



# Dennis Historical Society Newsletter August 2024

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**The next Board Meeting will be held on Tuesday, August 13th, 2:00 pm at the Dennis Memorial Library  
1020 Old Bass River Road, Dennis Village  
Members Welcome**

Please send information & stories for the newsletter to Dave Talbott at the DHS Website email address: [info@dennishistoricalsociety.org](mailto:info@dennishistoricalsociety.org)

**Once again, we are grateful for the knowledge and research expertise which DHS member and noted Cape Cod author Jack Sheedy brings to our society. This month Jack provides us with another insight into our history by providing us with this intriguing story!**



*View from S. Dennis across Bass River to S. Yarmouth, DHS Digital Archive*

## ***Shall we have a canal at Bass River?***

***It has been said that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line.***

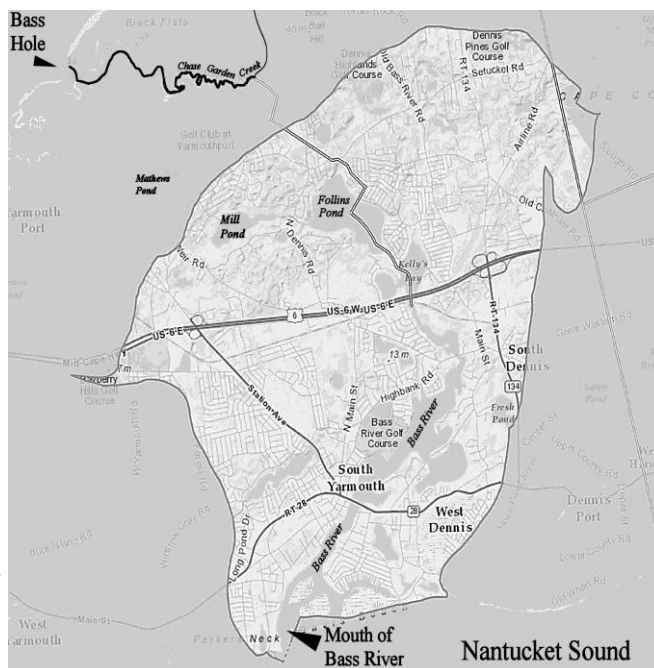
*Likewise, it almost came to pass that the shortest distance between Nantucket Sound and Cape Cod Bay was a canal connecting Bass River and Chase Garden Creek.*

*For centuries, the process of sailing from, say, Boston to New York required going around Cape Cod. This meant traveling along a coastline of dangerous shoals, rips, and bars from Provincetown to Monomoy. Over those centuries thousands of ships made the attempt and came to woe, their wooden remains now resting forever entombed beneath sea and sand.*

*In an effort to reduce this risk, proposals were occasionally floated toward digging a waterway in the location of the present-day Cape Cod Canal where two rivers once flowed.*

*In fact, Pilgrim William Bradford understood the importance of water transportation in that region, as he recorded in his journal: “standing on ye sea to ye southward of them, unto which, by an other creeke on this side, they could cary their goods, within 4. or 5. miles, and then transport them over land to their vessell; and so avoyd the compasing of Cap-Codd.”*

*Meanwhile, Frederick Freeman, in his 1862 book *The History of Cape Cod*, wrote that the area was “the scene of repeated surveys for a canal” which never reached fruition “although the reports of commissioners demonstrated its practicability.”*

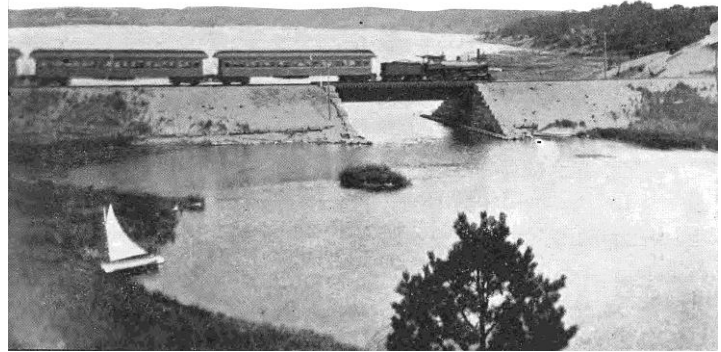


***Bass River Watershed, map from a study by the Cape Cod Commission***

Some two centuries before the canal was eventually dug through Bourne and Sandwich, a smaller canal was excavated at Eastham in the early 18th century. This narrow, shallow waterway was known as Jeremiah's Gutter. Interestingly, prior to the opening of the Cape Cod Canal in 1914, an attempt was made to build one in the mid-Cape area – at Dennis and Yarmouth – utilizing a network of existing bodies of water. An early mention of this proposed canal appeared in the January 23, 1877 Barnstable Patriot: "Shall we have a canal across the Cape? The project looks feasible. It is but a short distance from 'White's Brook,' to the headwaters of 'Bass River.' The expense of connecting them would be an insignificant sum."

Ten years later the idea of a "Bass River Canal" heated up in the local newspapers. According to the March 26, 1887 Yarmouth Register: "The project of a canal across the Cape via Bass River and Follins' Pond has been discussed in the columns of the Register heretofore, but not having attracted the notice of engineers and contractors, it has not been called to the attention of those interested in promoting such projects."

A second article in the same issue detailed the practicability of the mid-Cape location given that three-quarters of the distance across land was already cut in the form of the river and pond, with another pond further on. From there it required a two-mile cut across land to Cape Cod Bay, part of which would be provided by Chase Garden Creek to the north. Simeon Deyo, in his 1890 book *History of Barnstable County, Massachusetts*, referred to this location as "the largest stretch of inland water in the county."



Bass River passes under the railroad (now bike path bridge) and enters Kelley's Bay, DHS Digital Archive.



Throughout the next decade news of the proposed canal was sprinkled within pages of the newspapers as the project gained footing both locally and in the state legislature. It was explained that the difference in tides between the bay and sound was manageable, thus requiring no locks, and that the river provided a number of coves and ponds to shelter vessels if necessary.

Ed. note—appearing in the image to the left is *Mushsq. Rock*. It is one of the rocks in Follins Pond with what is presumed to be a Viking mooring hole.

With the turn of the 20th century discussion once again turned to the idea of a canal at Bass River. In 1904, according to the April 2nd Register, a legislative committee visited Dennis to tour the proposed route. Yet, a month later, the May 9th Patriot announced, "The Legislative Committee have

voted leave to withdraw on the Bass River canal petition." One year later, the May 22, 1905 Patriot reported, "The Bass River Canal Bill had been killed in the Legislature."

Before the decade was out, work commenced on the Cape Cod Canal. And the waters of Bass River were left to their usual course, undisturbed, as they had coursed for millennia.

**Thank you Jack!**

Ed. note – this view of Follins Pond shows *Mushsq. Rock* again. After Follins Pond, the proposed route was into Mill Pond in Yarmouth, Matthews Pond in Yarmouth Port, then Crab Creek, before making its way into Chase Garden Creek and on to the Bass Hole.



DHS Digital Archive

## Pop Quiz #2

This month, we are again grateful to Ruth Derick and Maureen Sullivan at the Pauline Wixon Derick Library for providing us with another Trivia Contest. It is amazingly appropriate with our feature article that this bridge is on the proposed Bass River Canal route. Last month's winner with the first correct answers about Scargo Tower from a reader on Cape was, not surprisingly, Carole Bell with these correct answers: 1. three, 2. 1874 3. gale and fire, 4. 30', 5. Joseph Murphy. Amazingly, as we go to press, there is no off Cape winner! This month's questions are about the Highbank Toll Bridge....come on off Cape members, show us some local knowledge!

**Congratulations to Carole Bell of Dennis Village!**



*Highbank Toll Bridge over Bass River looking at S. Dennis from S. Yarmouth, DHS Digital Archive*

1. When was the construction on Highbank Bridge begun?
2. What was the rate for each rider plus horse?
3. Which travelers never paid a toll?
4. In what year did the state declare use of the bridge free to the public?
5. When was the wooden bridge replaced with concrete?

**Thank you Ruth and Maureen**

## Unknown House

Turning this into the newsletter *Fun Page!*

In 2008, a photo album was purchased by David Rodriguez at a yard sale. He donated it to DHS. It contained photos which ranged from Washington DC to Florida and to Cape Cod. The photos date from the 1920s. Some, including the one pictured here, were taken in Dennis. This house which appears to be a half Cape was not labeled or identified. It may no longer even exist. If anyone can provide any information about it, please email at – [info@dennishistoricalsociety.org](mailto:info@dennishistoricalsociety.org). **Thank you!**



*DHS Digital Archive*

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**COLONIAL DAY IS BACK!**  
Saturday, August 17: 10am - 3pm at Josiah Dennis Manse



**FREE ADMISSION AND FUN  
FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY  
AT THIS SPECTACULAR  
SUMMER EVENT**

Step back to the 1700s as you visit the restored  
Old West School House and the 18th century home  
of the town's namesake minister.  
61 WHIG STREET IN DENNIS VILLAGE

**The Dennis Historical Society** is looking for one or more dedicated, volunteers to help maintain its **Digital Archive**. The work requires computer skills that will enable the learning of software, such as PastPerfect, Excel, and photo and document management. The use of a scanner to upload images to the system is available and a laptop can be provided, if needed. There are many tutorials available, and "on-the-job" training can be provided. For further details, please email [info@dennishistoricalsociety.org](mailto:info@dennishistoricalsociety.org) with the email subject: **Digital Archive Volunteer**. Thank you!



**Sea  
Captains'  
Cemetery  
Walk**

**FRIDAY, AUGUST 23, 10 AM**

Join guide Terri Fox for a free walking tour through the South Dennis Congregational Church Cemetery, 234 Main Street, and learn about local history through stories of notable early residents buried in these hallowed grounds. Park on the street or behind Scargo School next door. Rain date: Sunday, August 25, at 2pm.