

A History of the Gulf River

A Presentation by John F. Hartshorne
To The Gulf Association Meeting
On May 29, 2002



Photographs by Jim Spelman

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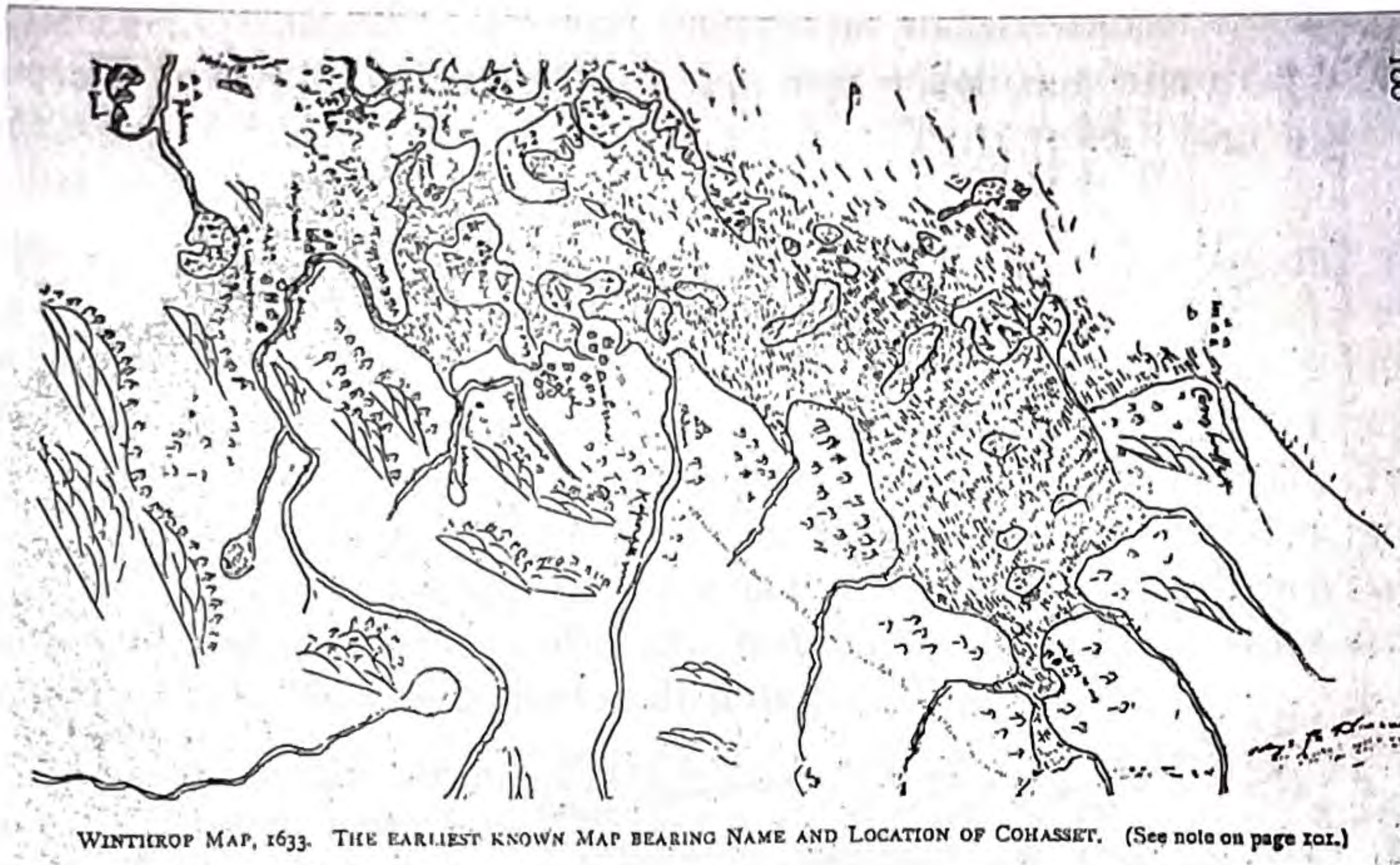
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Winter or Summer, the Gulf is a beautiful place. It is also an ancient and historic place. It was inhabited, by Native Americans, not hundreds but thousands of years before Captain John Smith “discovered” Cohasset.

Aborigines came here, mainly in summers, to fish, hunt wildfowl and pick berries. Their artifacts have been found all along the shores of the river. A professional archeological “dig” has never been made here, unfortunately, but it is believed there was an “Indian” village on the eastern shore of the Gulf. That village was linked to another at Scituate Harbor by a path which is followed in part by today’s “Indian Trail” leading from Scituate’s Gardner Road. The early inhabitants left us their names for places: “Satuit” (now Scituate) for the cold brook that empties into Scituate Harbor; “Musquashcut”, describing a red bush that grew in that area; and “Conyhassit,” now Cohasset, identifying our long rocky shore.

* John Hartshorne is a past president of the Gulf Association and past vice-president of the Cohasset Historical Society. He and his wife Mary have lived on the banks of the Gulf River since they retired here from New York in 1989.



“Conyhassit” was the earliest name for what we now call the Gulf River, and it figures prominently in this so-called Winthrop Map, drawn in 1633. This sketchy outline of Boston Harbor, its islands and the South Shore, shows on the extreme right a clearly labeled “Conyhassit” Harbor and river (the thin line tracing below the harbor). Evidence of its importance is seen in the fact that the map doesn’t even name “Boston” as such. It merely identifies the then-new settlement with a flag atop one of three hills. Watertown is named; so is the “Charls” River.

Boundary Lines

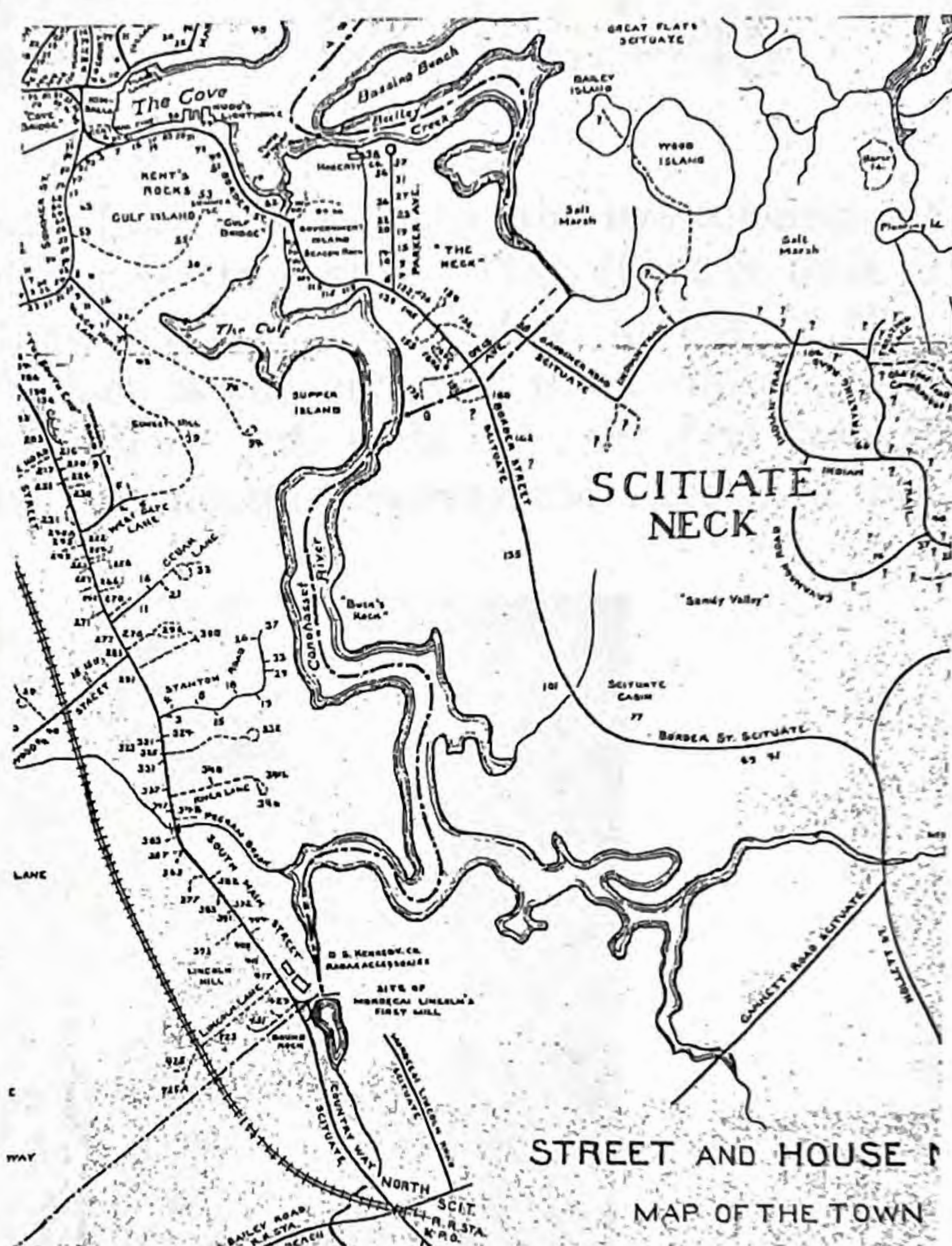


Why did the “Conyhassit” river deserve such prominence? Largely because of one plant -- Spartina Partens, commonly called Salt Hay -- which grew abundantly on the southern shores of the river and harbor. Salt hay supplied nourishing fodder for cattle and was readily available; English grass called for clearing land and planting, and there wasn’t time for that. So access to salt marsh was valuable. Scituate farmers, who were part of the Plymouth Colony, had direct access; farmers from the north -- Hingham

(which became Cohasset) -- who were part of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, had to come by boat to harvest Conyhasset hay; which they often did, to the consternation of their neighbors to the south. There were disagreements, maybe fisticuffs.

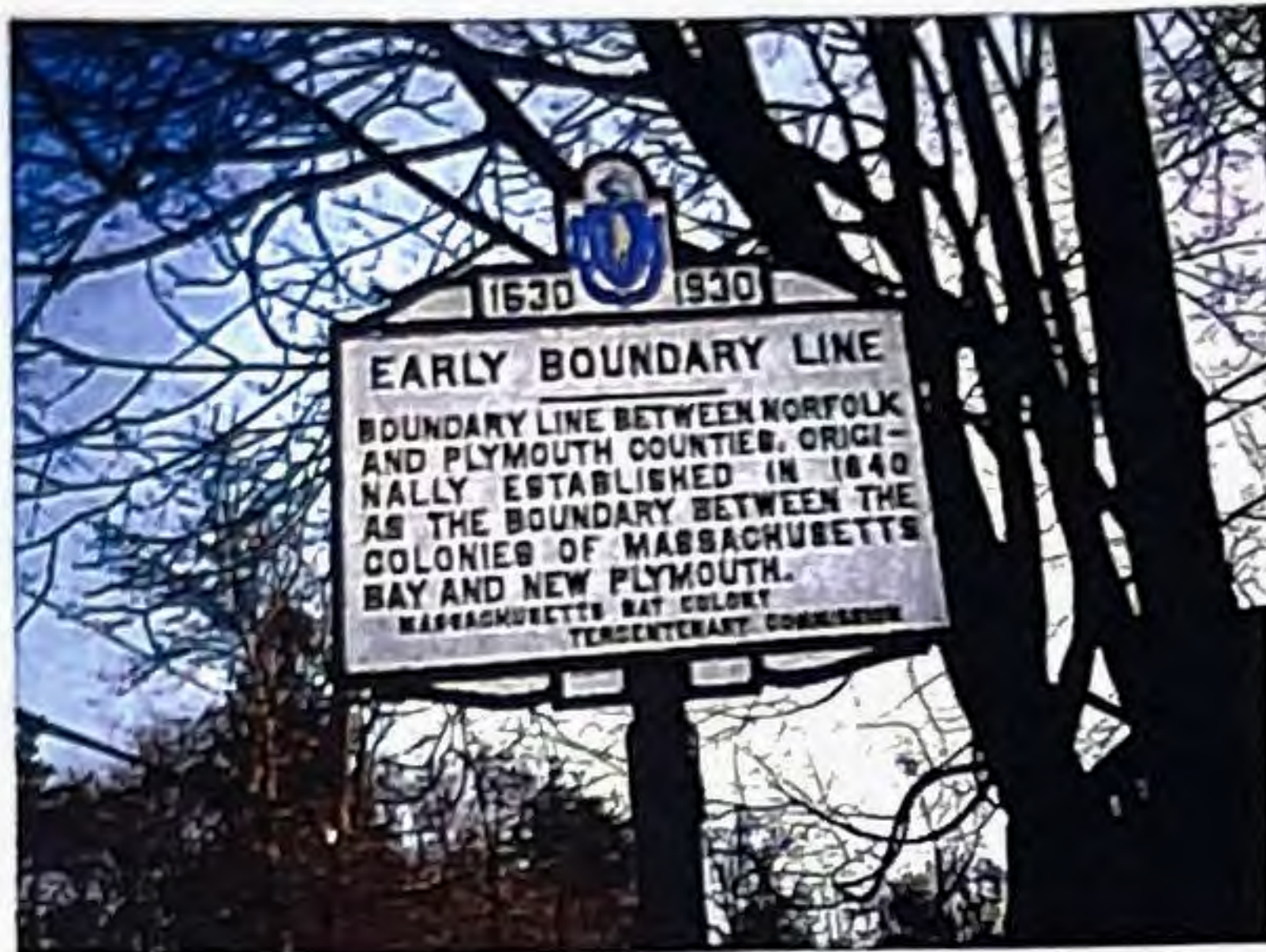
Eventually, in 1639 and 40, to remove this "bone of contention," the powers that were in Plymouth and Boston -- that is, William Bradford and Edward Winslow -- sent delegations to decide who owned what. Their agreement called for using the "Conihasset River" and the harbor as a natural boundary, and running the line right down the middle of each. This plan still favored Scituate farmers with the south-lying salt marshes, so a "three-score acre" area of marsh on what is now called "Bassing Beach" was set aside for Hingham farmers. But the boundaries of the three-score acres were not specified. They remained in dispute for 200 years.

This map of the area, drawn by Cohasset historian Gilbert Tower in 1953, helps to show the line. It also shows a change in the line that was made in 1830. (Interestingly, Tower's map called the river by its original name -- "Conihasset River", and labels as "The Gulf" only its open bay to the north.) Tower's map shows the dotted boundary line running from the mouth of Bound Brook down mid-river. Originally the line ran the length of the river and out through the harbor to the Atlantic. This map shows the 1830 change bending across Scituate Neck, then out Bailey's Creek to the Harbor. The reason for this change is that a bridge had been installed connecting Cohasset with the north end of the Neck, so, people living there felt a closer bond with their neighbors to the north and petitioned the Legislature to change the Town Line.



Tower's map also shows the river line to the south taking an abrupt turn at Bound Brook at a place appropriately called "Bound Rock" (photo next page) and running diagonally off to the southwest. This diagonal line runs straight from Bound Rock to Accord Pond, where Norwell, Hingham and

Rockland come together. The line continues straight southwest all the way to the Rhode Island border. Some 360 years later, this is still the boundary between Plymouth and Norfolk Counties.



The important thing about all this for us is that the two colonies got together and ironed out their differences themselves. They didn't go back to the King for a ruling. And that, according to Bigelow, author of "The Narrative History of Cohasset," which is our "bible" in these matters, was "...formative and epochal in our nation." He calls it "...the first step of federation that culminated in the Continental Congress and blossomed into the United States."



President Lincoln's Progenitor

We are looking at the spillway below the dam at Hunters Pond at the intersection of South Main Street, Cohasset, with Mordecai Lincoln Road, Scituate. The building straddling the dam is the remnant of a water-powered grist-mill. It is now an antique shop -- Mrs. Marjorie Ladd, proprietress. Bound Brook empties into Hunters Pond. It starts as a meandering stream

draining the Aaron River and Cohasset's Lily Pond. After running through Cohasset Water Department gates under Beechwood Street, it runs under 3A and Country Way in North Scituate and empties into the Gulf below Hunters Pond. In summer Bound Brook is merely a trickle -- not a source you'd pick for a thriving grist mill/iron smelter/saw mill business whose owner would father a Father of our Country. But that's what it became, when, in 1691 a "Blacksmith" from Hingham named Mordecai Lincoln bought rights at its mouth to build a dam and, a year later, the house we see atop the hill in the background of this picture.



Mordecai Lincoln's house is now owned and occupied by Mrs. Ladd and her son Donald. Except for a wing on the back, the house is original -- pure 17th century -- an historical and architectural gem.

Mordecai Lincoln was a mechanical genius and born entrepreneur. After damming Bound Brook and building a grist mill here, he built two more dams and mills upstream.



Here we see the remains of the mill he built at the head of Bound Brook at Turtle Island, as viewed from the foot of Mill Road; that's the one we see with the "Blueberries" sign tacked to a tree on Beechwood Street. This mill operated until 1930, as a bog iron smelter and forge, a saw mill, and a tannery -- all water powered.

Lincoln's third mill and dam was midway down-stream, near North Scituate village. Nothing remains of this dam or mill today.

Mordecai Lincoln's ingenious scheme enabled him to keep these three mills productive all summer long, even when the Brook flows as a trickle. Here's how he did it: Starting with a full dam upstream at Turtle Island, he would run the mill there on Monday & Tuesday, and then shut it down. Outflow from Turtle Island would have filled the North Scituate pond, which he would use to run the mill there on Wednesday and Thursday. That outflow, in turn, filled Hunters Pond, which he ran on Friday and Saturday. That's what we came to call, "American Ingenuity." And it ran in the family.



Mordecai Lincoln had five children. The eldest, Mordecai II, learned the iron business from his father, then took off as a young man for bigger and better things in Monmouth County, New Jersey, settling on the "Navesink," a tidal river there. He married one Hannah Salter*, fathered 7 children, prospered, and moved to iron country in Berks County, PA. Later, one of his sons, John, moved on to rich farmlands in the Shenandoah Valley, VA. In 1782, John's son, Abraham, learned from a fellow named Daniel Boone about even richer country out west, so he took his wife and three boys on the Indian-infested Wilderness Trail through the Cumberland Gap to Beargrass Fort in the Kentucky territory. Four years later, in 1786, when Abraham and his boys were tending fields by their cabin,

an Indian attacked and killed Abraham. Mordecai, the eldest boy, ran to the cabin, got the gun, and killed the Indian --thereby saving the lives of his two brothers. Thomas, the youngest, in due course moved farther out in Kentucky and married a girl named Nancy Hanks. Their second child, a boy, was born in 1809. They named him Abraham, after Thomas's father. And Abraham -- a direct descendent of our Bound Brook "Blacksmith" -- became the 16th President of the United States.

* Hannah Salter's brother, Richard, was the author-presenter's great, great, great, great, grandfather -- making President Abraham Lincoln my "fourth cousin, twice removed" -- so I am told.

Elisha Doane's Mill

One hundred years after Mordecai Lincoln built his mill at the mouth of Bound Brook, another enterprising fellow, named Elisha Doane, obtained grants from the towns of Cohasset and Scituate to build a dam and grist mill at the other end of the Gulf, its outlet to Cohasset Harbor. Almost nothing remains of this elaborate structure but a few blocks of stone, one of which you see in the foreground of this picture.

The Doane grants for the mill are recorded in a deed book in Dedham. Underlined portions of the Scituate grant tell us something about how people lived in those days; also about the early and persistent confusion over the name of our river:



At a meeting of the inhabitants of the Town of Scituate, April 2, 1792, said Town granted to Mr. Elisha Doane all the right, title and interest they may have to the "Gulf Stream" so called Near Mr. Job Bailey's. Provided the said Doane will build a good and sufficient Corn Mill at or near said "Gulph" and also provided said Doane will grant to the inhabitants of the Town their turns as customary in other mills and also on conditions that said Doane should not supply said mill with grain by importation or otherwise when he hath grain in said mill sufficient to grind belonging to inhabitants of the Town & also provided he will make and maintain suitable Flood Gates in some convenient place in said mill dam sufficient for "Vassalls" to pass and repass.

Here we see the grist mill as a regulated public utility. People grew their own grain in those days but they had to have water power to grind it, and that power could only come from one source within reasonable distance. Hence the requirement of the miller to give priority to grinding local grain. Also, the requirement to provide "suitable Flood Gates" is of interest -- proving that ships of some size could enter and exit the Gulf, obviously at high tide, even though the river was dammed.



A significant link with the past here is seen in the photo on the left. Frank Canney, who now runs the boatyard, points to a millstone built into the foundation of the boatyard building. I'm sure that it belonged to Doane's Mill. No one would have carried it here just to serve as a foundation stone.

The photo on the right, from the Cohasset Historical Society archives, shows one benefit (if you call it that; I do) of having a dam at the mouth of the Gulf: it held back the salt water and allowed fresh water from Bound Brook to accumulate and freeze firmly enough to support the pressure of iceboats. My guess is this photo was taken about 1900.

River Harvests

Harvesting salt hay on the Gulf meadows went on for many years -- by boat. The boats were flat-bottomed barges, oddly-named "gundalows." They were poled along the narrow, shallow waters, from the salt marshes to landing places along the river.



Above (left) is a photo of one of the landing places on the Gulf -- the sea-wall in front of Eleanor Bleakie's new house. Another landing place was this one (photo right) on Jack and Connie Barnard's shore, just up-river from the Mill Bridge.



Sometimes salt hay was cut and hauled by horse and wagon. Because the meadow-ground was spongy, the wagons had extra-wide wheels, and the horses had "swamp shoes" strapped on their hooves. Here's a photo of a "swamp shoe" (the one on the left!) It's in the Cohasset Historical Society's Maritime Museum collection.

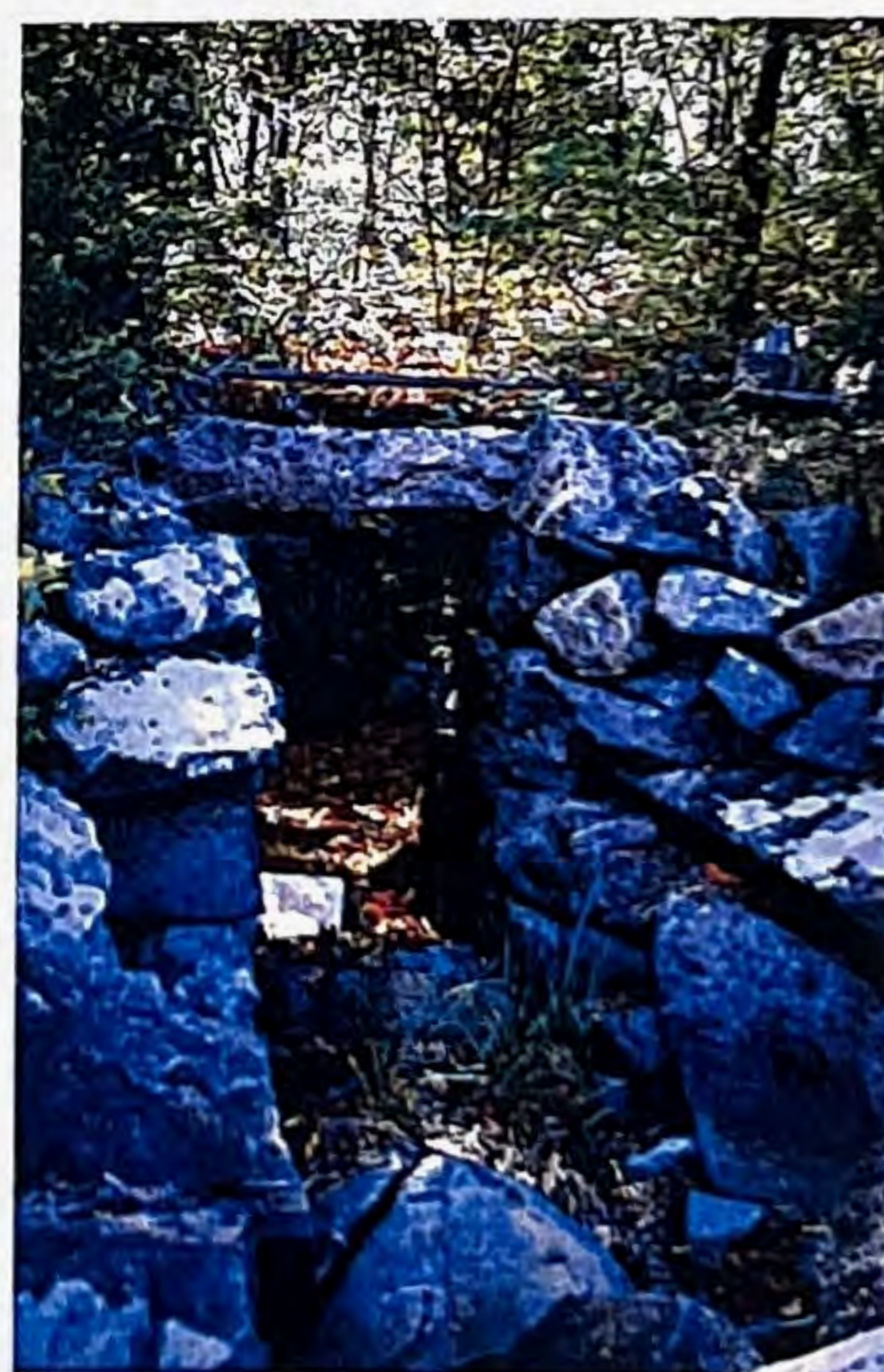


This is where Pegram Brook, which runs under South Main Street near River Road, empties into the Gulf. Near the mouth of the brook was a landing which was at the end of a long dirt road leading to Beechwood and surrounding woodlots. From the landing, bargeloads of cord wood were floated to Boston to satisfy an inexhaustible demand for stove fuel. Imagine the smoke, with every kitchen in the city burning stove-wood all day!

A tannery run by the Lincoln family was just up river toward Bound Brook from the center of this picture.

Ice was another commodity in much demand. It was cut on the river and packed between layers of hay in ice houses, such as this one built into Jack Barnard's landing place.

Of course, fish was always -- and still is -- an important economic and recreational resource of the river. But there were a lot more fish in the river then than now. This fish ladder (next page) was built into the dam at Hunters Pond to help hundreds of thousands of "alewife" herring in their



annual spring migration to spawning places upstream. Aborigines scooped them up for food and fertilizer; fishermen netted them for bait. Today, sadly, few alewives are seen: too many obstacles in their watery path. Shellfish, edible shellfish, were plentiful in the memory of some here today. If you could find a clam in the Gulf now, you wouldn't dare eat it. And eels: The late Irving "Bud" Blossom of Border Street, Cohasset, told me he went spearing for eels on the river one February morning years ago and came back with 200 pounds! There's a lot of room for recovery in our fish population!



The War of 1812



Last week's Cohasset Mariner had an interesting article about Cohasset in the War of 1812. This stone structure, on land owned by Jim Borden (in the photo) and his wife Marguerite, may have had a role in that historic event—or maybe it didn't. It certainly looks like a gun emplacement: flat, on high ground, sighted in on the narrows between Supper Island and the Gulf's east shore. Jim found this structure when he cleared land newly-acquired from the Bleakies on Border Street. It doesn't seem likely that one would mount defensive artillery this far up the Gulf, but it's hard to explain otherwise. Any ideas? Pass them along to Jim.

In another way, it does seem certain that the Gulf served a useful purpose in that War. In 1814, threatened by an invasion of British marines, Cohasset fishermen moved 27 vessels into the Gulf and scuttled them -- that is, sunk their hulls to the bottom -- to keep the British from burning them.

Old Houses



This fanciful painting is also from the Cohasset Historical Society archives. It shows how the Gulf looked in the early days and where some of the original houses were. We're looking over Black Horse lane and the "Snow Place" (now the Barnard property). Across the Gulf we see Beacon Rock and the Mill Bridge and one house on Border Street.

That house is the Job Bailey house, which we see in this photo as it looks today. It's at 126 Border Street near the corner of Parker Avenue. It was built by Amassa Bailey in 1765. The Baileys (of "Bailey Creek") owned much of the north end of Scituate Neck in the early days.



Another early and existing house is the Job Turner house, just down the street from the Bailey House, at 181 Border Street. It is now owned by George and Patsy Rabstejnek and has the distinction of being on the tax roles of both Cohasset and Scituate, since the revised town boundary line we saw on the Gulf cuts right through the middle of this house. Another distinction

is that the house was moved here from Boston, in two pieces, on lighters, or barges. That was about 1800.



One day, on March 3, 1808, tragedy befell the Snow family. Young Joanna Snow and friend Henry were out playing on the ice, which by that time of year was probably rotten. They fell through. Their cries brought



This is the "Snow Place." The house we looked down on in the painting. It's at 70 Black Horse Lane and is owned now by Jack and Connie Barnard. Built in 1742 by Jesse Stephenson, it was bought about 1800 by Captain Ephraim Snow, a "Master Mariner" who captained several Cohasset merchant ships in global voyages.

On the right is a more familiar view of the "Snow Place" showing the big red barn with the eagle that we see from the Mill Bridge, looking now much as it did in Captain Snow's day, but without the eagle.

On one of his ocean voyages Captain Snow met and soon adopted a young Spanish orphan by the name of Salvadore Sabate Y Morell. Captain Snow brought Salvadore home to Cohasset and raised him with his 11 other natural-born children. Salvadore became a naturalized American citizen at age 26 and took the name Samuel Snow. He, too, became a Master Mariner, but, as all-too-often, was "lost at sea" at age 35. Not before he married a Cohasset girl, however, and fathered 6 children. The 6th of them was Samuel Thomas Snow. Samuel T. Snow became Treasurer of Revere Copper Company and a wealthy man. He was first president of the Paul Pratt Memorial Library and gave the land on which the present library was built.



One day, on March 3, 1808, tragedy befell the Snow family. Young Joshua Snow and friend Henry were out playing on the ice, which by that time of year was probably rotten. They fell through. Their cries brought

Mrs. Snow and daughter Drusilla, age 11. They too fell through. Neighbor Luther Stephenson heard the commotion and ran to the rescue carrying a fence rail. He and fence rail were soon in the water, as well. By now men down on the docks heard the trouble. Nichols Tower and Newcomb Bates hauled a rowboat across the ice, launched it in the open water and attempted to lift the victims aboard, when the rowboat swamped. Now all were in the water, the little ones lost sight of. A rope from shore was needed but none was found, until someone thought to unweave the rope webbing from a bedsted, a tedious task at best. With the aid of that rope the victims were saved -- all, that is, but little Joshua, Henry and Drusilla.

Soon after Drusilla drowned, Mrs. Snow gave birth to the 6th of her 11 children, a girl; she named her Drusilla. That Drusilla died two years later. Mrs. Snow's 7th child was a boy, and she named him Joshua. That Joshua died when he was 4. Mrs. Snow's 10th child, again named Drusilla, lived to a ripe old age.

Border Street



On the left is the north end of Border Street, just short of the Mill Bridge, more or less as it looks today; the photo was taken a few weeks ago. And on the right was Border Street a couple of years ago -- looking much as it had for 100 years :a row of small houses, all built within 20 years of each other (1870-90) by Portuguese fishermen. These fishermen knew what they were doing: sheltered from northeast storms by the huge Government Island ledge across the street and a short walk to the harbor and their fishing boats. The houses were all built to the same basic plan -- two stories, front door on the left or on the right, a little back yard running down to the river with just land enough for a cow or pig. The river was useful: it disposed of everything that was broken or indigestible.

Mary's and my house (#115) is the nearest one in the previous photo. Soon after we came here we went to Dedham to trace its title. This is what we found:

In 1832, James Doane, grandson of the Gulf mill builder, Elisha Doane, inherited from his father (also Elisha, living in Duxbury) 14 acres at

"Gulf Island" (which is incorrect and a common mistake: Gulf Island was actually an area of salt marsh roughly bordered by the Gulf and Summer Street that once was pretty much surrounded by water).

In 1864, 32 years later, James Doane sold "a certain piece of land" to Enos Frank (Francis), "(Mariner)" for \$125.

In 1873, 9 years later, Enos Frank sold land "with the buildings thereon" to Manuel Fratus (deFraetas) for \$1,500. The plural "buildings" suggest a newly-constructed barn or outhouse going with the house.

In 1886, 13 years later, in a deed drawn at Pico Island in the Azores, where he had evidently retired, Manuel Fratus sold land with buildings to John and Mary Silva for \$1,000 -- a \$500 capital loss for Manuel Fratus in 13 years! Which only goes to prove that there is (or was) such a thing as deflation in real estate. Or maybe that's just the economics Border Street.

Modern Improvements

Some parts of the Gulf bear the marks of 20th Century man. One of these is mosquito ditches that slice every salt marsh in straight parallel lines. During the Great Depression, as WPA Projects, digging these ditches kept many men busy, but did little else to achieve the intended purpose of preventing mosquitoes. There are more effective, less land-defacing, anti-mosquito technologies in use today.



This photo shows a stand of "Phragmites," better known as Pampas Grass --another 20th Century import. It is invasive, destructive of native marsh grasses such as salt hay, and very hard to eradicate.

And now we have a 21st Century innovation: very large houses on not-so-large lots.



Ancient History



There's another history of the Gulf, not touched on to this point because it's too long a story to tell. That's the geologic history of the river. We get a glimpse of it, dramatically, here in the "Lion's Head" ledge on the Bleakie property. Other evidences are everywhere on the river of cataclysmic events that took place here 500-million years -- and much longer -- ago. We will leave it to another presenter to tell that story.

Save the Gulf

The Gulf is a precious historical and ecological resource. I guess that's why we're all here -- because we want to keep it that way!