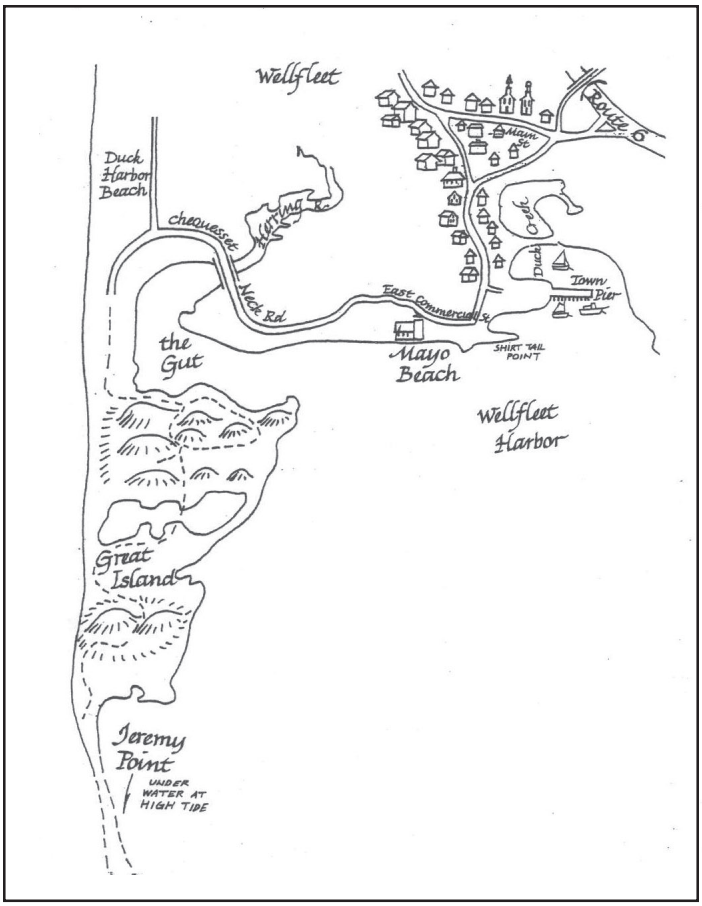
# Guide's Guide
## *Great Island*

### *Location Summary*




**Directions:** To reach Great Island, turn left off Route 6 to Wellfleet Town Center (look for green and white sign for Town Center). Turn left onto East Commercial Street. At town pier, turn right onto Kendrick Road, then left onto Chequesset Neck Road to the Great Island parking lot, 1/2 mile from traffic light on Route 6. **Driving hint**: Water view will generally be on your left.

**Safety:** Wellfleet town roads are narrow and windy, and are not well-suited for larger vehicles. **Be careful to avoid stepping on fiddler crabs (or their holes) during spring and summer when walking along marsh areas here.**

**Other:** Picnic tables are located at the Great Island parking lot, and portable restrooms are provided seasonally.

**Tips:** Tell the Blackfish Creek, Great Island and Cape Cod architecture stories on the bus on Route 6. Look for examples of Cape Cod architecture along Route 6 between Wellfleet and Truro.

**Time Frame**: Five-minute narration if bus remains on Route 6. Thirty minutes to one hour needed if group goes to Great Island.

**Notes for Educators:** The Great Island Trail is a prime location for isolated marsh, tidal flats, upland and dune ecology studies. Fiddler crabs can be seen at the base of the trail where it skirts the marsh (in the warmer months). A memorial to a Wampanoag woman at the head of the trail, and a memorial to Governor Bradford several miles inland offer historical perspective. A wayside exhibit explains the significance of the Great Island Tavern site.

**Highlights:** Blackfish Creek Herring River Drainage Tidal Flats (oyster beds) Great Island

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## *Prominent Natural Features*

**Kame (or Knob)** is the name given to the large mounds of glacial debris that have become the "islands" in this area. Here, they have gone through a series of being isolated and then reconnected, due to various coastal geologic processes.

**The Herring River drainage** is an east to west drainage. It once flowed directly west to Cape Cod Bay, isolating Great Island. Its estuarine tidal flats provide a rich habitat for oysters, and the edges of the adjoining marsh are home to many tidal species, including fiddler crabs, which frequent the shoreline during summer.

**The tombolo formation** that connects the main body of the Cape to Great Island is another prominent geologic feature of the area. It is a formation that has arisen because of specific sediment deposition and current patterns.

**The Great Island forested uplands** consist primarily of even-aged pitch pines, due to replanting activities at the end of the 19th century. Bearberry stands and other low growing species attest to the previous impoverished condition of this setting, while occasional white pine stands and one or two struggling American chestnut trees attest to the area's even earlier plant diversity.

# *Great Island*

## *Touring Script*

Traveling north from Eastham on the way to Great Island, there are a number of noteworthy features.

In the central and northern portions of Wellfleet, the Cape Cod National Seashore stretches from ocean to bay. A rich diversity of natural and cultural features lie within this range.

The first glimpse of this diversity can be seen 3/4 of a mile north of the Marconi Area along Route 6, where Blackfish Creek and its salt marshes appear to the left of the roadway. (Blackfish Creek was named for the repeated strandings of pilot whales, or blackfish. This phenomenon is still not fully understood by scientists.)

The drainage of the outwash plain from east to west is very apparent at several places on the Outer Cape, like Blackfish Creek. (The most prominent is the Pamet River, eight miles to the north.) LeCount Hollow Road, .5 mile further to the right, offers a connection to Wellfleet's portion of Ocean View Drive (the only road other than Ocean View Drive in Eastham that flanks the ocean).

Further north, and to the west of Route 6, is Wellfleet Center. Wellfleet was once a part of Eastham, but developed a center around its harbor. (The clock in the town's Congregational Church strikes in ship's time, and evidence of maritime activities can still be found along the waterfront).

The earlier name for this area was Billingsgate. Earlier still, it was the home of the Punonakanits (Wampanoag) people. Both Native Americans and European settlers took advantage of various marine resources, including stranded pilot whales. Gradually, whaling activities increased, as larger whales were driven ashore from Cape Cod Bay.

Great Island looms off to the west of Wellfleet Center. A tavern existed on Great Island, apparently to serve mariners, in the late 1600s and early 1700s. In time, both the soils of Wellfleet and the abundance of whales in the bay gave out, forcing Wellfleet residents to make the same adjustments made by residents of other Cape towns. Wellfleet became the home of fishermen, whalers, and other deep-water mariners throughout the 18th and 19th centuries.

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**The Marsh**

Oysters, soft shell clams, quahogs, fiddler crabs, herons, egrets and marsh grasses abound here because of the special configuration of the land. It was gradual sea-level rise on the sloping outwash plain that allowed for the development of most of the rich salt marsh areas visible today. Changes in upland drainage patterns also enhanced the connection of various bayside "islands" through movement and deposition of sand. This process further stabilized the marsh area fringing the "tombolo" formation (known as "The Gut") that stretches between Griffin and Great Island. Two more similar concave shaped "salt marsh harbors" are sheltered southward between Great Beach and Little Beach hills.

Wellfleet oysters, which thrive in the flats adjacent to the marsh at this location, have been world renowned. Native peoples used oysters in their diet, and Pilgrim settlers soon discovered their commercial value. Oyster shells were also burned to make lime for mortar. However, it was not always understood that oysters need old shell surfaces to propagate their spat. This, and possibly other factors, caused the dramatic disappearance of this delicacy from local waters in the mid 1800's. Reintroduction of oyster stock from southern U.S. coastal areas reestablished this species locally-but it will never be known if the replacement stocks can match the flavor of the famous Wellfleet oysters of old.

**Billingsgate Beach**

The ancient name for the farthest point south of Great Island was Billingsgate Beach. Initially, the chain of outwash mounds located here gradually became islands some 18,000 years ago as the glacial period ended and sea level rose. Then these same islands became reattached to the land by sandy bridges (causeways) due to migration caused by wind, waves and currents. The sandy attachments between these islands are known as "tombolos" by geologists. However, "The Gut," one of the most extensively formed tombolos on the Cape, did not form fully until after the 1850s, when the Herring River was altered by a dike widely held to have been built to support railroad tracks (and also used to limit salt water circulation upstream).

Billingsgate Point eventually became an island again in the late 19th century. At that time it even hosted a lighthouse and several dwellings. Currents and other erosion factors, however, claimed the entire land mass in the early 20th century. Jeremy Point is now the namesake of the less distant end of the remaining stretch of beach-which today is subject to being submerged at high tide.

**A Tavern Tale**

Whaling was indeed a lucrative enterprise in this vicinity. The Native Punonakanits took advantage of stranded whales, as well as those in the adjacent bay that could be driven into the shallows. The Pilgrims observed Natives harvesting a blackfish (or pilot whale) during their exploration of this part of the Cape in December 1620. Whales have often frequented Cape Cod Bay, but for reasons not fully understood they occasionally strand on the bay's shallows. Blackfish have been particularly vulnerable, stranding in large numbers at times. The early Pilgrim Cape Cod settlers saw this as a natural bounty, and throughout the 1600's, Great Island was set aside as a "common land" for both local Native and European inhabitants to partake in whaling activities.

Great Island offered several advantages-closeness to whales in the bay, gently sloping beaches on all sides (well-suited to pulling harvested leviathans onto), and abundant wood to fire tryworks to boil out the oil. "Whale Houses" to store gear and "trywork kettles" were permitted to be constructed around the perimeter of the island. However, the construction of a tavern remains somewhat of a mystery. Archeological evidence indicates the most probable date of the tavern's operation to be between 1690 and 1740. However, Plymouth Colony records show that the land was not subdivided into private parcels until 1715.

Hence, construction of an upland dwelling on the island in earlier times would have required some “legal” exceptions. Furthermore, near-shore whaling declined soon after the land was subdivided, due to the depletion and loss of the wood supply needed to fire tryworks on Great Island.

While Samuel Smith became a later landholder of much of Great Island, tradition holds that he operated the original tavern. But, if this is true, it was at the end of Great Island’s golden era of near-shore whaling, and the beginning of its transformation to a depleted (and then protected) landscape.

**The Punonakanits**

People living here, using the resources of bay and shore to support their year-round settlement well before the arrival of Europeans. The local Natives, known as Punonakanits, were members of the Wampanoag federation. Shell middens and other remains from these inhabitants and their predecessors indicate a sophisticated and stable social structure. An ossuary, discovered in the late 1970s on Indian Neck, points to an advanced, well-developed society. During the woodland period, these people grew crops during the warm months and supplemented their diets with shellfish and other marine resources in the winter.

Surprisingly, the Punonakanits population remained relatively stable throughout the 1600’s, although competition for land and resources undoubtedly put pressure on their means of livelihood. Pilgrim laws assured the sharing of certain resources, and for many years, the two peoples lived peacefully side by side in this area. The great smallpox epidemics of mid-1700s had a bad effect on both groups of inhabitants and was particularly devastating to the Punonakanits population. Despite noteworthy efforts by local townspeople to aid their Native neighbors, the Punonakanits population declined to a point where only a handful survived into the 1800s. Thus, a proud people disappeared from a land of which they once were very much a part.

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## *The Pilgrims in Wellfleet*

The Pilgrims were not the first Europeans to visit this area. Gosnold affixed the name Cape Cod in 1602 as a memento of the abundance of codfish caught in the bay, and Champlain dubbed the area Port Aux Huitres in recognition of the fine oysters found in the harbor located here.

Although the Pilgrims bypassed the shores of Great Island in 1620, by 1644 memories of the richness of Cape Cod lured seven prominent families from Plymouth to resettle in the Nauset area (later named Eastham). Eastham's jurisdiction stretched, at one point, from Provincetown to Plymouth. The Billingsgate area was named early on because of its abundance of oysters and marketable fin fish (in honor of the famous Billingsgate fish market district in England). Billingsgate remained a district of Eastham until the mid-1700s, despite efforts to separate off earlier. It was then named Wellfleet, probably again to capitalize on old world "Wellfleet" oysters sold in Europe. (Oysters could be shipped for several months and yet stay fresh, thus they were a good long-distance market commodity.)

Great Island deteriorated from being an asset to being a liability to the new town. Overharvesting and unchecked grazing not only depleted the abundant woods but the native grasses and topsoil as well. There were real fears that sand blowing from the wasting Great Island would clog the harbor and possibly even threaten the oyster beds. Protective laws were passed, and in the late 1700s reforestation efforts (by planting pitch pines) were taken in earnest. The few families living on the island in the late 1700s were charged to serve as caretakers. As the island gradually recovered, later residents, such as the Hendersons, witnessed the beauty of the area return. In the 1960s, with the establishment of Cape Cod National Seashore, residency on Great Island ceased. A memorial to Governor Bradford and other Pilgrim followers, erected on Henderson family property on Great Island, completes the circle of European settlers' recognition of the special spiritual bounty of this land-similar to the connections with the earth expressed by original Native American inhabitants.

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## *Cape Cod's Whaling Era*

**Not Ready for Whales**

The Mayflower was welcomed to the New World by a school of whales. They frolicked all around the ship as it lay anchored off Cape Cod, but Captain Jones, master of the Mayflower, did not appreciate them. He was on a ship that didn't have a single harpoon. His passengers, farmers for the most part, had been more concerned with bringing ploughs, axes, and pitchforks than they had with bringing a complete line of fishing gear.

**Drift Whaling**

Actually, there was a way to catch a whale without a harpoon. The Pilgrims discovered this later when they moved to the Cape. Indeed, a person didn't have to be a fisherman to catch what was called a "drift" whale. A person could do it without even getting his/her feet wet. Drift whales were whales that ran into trouble on the sandbanks along the Cape coast, just as many ships did. Like those ships, they'd be cast ashore before they could escape to deep water.

"Whale in the Bay!" a Cape Codder would sing out when he saw a whale struggling in shallow water. The cry would bring neighbors running. Sometimes a whole school of blackfish (a type of small whales) would be washed ashore which would be an especially lucky catch. For a blackfish not only has oil that can be boiled out of its blubber or fatty parts, it has in its head, a "melon" full of particularly valuable oil. But, in colonial days, any kind of whale oil was prized, for it was with whale oil, rank-smelling as it was, that Americans and Europeans lighted their lamps.

So profitable was the business from drift whales that some towns appointed men to serve as whale watchers. (In 1661, Ralph Smith of Eastham was fined twenty shillings for neglecting his duty as a whale watcher.) As soon as a whale was beached, the citizens went to work on it cutting it up, removing the blubber, and building fires on the sand where iron pots (try pots, they were called) were set for boiling the oil out of the blubber.

After a while, Cape Codders decided it was foolish to wait for blackfish to run into trouble. Why not help them along? So as soon as they spotted a school, they would jump into their dories, row into the bay, and form a half-circle behind the blackfish. Shouting, hallooing, and clacking their oars flat on the water, they would drive the blackfish right up on the beach.

One barrel of oil from each whale had to go as a tax to Plymouth, the capital of the Old Colony. There must have been plenty of barrels, for in 1688, the secretary of the colony wrote: *Now Plymouth Colony have great profit by whale killing. I believe it will be one of our best returns.*

**Shore Whaling**

It was some fifty years after Captain Jones had sighted that first school of whales that the real art of whaling was introduced on the Cape. Ichabod Paddock of Yarmouth was one of the first to master the use of harpoon and lance, and after this method - shore whaling, it was called - caught on in Cape Cod Bay, fishermen in Nantucket invited Ichabod to come there and teach it to them. Cape Codders were carrying casks in their boats now to hold blubber that they cut up at sea. Soon they began to build try works for boiling blubber right into the decks of their boats.

The shore whalers didn't go far, but they were thorough. By the middle of the 1700s, the bay was emptied of whales. Some families moved off the Cape. When the economy declined further, many families who lived on Long Point (out of Provincetown) put their houses on rafts and floated them across to the town itself. (Many of these houses are still standing in Provincetown. They are marked with a blue and white plaque, showing a picture of a house on a raft. At the Provincetown Museum, there is a diorama of the Long Point settlement as well as a full scale replica of a whaling captain's quarters.)

**Deep Sea Whaling**

Other fishermen followed the lead of Nantucket mariners who had discovered that in the deep waters of the ocean there seemed to be an unlimited supply of whales. The whaling business reached its peak in the 1840s when there were more than 700 American whaling vessels with between 15,000 and 20,000 men at sea. Whaling masters came home after years at sea with new ideas and generally with lots of money.

For the crew of a whaler, the years at sea were lonely and boring. To keep themselves busy, the men would often carve and decorate whale ivory into various knickknacks. This practice is called scrimshaw. Frequently, sailors scrimshawed gifts for their wives or sweethearts.

After mineral oil was discovered in Pennsylvania, the demand for whale oil dropped off, and the business declined. In today's world, some whales are in danger of becoming extinct. Cape Codders and Cape visitors generally respect whales. If a whale accidentally swims into the bay, they will try to save it. In the spring when herds of migrating whales pass Cape Cod, boatloads of sightseers go to watch them, to welcome them, to wish them well. Race Point Beach is an excellent spot to look for whales.

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## *Great Island Tavern*

In the late 1600, whales were so plentiful here that they regularly appeared in Wellfleet Harbor. Lookouts posted on high ground alerted the whalers who pursued the great mammals in small boats.

Local tradition holds that whalers often retreated to a tavern on the secluded bluffs of Great Island. Here, they could recount their adventures, fortify themselves with toddy, and consort with sympathetic ladies, while lookouts watched for whales nearby.

During the summer of 1970, archeologists from Plimouth Plantation located and excavated the foundation of a building on Great Island that may have been such a tavern. More than 24,000 artifacts were uncovered. Evidence indicates the building was used between 1690 and 1740.

According to legend, the following message welcomed thirsty patrons en route to the tavern on Great Island:

*Samuel Smith, he has good flip,*
*Good toddy if you please,*
*The wav is near, and very clear,*
*'Tis just beyond the trees.*

In the whaling days, Great Island was completely surrounded by water. Shifting sand transformed it into a peninsula.

Representative artifacts found at the Great Island Tavern site include:

*Rat-tailed pewter spoon*

*Free-blown wine glass stem*

*British clay smoking pipes*
*(from which bore diameters can signify manufacture period)*

*Redware pudding pan*

*Neck of wine or oil bottle*

*Piece of locally-made porringer Whalebone chopping block*