundaries.

All programs begin at 1 PM and meet at Belle Isle Park parking lot, unless otherwise specified. Be sure to wear warm clothes and waterproof shoes. Programs are free and open to the public.

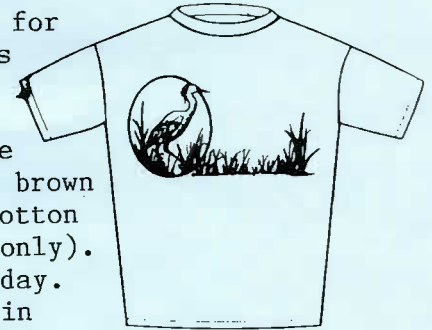
For further information, call MDC Public Information at 727-5215 or 5350.

TASL HARBOR CENSUS: JANUARY 16

Boston Harbor is winter home to thousands of water birds - birds such as cormorants, Brant, eider, gulls and sandpipers. Join this half-day survey and census of the harbor and expand your knowledge of our "backyard birds." For more information, call Soheil Zendehe at 628-8990.

T-SHIRTS: \$7

Here's an idea for kids' Christmas presents: give our very attractive T-shirts, dark brown on tan, 100% cotton (men's size S only). Order yours today. Free delivery in East Boston, Winthrop, or Revere. Others please add \$1.50 for handling and postage. Write Box 575, East Boston, MA 02128.



MEMBERSHIP INFORMATION

All our activities and publications are financed by our membership. If you are not a member, please join now. Dues should be mailed to our P. O. Box:

Individual	\$3
Family	5
Seniors	1
Youth (under 16)	1

Any contributions above and beyond dues will be greatly appreciated. FBIM is a registered non-profit organization.

This newsletter is produced by Esther Fich and Soheil Zendehe. Photo by Barbara Bishop. Ipswich Sparrow by Ted Davis, Jr. Maps by Soheil Zendehe.

Friends of Belle Isle Marsh

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