

Bristol Ferry Town Common - Some Information

The Bristol Ferry was once the most popular of two means for overland travelers to depart Aquidneck Island for Providence or Boston, the other being a ferry to Tiverton. By the 1700's the Bristol Ferries were flourishing, with two families provided ferry, as well as hotels and tavern services on the Portsmouth side. The main transportation and the postal routes ran through here and by 1716, there were ferries running that were large enough to carry stage coaches and horses. French General Lafayette passed through several times before the Battle of Rhode Island, fought in Portsmouth August, 1778 and George Washington passed through the Bristol Ferry in March 1781.

The Bristol Ferry Town Common itself was established on 12 March, 1714 in a list of "Rhodes, Ways and Lanes in Portsmouth" promulgated by the Town meeting as determined by a committee "... of Free Inhabitants of the Town of Portsmouth ...empowered to lay out all the undivided land in the Township." This document is available in Town archives. Regarding the Bristol Ferry Common, it states that

"... the piece of land near Abel Tripp house adjoining to the ferry against Bristol, is left for the conveniency (sic) of the Public in importing and transporting of Cattel (sic), Sheep, Horses, wood, rails, etc. and is bounded on the bank against the salt water 12 rods, and against the land of John Earl & John Earl _____ twelve rods and against the land of John Pool, John Tripp and Abel Tripp, that is, from the Earl ____ his corner to Thomas Borden's Northeast corner aforesaid, is twenty rods and from Borden's down to the lege (sic) of the bank next to the salt water is nineteen rods."

This fairly large space was probably used by farmers and others to keep their livestock and other goods while waiting for the ferry to Bristol. A rod was an 18th century measurement of length equaling 16.5 feet. It appears from this document that at one time the Common included 12 rods (198 feet) of shoreline. This broad public shoreline appears to have been incorporated into the large landfill area for the Bristol Ferry Dock along the northern edge of the Common.

According to Town Council records, Book 12, page 153 dated 11 October 1875, a committee was appointed at a citizen's meeting on 18 September, 1858

"...to investigate in relations to the rights of the public, to the Common and landing at Bristol Ferry, and to prosecute, if need be, any party or parties infringing upon those rights; and upon a careful examination of the premises, and of the Records in relation to said Common, it was determined that the owners of Bristol Ferry Estates...were trespassing on the Common; materially obstructing the rights of the public thereto... a suit of law was commenced against them, in the name of the state, for Trespass upon said Common, and after a long and tedious trial, they were found guilty, as appears in the Records of the supreme Court of Rhode Island, September term 1870 and also in the March term of said court in 1874, thus reestablishing the bounds of said Common agreeably to the report of the Committee, appointed in Town Meeting, March 12, 1713, which report is recorded in the first book of Town Meeting Records of said Portsmouth, on pages 63, 64 & 65; and we have caused permanent Boundary stones to be set at the several corners of said Common..."

These boundary marker stones are still visible as square granite posts today, clearly marking the four corners of the Common.

The Bristol Ferry was also an important rail center after the Old Colony and Newport Railroad was completed in 1864. Many farmers brought their produce to the area to ship it to Fall River and elsewhere. This went on well into the 20th century. When the Mount Hope Bridge was completed in 1929, the Ferries were shut down as were most of the related businesses. The Town Common remains.

Over the past several years, the Town Common has been tended by local citizens living in the area, with some limited support from the Town. In December, 2008, a Town Common Committee was created by the Town of Portsmouth to formalize this arrangement and to establish guidelines for the maintenance of the gardens and open areas of the Common. This Committee is currently comprised of the following members: Ken Alves, Abby Brown, James Boyd, Linda Butler, Maggie Elliott, Bob Obara, Don Ratte, Ruth Sears, Lois Seltz, Doug Smith, Mary Beth Smith, Nanci Smith, Claudette Weissinger, and Web Wilson.

As a first order of business, this Committee requested that a survey be conducted to firmly establish the boundaries of the Common, to be followed by the installation of additional granite boundary markers along its borders. This was accomplished in early 2009.

The next step desired by the Committee was to develop and install an informational sign on the Town Common that described its boundaries and unique history. To this end, a grant was applied for and approved from the Merritt Neighborhood Fund Committee of the Aquidneck Land Trust in the Spring of 2009, which allowed us to purchase the sign.

In the Fall of 2009, Alex Counoyer and his fellow Troop 1 Portsmouth Boy Scouts constructed a landscaped base for the informational sign as part of an Eagle Scout requirement. In preparation for this project, Alex spent 3 months raising funds from civic organizations and solicited donations from businesses in the community for materials. The local businesses that contributed with discounts, donations and deliveries services included Aquidneck Stone and Materials, Cawely Construction, Little Landscaping and Shaw's Market. Monetary donations for the Eagle Scout project were received from the Portsmouth Lions Club and GTECH Corporation. It took over one-half ton of paving stones, 2.5 tons of stoned dust, 3 yards of loam and 2 yards of mulch to complete the project over the space of two weekends.

This spring, Alex and his fellow Scouts returned to complete the foundation to make it ready for the installation of the new sign. The sign itself was designed by the Bristol Ferry Town Common Committee and created by Michael Quay of HTF Engraving, himself a nearby neighbor of the Common. The sign was assembled and installed by the Portsmouth Department of Public Works in early October.

For Further Information:

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