

The Wading Place

Anarrow river called Muddy Creek is the northern boundary between Chatham and Harwich. It flows into the southwestern corner of Pleasant Bay. The creek takes its name from its peaty, muddy bottom. The Indian name for this waterway was Monomoyick and the low place where the river was forded was named Askaonkton, the wading place.

The Europeans who settled on these Indian lands followed the example of the Nauset and Monomoyick tribes and used the wading place to cross the creek at low tide. The water was too deep at high tide to allow for a safe crossing.

Accounts differ as to when the first bridge was built across the creek. Some place the date at 1825 but in an article written by Warren Nickerson of East Harwich in an 1895 issue of the Harwich Independent he claims that the first bridge was built in 1850.

He writes, "There was a very strong current and several persons came near losing their lives and one man was drowned there having mistaken his bearings and he tried to cross in deep water."

The two towns agreed that a bridge must be built. Over the years the mouth of the river had shifted and the stream bed had moved farther south creating a beach on the Harwich side that the bridge would need to span. Chatham insisted that Harwich pay the cost of the bridge to the town boundary in the middle of the stream with the result that Harwich had to pay five-sevenths of the total cost.

"The first bridge was not built high enough," wrote Nickerson. "The high tides washed it away and another had to be built in 1853. That one lasted until 1869 when another was constructed on the same plan as the others, Harwich paying five-sevenths as usual."

When this bridge was deemed unsafe Harwich looked at their expenses thus far and balked. The town had invested \$4797.29 on Muddy Creek bridges none of which has lasted more than 20 years.

The selectmen of Harwich decided that the next bridge over the waterway should be strong enough to last for generations. But how could the town afford to build such a bridge? The early bridges had been wooden and constructed on wood pilings. Plans for the new bridge were made. The foundation would be huge granite blocks and the roadway was to be hardened with clay and gravel. Walls several hundred feet long built with stones weighing two to three tons each would hold the bridge and roadway in place.

It was estimated that this bridge would cost \$12,000.

The Town of Harwich appealed to the General Court of Massachusetts and the court sent a joint committee to look at the site. The court decided that the county should pay one-half of the expense of both building the bridge and of cutting down the steep hill on the Chatham side which had been a prob-

lem during previous constructions.

According to Nickerson, "... the stone was all procured within a mile or two of the bridge; the clay and gravel was within a quarter of a mile and more money came into Harwich than was paid out of the town treasury, and we have one of the best bridges in the county..."

The county paid \$6,000 toward the new bridge and the two towns spent \$3,000 apiece. However, Harwich's Road Commissioner, Capt. Thomas D. Kenny, who was in charge of a portion of the job, paid out \$3,382.74 which was divided among many residents of Harwich for labor, clay, gravel and stone.

**NATURE'S
WAYS
BY
LEE
W.
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Today, 101 years later, we can still see that earlier handiwork. The rough hewn blocks of granite that support Route 28 and the span across the creek are visible from the salt marsh on the east side of the road. Massive boulders stretch for many yards in each direction continuing to serve as a foundation for the bridge that has lasted for generations.

Along the embankment above the salt marsh grows a variety of wild flowers, cocklebur, yellow cress and skullcap that has loose clusters of pale purple flowers.

Down in the small salt marsh area grows the succulent seablithe. It ranges from six inches in height to almost a foot. In summer it shows reddish tinges but the whole plant turns a bright red by early fall.

Two hundred years ago salt vats would have filled much of the shoreline. There were salt vats around Round Cove and Ensign Nickerson had salt works on both sides of Nickerson Neck.

In the early 1700s, Micah Rafe, one of the last Indians to occupy this area, lived in a small house on the northern bank of Muddy Creek. His holdings came to over 100 acres. He and his wife are buried nearby.

Squanto, a Plymouth Indian who traveled with the Pilgrims by boat to Pleasant Bay guiding the Europeans on a trading trip, took ill and suddenly died. He is supposed to be buried in the area. The exact location of his grave depends on whether you are reading Chatham or Harwich history. He is either buried in Harwich on the west side of Round Cove only 50 feet from Route 28 or he is buried a few hundred yards east of Muddy Creek on land that is now part of Eastward Ho! Golf Course.

This part of Pleasant Bay can be enjoyed by wading along the shoreline of Nickerson Neck at low or mid-tide. You will get wet if you walk the area at high tide. Park at Jackknife Point on the Chatham side. The parking spot is reached by a road that steeply descends from Route 28 below the golf course... southeast of the stream. From the parking lot to Strong Island landing is less than a mile. Whether you walk east or west the views of Pleasant Bay, its shoreline and its islands are spectacular.