

Rediscovering Bluff Point State Park: a place of gathering

By Syma Ebbin

My 92-year-old mother, my husband, son and I launched our small boat from her house on Jupiter Point in Groton on an overcast Sunday morning, heading out of Pine Island Bay across Baker Cove and onto the Poquonnock River. Another son followed, paddling a kayak.

Sporadic rain and boat spray dampened us during the short trip to Bluff Point State Park, where my grandparents' summer house once stood. My mother, Mildred Raymond Newbury (now Ebbin) hadn't been back to the site of the house since 1938, when she was nine years old.

Despite her long absence, her enduring relationship with Bluff Point resonated through her recounted memories. Hers is one of many compelling stories that speak to the importance of this place. This beloved 806-acre peninsula—officially named Bluff Point State Park, Coastal Reserve and Natural Area Preserve—is seeing a new chapter added to its history. This magnificent site is now set to be part of Connecticut's anticipated designated National Estuarine Research Reserve (CT NERR). As in nature where each species has its own unique niche—its own place and role in the community—Bluff Point has its own special niche within the CT NERR. With its large size, historical significance, ecological diversity and long-time popularity, Bluff Point contributes to the CT NERR's mission of furthering science, recreation, conservation and education, welcoming the public to embark on explorations of their own design throughout the year.

As we pulled our boat onto the shore at Bluff Point that day, we checked a hand-drawn map for Lot 16. That was where my great-grandfather built a three-room cottage next to Mugg's Hole, a spot midway along the west side of the 1.8-mile-long peninsula. T.K. Raymond, my mom's grandfather, kept his large motorboat moored in deep water off the beach, transporting a dozen or more individuals out for frequent fishing trips where they caught porgies, flounder, striped bass, bluefish and other species. On Bluff Point, my grandparents boated, fished and clammed. My mother preferred hiking and exploring the coasts and uplands alone and with her summer friends, boating down to the Blue Shanty to get ice cream, and on rainy days working on her coin and stamp collections. They loved being near the water, swimming and soaking in the summer sun and playing cards and board games at night.

More than eight decades later, my mom now climbed over the side of the boat onto the beach. After a few moments she got her bearings, at first confused by the dense coastal forest



Syma Ebbin, right, heads home with her son Eli Kane and mother Mildred Ebbin in a small boat after visiting Bluff Point on Aug. 8. Photo: Michael Kane

that now crowded the shore, the fringing salt marsh at the edge of the beach and the absence of the brown sand beach she remembered playing on as a child. The vacation home she remembered had been situated on open, treeless land, 100 feet or so back from the swimming beach. She particularly remembered how, at low tide, she had been able to walk across the neck of water on a raised path at the mouth of Mugg’s Hole to get to her friend Betty Rogers’ house, which sat on the narrow peninsula of land jutting into the river. Some of the rocks which had formed the path are still visible, but the mouth is now wider and deeper, perhaps because of erosion, rising seas or the removal of rocks and sediment to allow boats to enter more easily.

At the end of their summer stay at Bluff Point in 1938, her family moved back to their home on Morse Avenue, about 4 miles away. She and her brother started school. They returned one last time in late September in the wake of the 1938 hurricane that made landfall on the 21st.

“We returned to an empty lot to sift through the mud for my parents’ silverware, while my friend Betty and her family searched for her brother,” my mother recalled.

During a 50th Anniversary reunion in 1988, Betty (then Betty Wadsworth) remembered that her newly married sister Carlene and husband Roger Page had been honeymooning at Bluff Point when they rowed back to the house with Betty’s brother Ellsworth to get a puppy. The tidal surge of the hurricane capsized their boat, drowning Roger and carrying Ellsworth up the Poquonnock River, where he was eventually found alive.

As described by ecologist C.S. Holling, what followed was a cycle of release and renewal. The category 3 Hurricane of

’38 created a veritable “ecological blank slate,” destroying most vestiges of human settlement on the Bluff Point peninsula. This ultimately facilitated events and conditions that led to the restoration and protection of the coastal forests and beaches that make up Bluff Point.



Glasswort, a marsh plant that turns from green to red in the fall, contrasts with saltmarsh hay in one of the marshes at Bluff Point. Photo: Judy Benson

Also known as Gardiner’s Point or Mumford Point (according to an 1868 map), Bluff Point is a rocky headland that extends into Fishers Island Sound, bounded on the east by Mumford Cove and on the west by the Poquonnock River. “Split Rock” lies at the southernmost point; to the west, Bluff Point’s rocky headland adjoins a mile-long sandspit, called “the Sand Bar.” Prior to the Hurricane of ’38, it was connected to Bushy Point, a rocky island to the west.

The area contains sandy beaches and dunes, salt marshes, mud flats and rocky intertidal habitats at its margin. These give way in the uplands to a coastal forest dominated by oak and hickory species, shrubs such as bayberry and huckleberry and more recently, a tangle of vines: invasive Asiatic bittersweet, Japanese honeysuckle and multiflora rose, and native poison ivy, blackberry and wild grape. The Atlantic flyway transects the point. More than 200 resident and migrant bird species have been identified, including several species of concern such as the piping plover, American oystercatcher and least tern which all nest in the area. Deer and other common New England mammal species also reside here. In the 1980s and 90s, the deer population exploded, negatively impacting the growth and regeneration of vegetation with their browsing.

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This led the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (CT DEEP) to institute a limited hunt to cull the population.

Estuarine waters around Bluff Point contain an assortment of fish and invertebrate species, many of them recreationally and commercially important. The shores and coastal margin contain abundant quahog clams, blue and ribbed mussels, oyster and various crab species. Offshore, eel grass beds provide habitat for bay scallops. Ancient-looking horseshoe crabs spawn on the calm and sandy beaches of the north side of the Sand Bar. CT DEEP and now, Sacred Heart University's Project Limulus have been monitoring and tagging horseshoe crabs on Bluff Point for over a decade. My children and I helped with this effort in the past, hiking out at dusk to make it to the

spawning area in time for the influx of hundreds of horseshoe crabs, all in search of a mate.

Before colonial settlers came, the native Pequot tribes lived along the coast of what is now Southeastern Connecticut, including the lands comprising Bluff Point along the Poquonnock River. "Poquonnock" is the Algonkian word for "cleared land," and the area near this river was the summer planting area for the native peoples. They also took advantage of coastal resources. Large shell middens found along the shoreline confirm their reliance on coastal species of shellfish. The shells of the quahog clam and whelk were fashioned into purple and white Wampum beads, then sewn into belts and other ornamental items and used in rituals and as a medium of exchange.

In the 1640s, John Winthrop the Younger was given permission by the colonial government to create a plantation on the tribal lands. Winthrop, who ultimately became the first governor of Connecticut, selected lands for himself that included Bluff Point, Haley Farm and Groton Long Point. The Winthrop residence on Bluff Point remained occupied for several hundred years until it was destroyed by fire in 1962. Bluff Point eventually passed to Henry Gardiner. In 1907 he rented it to John Ackley, a farmer who raised livestock and grew potatoes. Around 1920 Ackley subleased parcels of the peninsula to campers and the area became known as a "camper's paradise." Over 100 small wooden cottages were built, including the one my mom and grandparents summered in.

As early as 1914, efforts to protect Bluff Point began. Finally in 1963, the state acquired 246.6 acres of the Point for \$1 million. This was followed in 1974 by the acquisition of 530 acres paid with \$1.7 million of federal funds matched with state dollars. In 1975, Bluff Point became a state



A bucket of clams and a clam rake rest beside a driftwood log while Larry Richard of Ledyard (not shown) uses a different rake to harvest more clams.

"Coastal Reserve," in part due to the existence of a "cove forest," a rare habitat in southeastern Connecticut containing 100-year-old trees. It was designated through a special act of the Connecticut legislature, "for the purpose of preserving its native ecological associations, unique faunal and floral characteristics, geological features and scenic qualities in a condition of undisturbed integrity."

Bluff Point is one of the most productive shellfish habitats in the region, with clean freshwater from Groton's public drinking water reservoir to the north mixing with tidal waters. In 2012, more than 425,000 visitors were estimated to have visited Bluff Point and the adjoining Haley Farm Park.

Visitors today fish for the same species my great grandfather targeted from shore and by boat. Recreational shellfishers wade into the brackish waters at the mouth of the Poquonnock River at low tides, digging with rakes or with their feet for the abundant quahogs. These are seeded, along with oysters, through a collaborative relationship between Groton's Shellfish Commission and the Noank Aquaculture Cooperative which utilizes a town building for its hatchery operations. Blue mussels grow wild attached to the rocks.

Every day, hundreds hike and bike, run and ride horses along the warren of trails that crisscross the peninsula. Some use binoculars to view shorebirds and wildlife or set up tripods to take photographs. In winter, skiers and snowshoers frequent these same trails. Kayakers and stand-up paddle boarders explore the peninsula's mosquito channels, inlets and beaches.

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Clammers Stephen Meskiewicz, left, Henry Sistare, center, and Len Wineski, all of Norwich, dig for clams in the mouth of the Poquonnock River at Bluff Point on July 20. Photos: Judy Benson



Jackie Steele, left, and Zekiah Wright, both of Los Angeles, head for a walk at Bluff Point on July 20 while visiting the area. Steele is originally from New Haven and lived in New London before moving to LA. Photo: Judy Benson



Staff and students of Project Oceanology land their small boat at Bluff Point as part of an educational activity. Photo: Callie Scheetz

Educators bring students to learn about the geology and biology of coastal ecosystems, sample the waters for nutrients and dissolved oxygen, and to experience hands-on learning. Volunteers survey shorebird nests, tag horseshoe crabs, cut invasive species and pick up trash along the beaches.

Bluff Point is well-loved by Connecticut residents near and far. Its ecosystems have real value to the biota of the region, to humans and even to our local economy. These anthropocentric values have only become more important since the Covid-19 pandemic has arrived and lingered.

Throughout days of quarantine and confinement, Bluff Point's parking lot was crowded most days. Its trails filled with folks walking and biking through the coastal forest, along the sandy beaches and salt marshes, simply rejoicing in being outside in nature. How provident that this fine piece of land should be saved for us to enjoy.

MORE INFORMATION:

<https://portal.ct.gov/DEEP/State-Parks/Parks/Bluff-Point-State-Park>

What's in our names?



The wrack line at high tide on the barrier spit at Bluff Point in September is de-

What are wrack lines? The word wrack is a term for various kinds of seaweed, and wrack lines are the collections of organic matter (sea grass, shells, feathers, seaweed and other debris) that are deposited on shore by high tides. More generally, wrack lines are where the sea meets the land.

With our magazine *Wrack Lines*, we tell stories about the intersection of the land, sea and Connecticut Sea Grant. So what is Connecticut Sea Grant? One of 34 Sea Grant programs across the country, it helps residents make the most of our coastal resources and inland waterways.

It addresses the challenges that come with living by the water or within the

Long Island Sound watershed, in a state with 332 miles of shoreline and three major tidal rivers. This NOAA-state partnership based at UConn's Avery Point campus works with aquaculture farmers, fishermen and seafood purveyors to help their businesses prosper.

It funds research essential to understanding and managing our changing coastal and inland environments. It provides communities and local leaders with the information they need to make better land and shoreline decisions that result in more resilient communities and healthier watersheds. It educates students as well as teachers and adults of all ages about the marine environment.

Connected to experts and residents who live, work and recreate in the Sound and its watershed, it brings diverse interests together around a common purpose of working for mutually beneficial solutions to problems.

Small in staff but big in impact, Connecticut Sea Grant is like a pilot boat that navigates the way for large vessels toward safe harbors. Since 1988, Connecticut Sea Grant has supported "Science Serving the Connecticut Coast."

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