



Guide's Guide

Head of the Meadow and Pilgrim Heights

Location Summary

Directions: Traveling north on Route 6, proceed .25 mile north from Cape Cod Light/Highland Road exit. Look for the brown and white Head of the Meadow Beach sign on the right. Turn right and proceed two miles to the beach and bike trail head. Other areas of interest nearby include Pilgrim Heights (one mile further north on Route 6) and High Head (.5 mile further north beyond Pilgrim Heights).

Safety: Use caution when turning on and off Route 6 onto side roads in these locations. Traffic is heavy in summer. There is no bus turnaround in summer at Head of the Meadow Beach. There is no bus turnaround at High Head—the road becomes narrow and unpaved and dead ends. Watch out for ticks and poison ivy.

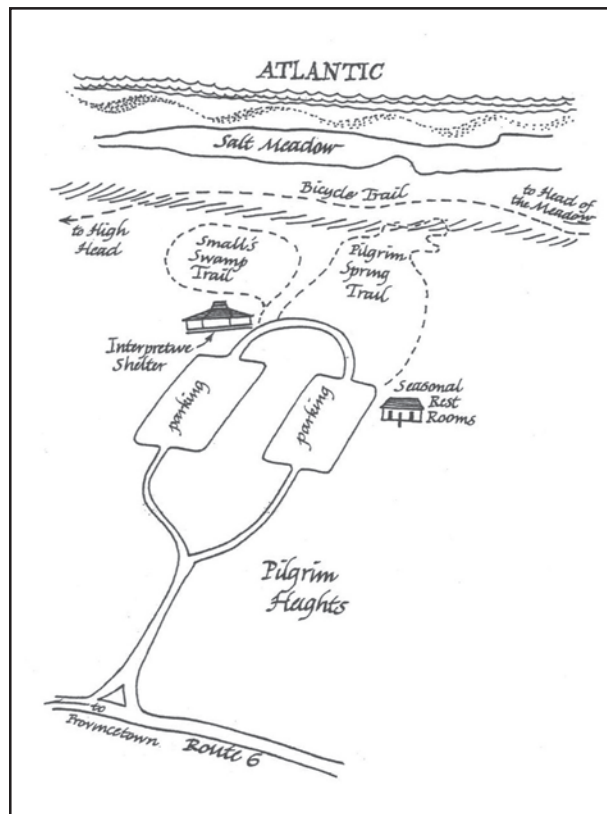
Other: Public restrooms and a picnic area are available at Pilgrim Heights (restrooms are closed in winter). Lifeguard protected beach is available at Head of the Meadow Beach in summer. Limited restroom facilities are available at Head of the Meadow Beach in summer only.

Tips: Start telling Head of the Meadow story upon exiting Highland Light area. Head of the Meadow bike trail is two miles one way on flat terrain. Each of the two self-guiding trails at Pilgrim Heights are approximately 3/4 mile loops, hilly terrain. Respect private property rights at High Head. Exploring the High Head area is best done on foot.

Time Frame: Ten-minute bus narration. Fifteen to thirty minutes or longer at Pilgrim Heights for picnicking, restrooms, walking trails.

Notes for Educators: Frequent Ranger-guided interpretive programs are offered in the area three seasons of the year. Inquire at visitor centers for schedule. Pilgrim Heights area contains two self-guiding trails, Small's Swamp Trail and Pilgrim Spring Trail. Both are approximately .75 mile in length.

Highlights: Head of the Meadow Beach; Head of the Meadow Bicycle Trail; Small's Swamp and Pilgrim Spring Trails; High Head Overlook



Head of the Meadow and Pilgrim Heights

Prominent Natural Features

The Head of the Meadow area displays various habitat changes that are a results of environmental changes over time. Bayside waters once reached into this marsh area, whereas today, the area is mostly dominated by a coastal dune setting.

Pilgrim Lake was once connected with Provincetown harbor. The railroad and highway impounded the waters here, and blocked tidal ebb and flow. The waters have gradually become brackish over the years.



Head of the Meadow and Pilgrim Heights

Touring Script

The Head of the Meadow area offers diversified terrain, activities and facilities, all within a short distance. In an afternoon, you could enjoy beachcombing at Head of the Meadow Beach, ride the bicycle trail, picnic at Pilgrim Heights, and hike through the parabolic dunes at High Head. Camping areas and small stores in the surrounding North Truro area offer limited services year round. The area is seven miles from Provincetown.

Three distinct geographical regions are highlighted here: the outer beach, an extend-ed freshwater meadow, and the pine uplands of Pilgrim Heights that culminate with the bluffs of High Head overlooking Provincetown. At the “head” of the freshwater meadow are two public ocean beaches, one administered by the town and one by the National Park Service. There are fees to park at each beach in the summer. At low tide, the remains of the shipwreck *Frances* (1872), can be viewed from shore on the west end of the public beach. Her cargo of sugar and tin as well as her crew, was rescued, although the German captain of the iron-hulled bark later died and is buried in North Truro.

The Head of the Meadow Bicycle Trail begins at the entrance to the beach. It follows a remnant of the Old King’s Highway for a two-mile, paved, flat stretch, ending at the dirt parking lot at High Head. The trail runs along the fringes of the meadow and is rich in birds and other wildlife, especially early and late in the day.

Pilgrim Heights

Pilgrim Heights is a lightly-visited area that offers ample parking, a picnic area and restrooms, and two self-guided trails. Small’s Swamp trail explores a geologic kettle hole and traces the development and demise of the Small family farm, while the Pilgrim Spring trail tells the story of the Pilgrims of 1620 as they discovered their first fresh water in the New World near here. Both trails traverse rolling Pitch Pine forest and offer comfortable walking all seasons of the year. Overlooks from both trails highlight the meadow and ocean below. The meadow used to be a salt meadow, offering a rich harvest of salt hay used for livestock. Its outlet into Cape Cod Bay to the west was sealed in 1873, creating a freshwater habitat.

Continuing north from Pilgrim Heights, the road suddenly descends from the heights, and spectacular views of sand dunes and Provincetown unfold for a brief moment. You have descended from High Head and have crossed over 25,000 years of geologic history. Geologically, High Head represents the tip of “old Cape Cod.” The original landform deposited during the last Ice Age ended here, with cliffs towering above the sea. The dunes beyond are part of the growing sandspit which has developed beyond High Head during the last 6,000 years-very young indeed geologically. This “new” spit is nourished from materials eroded from other parts of Cape Cod and redeposited here.

Look for the brown and white sign for High Head on the right. This road will fork, the left continuing as dirt road and ending at a small parking lot from which to explore the dunes and access the beach. The end of the bicycle trail is here as well. A right turn leads you back up High Head for a wonderful overlook of Provincetown, Pilgrim Lake, and the majestic sand dunes. There is no official parking at the top, and all vehicles except resident vehicles are discouraged. Therefore, access to High Head is limited, and walking up to the area is recommended. Please respect private property rights.

Head of the Meadow and Pilgrim Heights

Small's Swamp Trail

A Kettle Forms

Even as they retreat, glaciers are shapers of the land. Their great loads of sand and gravel, boulders and rock powder are carried forth in muddy meltwater by the millions of tons, and piled layer upon layer. Thus it was that the forearm of Cape Cod from Orleans to North Truro was created, principally from the great ice lobe which lay a mile or two to the east about 18,000 years ago.

Here, as happened elsewhere on the Cape, a great block of ice was separated from the melting glacier, then it was gradually surrounded or covered with outwash deposits. Then, as the ice block melted, the debris settled into the cavity left by melting ice, and the kettle was given its final, symmetrical form.

Only in the past 2,000 years or so did the Cape's freshwater layer intersect this kettle. Water-loving plants were at last able to grow on the moist kettle floor-and leaf by leaf, season by season, several feet of peat slowly accumulated. Swamp azalea, highbush blueberry, and black cherry are abundant now, but should the water level drop, or the soil dry as it builds up, the balance will swing-and the "swamp" will quickly progress to a stand of red maple and tupelo-and ultimately become a beech forest.

Layers of History

Like chapters in a book, the artifacts retrieved from Small's Swamp reveal a history of its Native American inhabitants that stretches 4,000 years or more into the past. The first settlers were hunters and fishers and gatherers of fruit and seed, but there evolved a woodland culture with finer tools and the skills to raise crops. These people learned it was time to plant when the leaves of the white oak were the size of a mouse's ear; how to till the soil; and how to fertilize plants with fish and seaweed. And so by about 500 A.D., the raising of corn, pumpkin, squash, and beans became a part of each summer's ritual.

While men continued to hunt and fish, women planted and hoed, wove baskets, made clothing, and furnishings, and carried on their household tasks. Such were the privileges of the "sanops," the common people, who possessed rights to tribal land.

These were migrant people. They cleared the land of forest with fire; they raised crops for several years in succession, then they moved on. By this process, the soil was allowed to recover before it was used again. The evidence? In part, it lies within a seven-and one-half inch layer of swampy earth collecting during these years of settlement. The layers which possess corn pollen are separated by intervening layers of peat which hold no such record of nearby agriculture. By A.D. 1600, life here was bountiful. Relatively peaceful and secure, the people were adjusted to this world, and had learned how to tap the resources of both the land and sea.

They knew how to preserve grain, vegetables and meat for winter use. Government by the ruling "sachem" included the advice of his noble "sagamores," and Kiehtan, the Great Spirit, guided all life and all things.

But with European contact, this world was quickly erased. A great plague struck many tribes from 1615 to 1619, and four of every five persons were killed. The old order fell apart. Traditions, skills, language, education-a whole heritage virtually disappeared. And while it did, the newly arriving, light-skinned people began putting their mark on the land.

Thomas Small's Farm

We shudder at the thought of living here ... Some of it is not worth writing a deed for.

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

After two centuries of European settlement, the Truro plain had little resemblance to the forests which the Pilgrims found. Logging, farming, sheep raising, and the general needs of settlement were a greater drain than the soil could satisfy, and so by 1850, the area was barren. Nevertheless, agricultural use was expanding, and in the 1860s Thomas Small and his wife began their 200-acre farm.

An observant person does not build without considering winters that are long and harsh-and the Smalls were no exception. So, as the Native Americans did, they select-ed this kettle for its protection from wind, and here built their house and outbuildings.

The Smalls worked this earth for sixty years. Cows were raised, fed with saltmarsh hay; and corn and asparagus were grown. But the land's day of yielding a living was ending. Upon Warren Small's death in 1922, the farm was abandoned. Once a part of the Cape landscape, the structures were eventually burned.

Few remnants survive of the buildings which once stood here, but there are more lasting marks. The dooryard favorites grape, lilac, bouncing bet, plum, and apple - all of these were once a cultivated part of the farm. They are unkept and untamed now, blending with the returning woods, but they endure, reminders of how the land was used and of a way of life that has passed from the Cape Cod scene.

Reminder: Artifact hunting is prohibited within the National Seashore. These are held in trust for all of us.

Head of the Meadow and Pilgrim Heights

Shipwrecks

An Ocean Graveyard

So many ships have piled up on the hidden sand bars off the coast between Chatham and Provincetown that those forty miles of sea have been called an “ocean graveyard.” Indeed, between Truro and Wellfleet alone, there have been more than 1,000 wrecks.

When a storm struck the Cape in the early days, no one was surprised to hear the alarm: Ship ashore! All hands perishing! The townspeople would turn out on the beach, but usually the surf was too high for them to attempt a rescue. By the time the storm was over, there was usually no one to rescue.

The first recorded wreck was the Sparrowhawk which ran aground at Orleans in 1626. The people aboard were able to get ashore safely, and the ship was repaired. But, before it could set sail, the ship was sunk by another storm and wasn't seen for over two hundred years. In 1863, after storms had shifted the sands again, the skeleton of the Sparrowhawk reappeared briefly. So the ocean takes and gives back and takes again. (The ribs of the ship are now on display in Plymouth at Pilgrim Hall.)

But if the passengers and crew of these early ships couldn't be saved, the cargo often was. After a wreck, townspeople would come out with their carts and horses and haul away the spoils: wine, coffee, nutmeg, cotton, tobacco, and whatever else the ship had been carrying. Sometimes owners of the wreck paid the local people to salvage their cargo; often the local people simply went on the theory that finders were keepers. Certainly, this was their theory when the famous pirate, Samuel Bellamy, and his ship, the Whydah, went down off Wellfleet in the spring of 1717. Although officially all goods on such a ship belonged to the colony, plunder occurred.

From the Head of the Meadow Beach at North Truro, the wreck of the Frances, which was sunk in a December gale in 1872, may still be seen at low tide. United States Life Saving Service men dragged a whaleboat from the bay across the Cape to the outer beach and rescued all aboard. The captain, who died several days later from the effects of exposure, is buried in Truro.

Rescuing Sailors

In the early 1800s, there was an average of two wrecks every month during the winter. The loss of life seemed especially sad when a sailor managed to get ashore on a winter night only to freeze to death after he got there. In 1797, the Massachusetts Humane Society started putting up huts along the most dangerous sections of the Massachusetts coast in the hope that stranded sailors would find them and take shelter. It was not, however, until 1872, that a really efficient lifesaving service was put into operation by the United States government. Stations were erected every five miles on the beach. Six or seven surfmen and a keeper lived in each station and kept a continuous lookout. At night, two men from each station walked the beach on patrol, met at a small half-way shelter between stations, and then returned on their same route.

As soon as a ship in distress was sighted, a red signal was fired from ashore to let the crew at sea know they'd been seen. Then the lifesaving crew went into action. If the sea permitted, they launched their special surfboats - some equipped with air chambers (to help keep them afloat), cork fenders (to keep them from being smashed against the sinking ship), and righting lines (to use in case they capsized). If they could not get out by boat and if the shipwreck was near enough to shore, the lifesaving team stayed on the beach and pulled the sinking crew to shore, one by one, in a basket-like contraption called a breeches buoy attached to a rope that was strung high over the water. Using a Lyle gun (a small cannon), a double line with pulley was fired to the ship. While the sailors on the ship tied their end of the line to the mast, the lifesaving crew attached the other end to a structure anchored in the sand and then sent the breeches buoy over the rope to the ship. A sailor from the sinking ship would climb into the breeches buoy and be pulled to shore. Then back the breeches buoy would go for the next rescue.

A demonstration of a breeches buoy drill is given weekly during the summer months by National Seashore Rangers at Race Point in Provincetown.

The Old Harbor Life-Saving Station at the east end of Race Point is still standing. Currently, it is being restored to its original condition, complete with lifesaving equipment.

