

A History of Change at Eel Pond Beach



In 1846, Eel Pond was separated from Nantucket Sound by an expanse of dunes several hundred feet wide (1). Three sheep and cattle farms were operated on the peninsula that would become Washburn Island (then called Old Menauhant). There were several farm buildings on the peninsula (one of which was still standing in the 1950s). Farmers gained access to the mainland by a road that was built on the saltmarsh and dunes behind Eel Pond Beach. In 1875, a hotel was built next to the west end of the beach (2). It was the nucleus of a popular summer colony, one of the first on the Cape. The water in front of it was deep enough that children dove off the pier built for steam ferries serving the hotel (2). By 1930, most of the beach and its dunes had eroded away (3) and storm waves lapped at the road that served the two estates on the island. The hotel had burned down in 1918 and the pier was gone, too. Waters where it used to be were now quite shallow, apparently filled in by the eroding dunes. Although the beach had narrowed, the southern shore of Eel Pond was still in roughly the same location as it had been in 1846. This would soon change.



In 1936, a powerful hurricane washed through the beach, creating a wide opening that connected Eel Pond to Nantucket Sound. For the first time, Washburn Island was truly an island. Earth movers soon filled the opening, however, and a new road was built on top of new dunes, piled high by the Army Engineers when they used Washburn Island as a training camp. Soon after, in 1944, another powerful hurricane washed over the beach again, creating an even larger opening than before. Part of this opening was retained and is the navigation channel that still cuts through the beach today. But the sand that had been used to build up the dunes ended up in Eel Pond, where it filled its southern portion. The southern shore of the pond was now more than 100 feet north of its original position. The changes marked the beginning of the end to the oyster fishery that had existed in Eel Pond for many years. It also marked a period of transformation of the beach, because it was now a sand spit and subject to a variety of erosional forces that would sculpt it into a never ending array of shapes and configurations. It would never be the same.

Today, all that remains are traces of the past. Occasionally, a mat of peat (4) appears in the surf zone at the southwestern corner of Washburn Island (5). It is remnants of the old road that lead to the farms. Sometimes, cleat tracks of old farm tractors are visible (6). Slightly further east, exposed in the eroded beach face, is a layer of tar buried in the sand (7). It is the road the Army built in 1942, although parts of it are more visible further inland. The beach itself is several hundred feet north of its position in 1846 (8). Of course, even back then it was moving northward. Years before that, the beach was even wider and the dunes and marsh were more expansive. What we see today is the result of a natural process of shoreline change. Unfortunately, the outcome of this change has been altered by our attempts to use the beach as a road and, later, to maintain a channel through it for recreational boating. While it may not be evident at first, there is often a price to pay to have things "our way". At Eel Pond Beach, the price paid is easier to see than most.

