



Belle Isle News

Newsletter of the Friends of Belle Isle Marsh

Number 37 March 1993

Annual Meeting:

Sunday, March 14

Speaker: MDC archaeologist **Tom Mahlstedt**: Historical uses of local coastal areas including Native American sites at Belle Isle.

Time: Sunday, March 14, 2-4 PM

Place: St. John's Episcopal Church Hall, 222 Bowdoin St., Winthrop.*

This meeting is free and open to the public. So join the gathering of Friends and enjoy the speaker, special interest corners, music and entertainment, raffle (see below), photo contest, socializing and refreshments.

Annual Elections

The Nominating Committee will present a slate of officers and will accept other nominations from the floor. Please call in your nominations to Mary Mitchell at (617) 846-2389 after 6 PM.

Raffle

First Prize: Herb Guttel's original stainless steel sculpture (see photo in last issue).

Other Prizes: Original wood-carving and painting, etc.

Tickets: \$1, available at door or through Board members.

*Directions to Church

From **Revere** shore to Revere Street, Winthrop; right at first set of lights, through second set, sharp left at third set (five-corners). Immediate right on Bowdoin Street, keep right at fork to Parish House on left.

From **East Boston** Bennington Street at Orient Heights, take Route 145 to Winthrop, right on Pleasant Street (still 145), left at *Episcopal Church* sign onto Buchanan Street to Parish House on left.

William Chesebrough, Herder: First Resident of Winthrop



The story of William Chesebrough in Seventeenth Century Winthrop (then Pulling Point) is important to the human history of adjacent Belle Isle because it provides information on local living conditions at that time.

In 1635 Chesebrough, a Boston constable, arrived in Pulling Point with a herd of cows, sheep and goats belonging to Bostonians. These animals could no longer be kept in Boston proper, for lack of space; the livestock was therefore sent to graze and live at Noddle's Island (East Boston), Hog Island (Orient Heights/Belle Isle), and Pulling Point, where there was a lot of water and relative security from attacks by Indians, wolves, and wild cats.



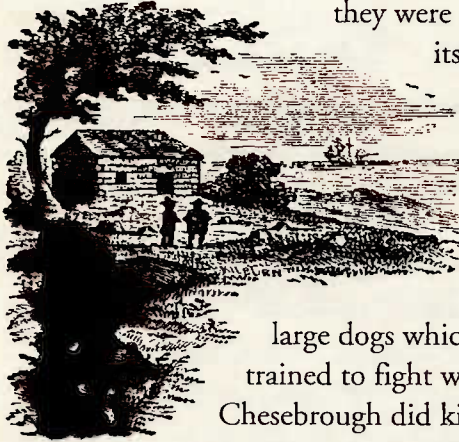
Near where the Winthrop Town Hall is presently located, the City of Boston built a house and palisade for Chesebrough, by a field of grass and a swamp with fresh water. He probably lived in a one-room house, built of logs and covered by a roof of cedar or soft-pine shingles. The house had very few windows and one door, which was built to be very strong against the possibility of attack by Indians. In the walls of the house there were loopholes through which muskets could be fired; the walls themselves were thick enough to repel Indian arrows. The "palisade or stockade was made of stout logs set on ends and firmly [bound] together with cross beams. The gate, large enough to just admit one cow at a time, was very heavy and solid and held shut by bars fitting into sockets. It

(Continued on page 2)

Chesebrough (Continued)

was more of a fortress than a house..."

Boston authorities built a fence across the land at Short Beach in Beachmont in order to keep livestock from wandering too far from Pulling Point. The cattle, goats and sheep were allowed to roam beyond the palisade during the day. Chesebrough had to make sure



they were all returned within

its boundaries at

night for fear of

predation by

"wolves, bears

and wild cats."

Chesebrough

also kept two

large dogs which were specially

trained to fight wolves. When

Chesebrough did kill a wolf, he

earned extra bounty income.



here were many animals other than predators in the vicinity of the small house next to the swamp. Noise from shorebirds near the water's edge filled the air, and the thick woods were full of deer, turkeys, and "partridges" (grouse). The house itself was as rustic as its surroundings. The floor was either matted-down dirt or dirt covered by stringers of poles flattened on the side. The bare dirt was more solid but much colder in winter. There was a fireplace of small logs covered by clay, and the hearth was covered with pieces of shale or slate collected from the beach.

The table was hung from the rafters to keep crawling insects away from the food. A wooden slab with a few logs secured into holes in the underside was used as a stool. There was probably no silverware in Chesebrough's house, though silver and pewter spoons were used in Boston. There were no forks at the time but he probably used a wooden spoon extensively. He did not have china, but probably used a wooden bowl and a wooden trencher, which was "an oblong chunk of wood with a bowl-like cavity carved into its substance," for carving meats. Most important of all was his hunting knife: this he used to hunt as well as eat. He probably

cleaned his utensils with either grass, hay, or sand and water.

Chesebrough probably drank ale; the Puritans are known to have brewed strong ale but they demanded moderation. He got his bread and beer from Boston, but took most of his sustenance from his immediate surroundings. Meat from deer, bears, partridges, turkeys, and ducks was easy to obtain. A clean Boston Harbor was also full of finfish and shellfish. Finally, he ate cornmeal prepared in many ways to round off a healthy diet.

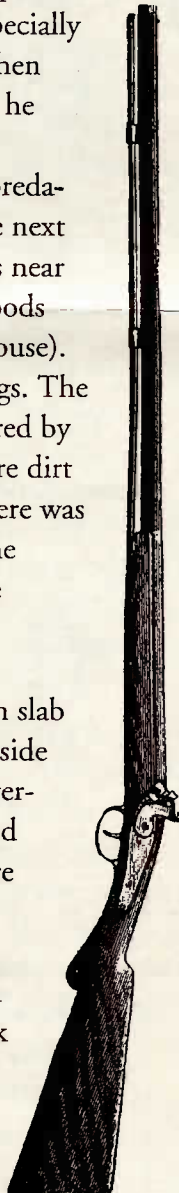


Chesebrough read the Bible, which "next to the musket and the axe was the most important item in any Puritan dwelling." He wore a

doublet and hose, heavy shoes and a large hat which protected him from the rain and sun. He also had light armor, consisting of a "steel cap, a breast plate, a backpiece and tasletts." To go with his armor he had muskets and the common sword, powder flints, bullets, and chunks of lead.

Chesebrough himself did not remain a herder for long; he apparently became dissatisfied in 1638 and moved to the new town of Braintree and later founded the town of Stoughton, Connecticut. But the description of his post, brief as it was, forever serves as an indicator of the lifestyle of those who lived in the area of Belle Isle when it was first being settled.

Ian Ogilvie



William Chesebrough

*The author was a seasonal interpreter at Belle Isle Park during the summer of 1987. This material was excerpted from his **The History of Belle Isle, and Especially Belle Isle Marsh Reservation**, which he researched and wrote that summer. His source and quotations are from:*

The History of Winthrop, Massachusetts, 1630-1952, by William H. Clark, Winthrop Centennial Committee, Winthrop, Massachusetts, 1952. (Available at the Winthrop Public Library.)

Metropolitan Parks System 1893-1993

"For crowded populations to live in health and happiness, they must have space for air, for light, for exercise, for rest, and for the peaceful beauty of nature." -Charles Eliot

Beginnings...

At the close of the 19th century, the population of Metropolitan Boston was nearly one million people. The majority were poor working-class immigrants living in congested tenements. For them, open space and parkland was almost nonexistent. Of the 35 cities and towns in the region only Boston had any established parks, and from Gloucester to Plymouth the only oceanfront open to the public was along the Nahant Causeway and at the Marine Park at Castle Island, South Boston.

Charles Eliot, landscape architect and apprentice to Frederick Law Olmstead, was well aware that people needed open space and contact with nature in order to relax and escape the daily pressures of crowded urban life. In 1890 Eliot and Sylvester Baxter proposed an organization of citizens from the Boston area to be empowered by the state to hold lands, *"just as an art museum holds pictures, or a public library holds books... for the enjoyment and use of the public."*

By 1892, the Massachusetts legislature officially created the Metropolitan Parks Commission to study the feasibility of a regional parks system. Over the next year members of the Commission rambled throughout the region looking at every natural, scenic and recreational site within ten miles of Boston.

In 1893 the Commission's report was complete. This far-reaching and visionary document encompassed a concrete plan for selecting and securing the scenic forests, rivers, and seacoasts of the region for public use by present and future generations.

The Commission recommended the acquisition of land along the Charles, Neponset and Mystic Rivers, beachfront including Revere, Winthrop, and Nantasket beaches, and scenic uplands such as the Blue Hills and the Middlesex Fells. They also suggested the creation of scenic parkways to connect these properties.

Urging speedy action, Commission Secretary Baxter cited rising land prices and increasing development of the region, which was...

"in danger of becoming a vast desert of houses, factories, and stores, spreading over and overwhelming the natural features of the landscape... The creation of such a human desert, relieved hardly by an oasis, is threatened upon the greater part of this naturally beautiful region."



Charles Eliot: 1859-1897

private citizens could not only agree, but actually design and create a park system of this size.

*Karl Pastore,
Park Manager*

This is the first of a series of articles on the century of development of the Metropolitan Park System, which today includes Belle Isle Marsh Reservation, and which is mainly now administered by the Metropolitan District Commission (MDC).

The MDC is planning a variety of events to celebrate this centennial. For more information on these events please call (617) 727-1993 or the Belle Isle/Rumney Marsh Reservation office, (617) 727-5350.

NEWS NOTES:

Bonacorso Update

The good news is that some remedial boundary work has been done on the Bonacorso property on Morton Street, Winthrop, and this fact is, in itself, an acknowledgement that there is a problem.

The bad news is that the quality of the work done is so inferior that no inspector with any degree of integrity would pretend that it meets the criteria for the permanent rip-rap revetment mandated in past proceedings regarding this site. Also, the amount of fill removed from the site would barely fill a couple of good-sized potholes on Morton Street

We will continue to monitor this area. Perhaps we will have better news next time.

Security

On January 29, FBIM members Conal, Eleanor, John, Mary and Rebecca (age 17 months) met with MDC Commissioner Bhatti at his office. The principal topic for discussion was the ongoing illegal sexual activity near the parking lot at Belle Isle.

The Commissioner was very receptive to the idea of providing additional visibility for cars there by moving the bulletin board to the Bennington Street side and by extending the pedestrian path around the lot. The view of the park from the parking lot would be enhanced, and parents with children and bicyclists would feel safer. The cover required for illegal activities would, to a large extent, be removed. This lovely park might then be restored for more family-oriented activities.

The Commissioner and Reservations Director Borderick, who was also present, stressed that they value input from Friends groups.

1993 Photo Contest

Deadline for receipt of entries: March 8, 1993.

Mail entries to: FBIM, P. O. Box 575, East Boston, MA 02128

Rules: Amateur photographers: enter as many photos as you wish, but you may win only once.

*Color or black-and-white prints taken at Belle Isle Marsh should have your name, address and telephone number on the back.

*Prizes will be awarded at our Annual Meeting in five categories: best overall, people, scenery, plants and birds.

Winter Bonus

As area ponds and streams froze solid in mid-January, many fresh-water birds sought out shallow, unfrozen salt water. Mallards could be seen sheltering and feeding on all sides of Belle Isle. Large groups of Canada Geese were there. Then one freezing morning, through a car window, came a dazzling sight: a pair of large, white, long-necked birds sitting in the Inlet just inside the Saratoga Street bridge. Could I believe my eyes? Swans at Belle Isle!

True, I know that these birds—the largest in my experience—can live year-round in our area and can fly at will; but this knowledge is overshadowed by an old mistaken impression I had that they are confined to parks and zoos. Also, despite a few years of birding at Belle Isle and hearing rumors of their occasional appearance, I had never seen them there before.

I sought confirmation of my vision. Yes, my bus-seat neighbor that evening had seen them in the same exact spot an hour before I did in the morning. Then I asked a friend whose home abuts one side of the marsh if she had noticed any swans out her window. Much to my disappointment, her answer was “No.” She then casually added, however, that she had seen two huge white birds on that same day when entering Saratoga Street, but didn't know what they were!

A few days later my news was broadcast at a Friends board meeting. Sure enough, the following Sunday two members checked out the Morton Street side of the marsh separately and each of them spotted one swan. My eyes had not deceived me.

Further conversations revealed other sightings in nearby areas, including Chelsea Creek. Perhaps you saw some large graceful birds lately and wondered if they could possibly be swans; they probably were!

If you haven't seen them yet, keep an eye out for them.

Esther Fich



February 8, 1993

The Brant Geese, about 50 of them, rose quickly from Belle Isle Creek on an incoming tide, heading for their mid-tide feed in that protected arm of the bay between Logan and Jeffries Point where the eel grass is abundant and the water not too deep. On the upland overlooking the marsh a huge Red-tailed Hawk perching comfortably in a remote tree was suddenly scolded by three raucous crows for some sins of his past--robbers rebuking the thief in their own contrary way. Down in the Phragmites no sign of the Redwings yet, although Leo saw some in mid-December--strange.



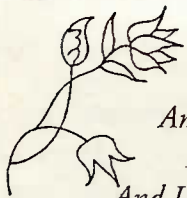
On the grassy knoll hundreds of voles' holes, tunnels and paths explain the kestrels--their continual hovering presence tells a story.

Glancing up--the Red-tail, flushed by the pesky crows, had soared half mile high on the cold northwesterly to free himself of the nagging, buzzardly Corvi brachyrhynchos --you guessed right, crows.

We can't forget the Mute Swans sighted at Belle Isle bridge. Probably driven out by the thick Charles River ice to prevent their feeding, they've moved out to open waters.

Reported at the leeward side of Fort Heath, Slade's Mill, Chelsea Creek (ugh!), and Winthrop, East Boston bay.
Conal Foley

THE CHILDREN'S CORNER



I know a place, in the ivy on a tree,
Where a bird's nest is, and eggs are three,
And the bird is brown, and the eggs are blue,
And the twigs are old, but the moss is new,
And I go quite near, though I think I have heard
The sound of me watching, if I had been a bird.

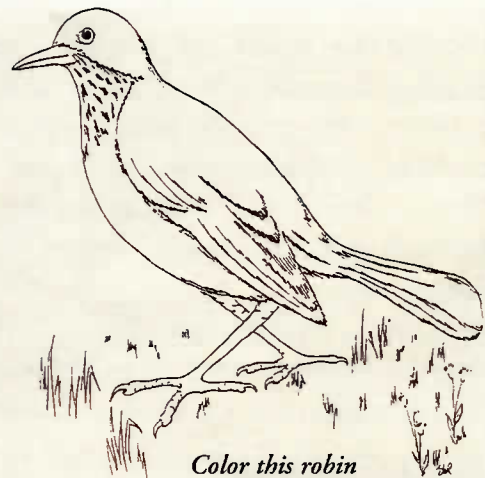
John Drinkwater

Soon the robins will return and bring the warm breezes with them. Be sure to join the Friends in one of our spring activities. Belle Isle is a wonderful spot to watch winter melt away.

Book Reviews:

The Mixed-up Chameleon, by Eric Carle; Harper Collins, 1975.

A cute but bored chameleon visits a zoo and begins to imagine being just like all the other animals he encounters. What if he could change more than just his colors? Eric Carle developed this book using his traditional illustration techniques, with help from school children. It is an amusing and colorful tale.



Color this robin

Animal Camouflage, a Closer Look, by Joyce Powzyck; Bradbury Press, New York, 1990.

This is a delightful and very informative look at how animals use camouflage in their natural habitats to protect themselves from their predators. Coloration, disguise, mimicry and masking are just some of the types of camouflage described in wonderful examples and illustrated in soft colors.

Mary Mitchell

Spring Activities

Lectures at Eliot House

Eliot House is the square two-story white house on Eliot Circle, at the southern end of Revere Beach. It is now administrative headquarters for MDC's Belle Isle and Rumney Marsh Reservations.

Please pre-register for these events by calling (617) 727-5350.

Saturday, April 10, Noon-2 PM: America's first public beach. Well known local historian Peter McCauley will present a program on the history of Revere Beach. Through old photographs he will take us on a tour of its colorful past.

Saturday, May 15, 2 PM lecture, 4 PM field trip: Shorebirds. With spring shorebird migration well underway, Soheil Zendehe will present slides on their habits and distribution. He will then lead a late afternoon field trip to find what birds the rising tide brings in at Belle Isle. *Binoculars and waterproof footwear recommended.*

Saturday, May 22, Noon-2 PM: Norman Gautreau, artist. Mr. Gautreau will discuss his artwork, which includes Revere Beach and sports topics. He will also show the process by which his paintings are transformed into lithographs.

Field Trips

Saturday, April 17, 10 AM: Coastal Geology. Leader: Karl Pastore, Reservation Manager. We'll look at how barrier beaches, drumlins and other glacial features helped create coastal marshes. *Please call (617) 727-5350 to pre-register.*

Sunday morning walks, 10 AM (9 AM when Daylight Saving Time starts): Join Conal Foley on a casual ramble through the marsh. *Please call Conal at (617) 846-0786 if you are going to come.*

Upcoming Events

Please call (617) 727-5350 for dates and times.

Annual Kite Day sponsored by *Seacoast Kite Flyers.*

Canoe Programs at Belle Isle and Rumney Marsh Reservations.

Fishing education Program sponsored by *Massachusetts Fisheries and Wildlife.*

Spring Hawk Watching

Soon hawks will be winging their way north. Join us on the following dates on the hill in the middle of Belle Isle Park. Dress warmly and bring a lawn-chair.

Saturday & Sunday, April 17-18

Saturday & Sunday, April 24-25

Saturday & Sunday, May 1-2

Saturday & Sunday, May 8-9

For more information please call the Belle Isle Hawk Watch Coordinator, Soheil Zendehe: (617) 863-2392.

Renew

Our membership year is drawing to a close. As you know, we have kept dues extremely low to keep membership open to the largest number of Friends. Who else has membership fees topping out at \$8 for a family?

So please, return the enclosed membership renewal envelope with the largest contribution you can afford.

Belle Isle News is published quarterly by Friends of Belle Isle Marsh, a non-profit organization dedicated to the preservation of this marsh. We are staffed entirely by volunteers and funded through generous contributions and dues: \$8 (Family), \$5 (Individual), and \$1 (Seniors/Under 16).

Each and every one of you is important to us. Thank you for your continued support.

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