

The Secret History of Gooseberry Island

One of my favorite places to walk in the SouthCoast area is Gooseberry Island in Westport. Gooseberry Island is the town of Westport's southernmost point, and is part of the Horseneck Beach State Reservation. Located between east and west beach of Westport, it is an excellent place to go for a nature walk. Parking is free, and dogs are allowed- those two criteria make it a winner in my book.

The walk around the island takes about an hour depending on how much beachcombing, ball throwing, picnicking, or fishing is taking place. The beach is either very rocky or very quicksand-y, but the walk is well worth the effort and the terrain easily traversed with a solid pair of sneakers. There is always something interesting to find along the walk, whether it be stone art left by a previous perambulator, or egg cases from the area's array of shellfish and sharks. Occasionally a ripe rotting ocean specimen can be washed up by the tide, and in times like these I have been grateful to have a leash for my dog. There are also some roped off areas designated as shorebird nesting sites- we steer clear of these with our furry friends as well. There is plenty of beautiful beach for everyone to share.

Gooseberry Island has an interesting history that I wasn't aware of until researching for this article. From my many walks around the island, I had seen the two ghostly cement towers that are out there and could only guess at their function. The towers, and a couple of cement foundations half covered by brush are all that is left of what was once a thriving summer community.

A causeway connects the Westport mainland to the island about 0.17 miles away. Before the causeway was built, Gooseberry

Island was connected to Westport by a natural sandbar, which could be walked during low tide. There has been some debate about whether the causeway has negatively affected the ecology of Gooseberry Island. It created a permanent barrier that can trap seaweed and other ocean debris on either side of the island. This replaced the transient sandbar that was there originally which allowed flotsam and jetsam to float freely from west to east and back again when tide permitted. Despite this potential drawback, it has definitely made travel to the island by car a lot easier, and allowed for the relatively rapid transition of Gooseberry Island into a vintage vacation hot spot.



The first written records of Gooseberry Island date back to 1602 from accounts of Bartholomew Gosnold's adventures exploring, mapping, and naming Cape Cod and the surrounding islands. It was during these expeditions that he named the Elizabethan Islands, including Cuttyhunk Island, which can be seen from the beach on Gooseberry Island. Gooseberry Island was first settled in 1670, and used for grazing sheep up until it was purchased by a private landowner in the early twentieth century. The causeway was built between 1913 and 1924, which opened up the possibility of development on the island.

Gooseberry was then sold again, and the new owners created vacation lots which residents were permitted to build summer houses on.

By the early 1950's Gooseberry Island had at least 81 buildings, many of which were permanent structures. Unfortunately, the exposed nature of the island made it a prime spot for hurricane damage, and these residences took some major hits. The hurricane of 1938 caused major destruction on the island, and the final blows were struck by Hurricane Carol in 1954. The damage to property was so extensive that, in 1956, the state of Massachusetts took over the 73 acres of Gooseberry Island as an addition to the nearby Horseneck Beach State Reservation.

Most of the residential remains were removed from the island to restore its natural profile, and much of what evidence remains is covered by beach plums and other dense woody shrubbery. A dirt road and some smaller dirt paths still dissect the island. As for the two cement towers that are still standing on the there, they are leftovers from World War II. They were used for lookout and fire control towers for large coastal guns in nearby Rhode Island, although the lookout towers never saw battle, and the guns were never fired except in practice. The military took over about six acres of the island in the early 1940's, and built the towers. Apparently they were originally intended to be disguised as farm structures, possibly as extremely unattractive silos or windmills. Their camouflage has worn off, unfortunately, and the two towers stick out of the scenery like a graffiti-tatted sore thumb.

Although they are not beautiful, the towers are a fascinating reminder of Gooseberry Island's past life. The beauty of the rest of the island definitely makes up for this with gorgeous views, rare wildlife, amazing rock formations, and plentiful photo opportunities. I am never disappointed when visiting this very special place, and plan to visit whenever possible

now that the earth has warmed up again.



If you are interested in finding out more about Gooseberry Island, I found the following website very informative:

gooseberryjournal.wordpress.com
