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# Pine Island: an Island Exploration

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# Pine Island: an Island Exploration

Syma A. Ebbin

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I was born and raised on islands; perhaps that accounts for part of their fascination to me. A few months after I was born on Staten Island, my parents moved me to the Balearic island of Ibiza in the Mediterranean Sea, where we lived for several years. We returned to the United States on a cold winter day. Our ship moved smoothly under the newly built Verazano Narrows Bridge as we entered New York Harbor. Although we lived on Staten Island, I boarded ferries each day to attend school on the island of Manhattan, and spent most vacations at my grandfather's house in Groton, Connecticut. Although my grandfather's house was not located on an island, it was, nevertheless, an important temporal island in the flow of my life. Situated on a narrow peninsula bisecting Baker Cove and Pine Island Bay, it was the perfect place for exploring the surrounding estuary of the Poquonnock River, a realm of water interspersed with islands of various sizes and constituencies.

Pine Island was one of the nearby islands we explored regularly; in part because of the variety of good swimming beaches and in part because of the interesting artifacts and myriad vestiges of prior human lives that could be discovered. So it was good news last year when the State Historic Preservation Council decided to designate Pine Island as a State Archaeological Preserve and placed it on the state's Register of Historic Places. The island is owned by the University of Connecticut and the state designation has sparked interest in the island by faculty of the Avery Point campus which lies just northwest of the island, across the mouth of the Poquonnock River. It is envisioned that Pine Island could provide a focal point, a means of connecting multiple campus academic and research programs, creating a shared learning experience for both students and faculty.

So what do we know of Pine Island? Although researchers have studied the surrounding marine environments, little research has been conducted on the island itself. Part of the excitement is that there is still so much to be learned—an opportunity for both the

campus and the broader community. A better question would be “What can we learn from Pine Island?”

Islands themselves have often been considered microcosms, models for larger systems, “laboratories,” or “*tabulae rasae*”, allowing some control and minimization of intervening variables and providing a tangibly and conceptually limited space where new ideas and hypotheses can be examined and assessed. They have also, as Godfrey Baldocchino, a leader in the field of island studies, notes, been perceived as insular, isolated or marginalized on the social periphery, vulnerable and lacking viability. Such insularity can breed creativity. Biogeographically, islands have been epicenters of evolutionary change, providing a proliferation of unique species. Culturally, social innovations have also flourished in these areas. With this combination of attributes, it begs asking what we can learn from our study of islands about resilience and sustainability in both natural and human systems. These questions can be answered from a host of perspectives, and additionally, lend themselves to interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary team-based investigations.

Historical records note the island to be about 15 acres in size, though the Town of Groton records the island at 14.3 acres. The Pine Island we see today is the result of the dynamic interaction of biological and physical events and processes that have taken place over the eons. Similar to other coastal areas in Connecticut, Pine Island has been pounded by surf and storms, sculpted by glaciers, transformed through weathering, erosion, sedimentation, deposition, and biological processes. The island has been colonized by both native and introduced species of plants, animals and microbes and undergone successional changes as organisms have altered the environment, creating niches more favorable to other species. A variety of distinct habitats are found on the island: sandy beaches good for swimming, a shallow and silty embayment protected from prevailing winds and waves, salt marshes of spiky *Spartina* and succulent *Salicornia*, tall stands of the invasive reed *Phragmites*. Rocky

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Diane Barcelo

The author, Syma Ebbin, enjoys an outing to Pine Island.

outcroppings fringe much of the island on the exposed south shore, jutting into intertidal areas. Along the tidal margin, one also finds a wrack line thick with wave-tossed detritus, some of natural origins, but most produced by humans.

Further inland, the island is encircled by an almost impenetrable snarl of invasive beach rose and native but aggressive poison ivy. The interior of the island is treed, a shrubby woodland, luxuriantly covered in poison ivy. A dilapidated tree house is perched precariously in a large maple overlooking Pine Island Bay and the foundation of a small house remains.

There is an active osprey nest which sits atop a pole installed for this purpose. Lobster pots encircle the island in the summer, and in the winter, a harbor seal hauls out on rocks extending from the northeastern side of the island.

As for its human heritage, Pine Island's history reflects and distills local and regional historical and cultural events and trends, embodying the changing social, political and economic forces of the times. It is likely that the island has been used by humans for thousands of years, providing access to

important resources, including fish and shellfish.

Although no pre-colonial artifacts have been found on the island thus far, two prehistoric archaeological sites have been located just north of the island on the property of the Groton-New London Airport. The two sites have been identified as Late Archaic camp sites, and include remnants associated with stone tool production. The Poquonnock Plain area and coastline were part of the territory of the Pequot Tribe and it is likely that Pine Island was seasonally accessed by canoe as a base for fishing and shellfish gathering activities.

Archaeological sites on the Connecticut River have been found to contain more than 100 marine fish species, including barracuda, bluefish, grouper and shark. This suggests that local indigenous people were pretty skilled offshore fishermen.

Land records exist for the colonial period and we know from these that the island was inhabited and farmed. It was a source of seaweed, salt marsh grasses, and grazing lands for livestock. The island played a role in the Industrial Revolution, as the site of factory production of fish oil and fertilizer. It also played a part in the coastal tourist economy, was transformed into a gentrified estate, and utilized for military operations during World War II. Since then, the island has been relatively undisturbed, providing an ideal destination for paddlers and boaters, to swim, camp, fish and beach comb.

Among the first written records referring to Pine Island, or Pyne Island as it was recorded, are the memoranda for the town meeting from the year 1651 in which John Cole (or Coale), a "ploo-right" was granted "the marsh upon pyne island" as noted

by Frances Manwaring Caulkins in her 1895 *History of New London*. Marshlands were a particularly valuable agricultural commodity at the time, she notes, "esteemed as the first class of lands by the planters...furnishing ready-made food for the cattle."

Unfortunately, some of the early New London land record books have disappeared now, but luckily my uncle, Horace Newbury, a civil engineer and surveyor, has spent a lifetime uncovering and deciphering the layers of boundaries dividing the land, collecting evidence of the division, aggregation and development of much of the lands within the Town of Groton.

Mr. Cole forfeited his property on Pyne Island, which passed then to Hugh Calkins who sold to James Bemas in 1655, his "two small plots of meadow...lying upon pyne island". In 1661, the remainder of the island was apparently granted by the town to Bemas.

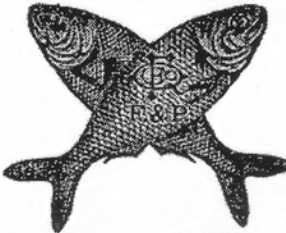
After his death, Bemas' daughter, Rebeca Satterly, leased his properties "on the East Syde of the Great River", including his holdings on Pine Island, to James Avery Junior for a yearly payment of



A gravestone on Pine Island memorializing the 1788 death of James Baley.

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“one barrel of good pork and one firkin of butter” or in lieu of that, “three pound in Currant Silver Mony of New England.” The land was eventually sold by John Griswold to Lieutenant James Avery for “nine pounds in Silver Mony” in 1696. For roughly one hundred years, ownership of Pine Island (described as being located at the “east chop” of New London Harbor or near “Shin-coset” or “Sinnecocit” Point in Groton) was divided and passed down through different lines in the Avery family, until 1780 when a  $\frac{2}{3}$  share in Pine Island, roughly nine acres, was sold to James Smith, who in January 1784 sold his share, “with buildings and appurtenances” to James Baley.

Baley didn't live long on the island, for in 1788, Baley, a Revolutionary War veteran, drowned while working his lobster traps. Baley was buried on the island, and his grave marker still stands, atop a rocky mound surrounded by a tangle of vegetation.

As Bruce Clouette and Ross Harper noted in their historical inventory of the island, Baley was an artisanal fisherman and farmer who at the time of his death owned some corks for a fishing net, a skiff, a partially built boat and boat building materials. He and his wife Martha raised a few animals (a cow, a heifer, four pigs and eight sheep) and tended a garden. At his death, Baley also owned a quantity of hay and flax, 50 pounds of cheese, spinning wheels, and a loom.

The subdivided island passed through a series of owners including various members of the Avery and Smith families, and was reconstituted as a whole in 1796, when the Smith family (James and his son Samuel) gained ownership of the entire island. Afterwards, the island was again subdivided and sold to Peter Avery, and again sold in 1823 for \$520 to Mark Stoddard of Montville. Mr. Stoddard advertised the house as a “summer retreat” available to overnight guests who wished to vacation on an island. In his advertisement in the *Norwich Courier* in June 1830, he



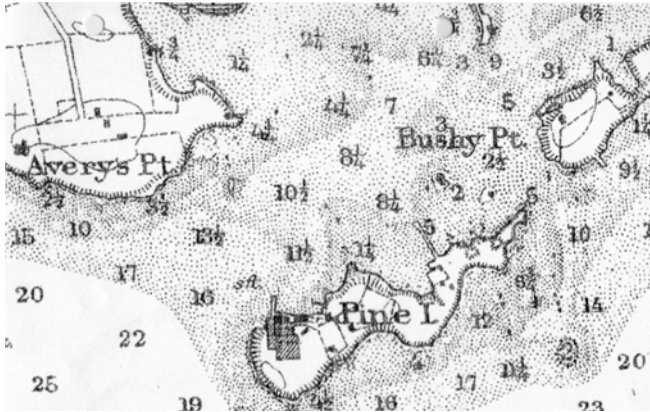
A postcard circa 1888 showing the fertilizer factory at Pine Island.

notes that “improvements” had been made, notably “a new wharf,” and that “no pains will be spared to give the most ample satisfaction to all who may favor him with a call.”

In 1835, the house passed to John G. Spicer, second husband of the widow Clarissa Stoddard, for a sum of \$550, “with one undivided half of the Dwelling house...reserving to Capt. Mark Stoddard of Montville the right of taking 50 tons of rock weed annually from the shores of said island for and during his natural life.” Mr. Spicer continued to rent the house on Pine Island to vacationers as a summer retreat, which according to a 1911 genealogy of the Spicer family, “became an exceedingly popular resort.” Spicer also made arrangements for the steamship *Angelina* to stop at Pine Island on her way from New London to Stonington.

The island's prospects changed dramatically in 1862 when John and Clarissa Spicer sold the island “with all buildings and appurtenances” to Hubbard and Sanford Morgan and Franklin Gallup for \$3500. The new owners established the Pine Island Oil Company on the island, which was engaged in converting bunker (menhaden) to oil for use in lamps, tanning and as a lubricant. In 1864, the company was bought by the Quinnipiac Company of Hamden for \$15,000 along with “fishing boats, seines and other property and appendages” of Elisha Morgan, who operated the Pequot Seining Company, a fish oil works along the banks of the Poquonnock River, on the current grounds of the Groton-New London Airport. The Quinnipiac Fertilizer Company became the largest such company in the state of Connecticut, and one of the largest in the U.S. The company built 13 buildings on Pine Island and employed 50 to 100 workers, producing both fish oil and a variety of fertilizer products, worth over \$500,000 a year, according to historian Jim Streeter. The fertilizer products were marketed as

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1889 Coastal & Geodetic Survey map showing Pine Island. The gray blocks are the site of the fertilizer plant.

“Fish and Potash,” “Pine Island Phosphate,” “Dry Ground Fish Guano,” and “Lawn Dressing,” and sold throughout the U.S. Despite good sales, the Quinnipiac Fertilizer Company was not a lucrative endeavor and went out of business in 1886. Reconstituted in 1888 as the Quinnipiac Company, the Pine Island factory continued to produce fertilizer, but with the innovation of synthetic fertilizers, the company’s future prospects were not bright.

In 1903, wealthy industrialist Morton F. Plant bought the island for \$100. Before purchasing Pine Island, Plant had acquired nine contiguous parcels of land on “Avery’s Point”, across the channel from Pine Island, and combined them into one, where he built an impressive summer residence called the Branford House. He reportedly bought Pine Island to put an end to the pungent odors produced by the fish reduction operations. Plant tore down the fertilizer buildings, and is said to have planted an orchard of 500 trees. He used the island primarily for recreation, allowing his grandchildren to play there. After Plant’s death from pneumonia in November 1918, his wife, Mae Caldwell Manwaring Plant, and son, Henry B. Plant, inherited the island with his estate. Eventually estate and island were auctioned off and subsequently sold to the State in 1939, which transferred them to the U.S. government in 1941 for military purposes. The island was used, to establish a defensive look-out for enemy craft and portions were used for dynamite practice. The mainland estate was used as a U.S. Coast Guard training center. The properties were transferred back to the State in 1968 and turned into the South-eastern campus of the University of Connecticut, now called the Avery Point campus. In 1970, the island was the site of some of the events organized for the

first Earth Day celebration.

So what is the university doing with Pine Island? For the moment they are considering how best to incorporate this resource into curricular programming and research efforts on the adjacent Avery Point campus. The island had a teaching debut of sorts this spring, when the Avery Point Learning Community, a group of faculty and students examining issues associated with indigenous people and the environment, took a field trip to the island for some on-the-ground investigation. The island may take on a larger role in the campus and Learning Community in the future, as a focus for a multidisciplinary and fine-grained exploration of place through time. Project Oceanology, a marine education program, often uses the island for its summer programs.

Ecological sleuth Tom Wessels notes the impossibility of knowing a place in its entirety, but admits that we may, through close study begin to assemble a knowledge of place. “Each landscape,” Wessels writes, “is a combination of multiple events that stretch far back in time—various cultural histories, climatic and geological transformations that reach beyond the tenure of our species. But it is possible to become acquainted with a landscape in a more intimate way, and through this growing familiarity develop a fulfilling connection to place. This possibility resides in the stories that are etched into every landscape—stories that go back centuries, millennia, and even into deep geological time.”

I hope we will take up this challenge and honor this island through close study, chart the changes in the land, and become acquainted with the interactions of human and natural systems at one specific locus in space over time. Pine Island provides a unique opportunity for the Avery Point campus community to collectively explore and develop a “sense of place”, to self-consciously begin the process of knowing a landscape, and at the same time define our own place in that history.

#### About the Author:

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