

Rhode Island in Three Rivers

By Ralph E. Heimlich

As I have written before, when the summer heat beats down intensely in the Chesapeake Bay, paddlers from the Chesapeake Paddlers Association head north for relief in the cooler waters and weather of New England. Six of us (Lois Wyatt, Marla Aron, Beth Heimlich, Bob Shakeshaft, Jay Perry and I) did just that in the middle of July to a house owned by a relative in Jamestown, RI. Using this comfortable abode as a base, we explored the waters of Narragansett Bay and surrounding locales by sea kayak two years ago and continued our explorations this year. Due to wind and whim, this year our paddles thrust into Rhode Island shores like a trident, based on rivers that ran up one side, and the other, and right up the middle.

The Heart of Rhode Island--Sunday, the day after we arrived, windy conditions in the lower bay suggested we seek more sheltered waters in the upper bay, blending into the Providence River as it approaches the port and city, which would be relatively sleepy on a Sunday. We settled on Haines Memorial Park, up in Bullock Cove, for a launch with facilities and adequate parking. As we drove up and started to unload our boats on the verge of the ramp parking area, East Providence police officer Kevin Grant stopped and expressed curiosity about our boats and gear, and our Maryland and Virginia license plates. Curiosity satisfied, Kevin proved a fount of local knowledge about restaurants all over the state, so he texted his best recommendations to one of our phones and provided info about the still-operating carousel at Crescent Beach Park and an alternate launch at Beach Road. [picture with Kevin]

Launching, Bob turned up river (being an inveterate Gunkholer). We passed under a low bridge and up into a tidal pond where fishermen were netting juvenile bluefish running the swift current of two 10-foot culverts heading into a second tidal pond above. Alerting the fishermen to our intentions, we muscled up against the current in the narrow culverts into the pond, surprising great and snowy egrets fishing the shorelines. After a few minutes exploration, we called echo-y warnings to the fishermen and shot through into the first pond, then down Bullock Cove past marinas and vacation homes, emerging into the upper Narragansett Bay at the point where it narrows into the Providence River. At this point, we could see both the Jamestown bridge to the west, and the piers of the Newport bridge to the east, as well as the Mount Hope bridge from Bristol to Aquidneck Island.

The Providence River is one of the oldest destinations in the age of exploration. Giovanni da Verrazzano, sailing for Francis I of France, sailed into Narragansett Bay and the Providence River in the summer of 1524, looking for a northwest passage around North America. Its sheltered waters have been home port for numerous shipping ventures over the intervening 490 years, from Roger William's renegade Puritans to the latest LNG tankers.

One of the most picturesque lighthouses on the New England coast sits high atop Pomham Rock on the right bank of the river. One of five lighthouses once on the river, the Pomham Rock lighthouse was built in 1871 and is the only one remaining. We were somewhat chagrined to see that this beautifully restored lighthouse is now owned by Exxon Oil Co., whose fueling port is just to the north, acquiring it in 1980. The exterior has been restored by the Friends of the Pomham Rock Lighthouse

(<http://www.pomhamrockslighthouse.org/>), but interior renovation and establishment of a museum await further funding. [pic of Pomham Rock lighthouse]

A short distance beyond Pomham Rock is Whortleberry Rock on which perches the venerable Squantum Association (<https://www.squantumassociation.com/HistoryofSquantum>), founded by a group of Providence men back in 1843. The imposing clubhouse, boasted as “the brightest bit of architecture north of the Newport family mansions,” was built in 1899, with a causeway to the Tea Pavilion on Whortleberry Island. Given that the main “culture” promoted by the club is the clambake, the Bakehouse was also completed in 1899 on a separate rock just north of the clubhouse. [picture of Squantum Club][picture of Squantum Club “Bakehouse”]

Several times during our paddle, deep-draft yachts and the fast SeaStreak catamaran ferries to Newport passed us well to the left, throwing up considerable wakes that rebounded off the sea walls and jetties on both sides of the river. The ferry goers seemed entranced by kayakers sharing the river with them. [picture of Providence skyline and the SeaStreak Ferry]

Continuing our paddle north up the Providence River, we passed the remains of a large Chevron petroleum depot on the right bank and Kettle Point on the left bank, which are currently in the process of redevelopment as waterfront residential projects. The port facilities just north of Kettle Point still are major depots for petroleum, asphalt, cement and road salt. As lunch neared, we bore right into the ebbing current of the Seekonk River to land at a gravel beach in Bold Point Park and watched the pleasure boats come and go.

Lois wanted to go through the Providence Hurricane Gates, so we all paddled up past the moorings for the tug boat fleet and through the large pivoting metal gates under the I-195 bridge. Built in response to massive hurricanes in 1938 and 1954 that flooded the downtown businesses, the hurricane wall and gates provide a barrier 25 feet high with three 40-foot steel gates that weigh 53 tons each. The barrier is backed by three massive pumps that can clear water from the city above. Built between 1960 and 1966, the flood barrier was the first of its kind in the U.S. and probably won't be the last in major cities. [picture of the Providence Hurricane Gates and tugs]

It didn't stop us. We paddled through and on past the marina and the Manchester Street power station. Above the marina, the water shoals from accumulated sediment and we were paddling in at low tide. Just barely scraping through, we started to meet casual kayakers on rental sit on tops as we paddled past a crowded street fair on South Water Street, and up between the Water Street and College Street bridges. We had a very urban vibe as we peered upward to the tall buildings, statues and flag-draped bridges. Lois and Bob eventually got all the way up to the divide marking the Woonasquatucket and Mohassuck Rivers that join to make the Providence. Underneath all the bridges were cords of carefully stacked firewood, a mystery until Lois explained that the 86 metal braziers on tripods embedded in the river are set alight every New Years as part of Providence's First Night celebrations, and at other times. The fires, known as WaterFire (<http://waterfire.org/>), are an award-winning sculpture/performance work created by Barnaby Evans with the first shows in 1994. [picture of downtown Providence from kayaks]

As the sun started to sink lower behind the tall buildings, we slogged our way out of the downtown area, through the hurricane gates, and back down the river to complete our 18 mile paddle into the heart of Rhode Island.

Westerly and Connecticut—Rain on Monday gave us an excuse to play tourist, traveling to the Whaling Museum in downtown New Bedford. I was surprised that the National Park Service has taken over management of the once-dreary museum, and they have done a great job with it (<https://www.nps.gov/nebe/index.htm> and <https://www.whalingmuseum.org/>). On Tuesday, clearing weather aided our left fork foray on Rhode Island's boundary with Connecticut. The line runs right down the Pawcatuck River, so we launched at the Main Street Boat Ramp in Westerly, RI. Paddling down the river, we passed factories and stores, gradually coming out onto a neighborhood of classic New England clapboard houses and equally classic sloops and catboats tied up to stone quays. We contrasted the eastern (RI) and western (CT) shorelines, and enjoyed great egrets, great blue herons, and squadrons of cormorants fishing the river. Tuesday morning meant that most of the boats anchored or tied up along the shore stayed idle, so we enjoyed a peaceful paddle downriver until it widened out into the miniature estuary known as Little Narragansett Bay. Passing Seal Rock and Rhodes Point, we saw the touristy town of Watch Hill, RI, on the left, and farther off on the right, the picturesque town of Stonington, CT. [picture along the Pawcatuck River]

We paddled out across the estuary to the beach at the Napatree Point Conservation Area, pulled out, and walked to the Block Island Sound side for a lunch on the beach. This area was formerly a summer colony of small beach houses, licked completely clean in the ravages of the 1938 hurricane. The current Napatree Point is 200 feet farther inland than it was in the 1930s and there is a wide channel between the current point and the island of Sandy Point, which were once connected.

After lunch, we paddled out along the back of Napatree Point and ventured out into the confused water and breaking waves of the passage between the two. The swells off Block Island Sound were large, and seemed to grow as they met the shallow, sandy bottom. Lois headed off toward the lighthouse on Fishers Island, not realizing how far away it was. Eventually we turned back and paddled by scores of oyster catchers and other shorebirds feeding in the ebbing tide. Bob stopped ashore to try a new camera, and the rest of us paddled on into the harbor at Watch Hill, drifting around to gawk at large, antique yachts, and up at the equally vintage resorts of Ocean House and the Watch Hill Inn. [pictures of Watch Hill] [pictures of shorebirds at Napatree Point]

We headed back up the Pawcatuck River, joined by Bob who cut directly across the estuary, but turned into another creek west of Pawcatuck Point, which led into the Barn Island Wildlife Management Area. This 1,013-acre area is Connecticut's single largest coastal property managed for wildlife conservation, providing a diversity of ecosystem and habitats including hilly uplands, agricultural/open fields, mixed hardwood forests and salt, brackish and freshwater tidal wetlands. Most of what we could see from the water was acre upon acre of sea meadows, interspersed by ditches once intended to drain them. One tree was festooned with snowy egrets like white Christmas candles.

We headed back up the Pawcatuck, more than happy with our thrust into the western side of Rhode Island.

East is Westport—Wednesday being another nice day, two groups of us took advantage to ride two of the State's best bike trails: The East Bay Bike Trail along the Providence River and eastern Narragansett Bay from East Providence to Bristol, and the Blackstone River Valley Trail, north and east of Providence in the old industrial heartland of the State. However, on Thursday, high clouds and light wind led us to our third thrust, this time to the east of RI, on the Westport River in southeastern Massachusetts. We gathered at the Horseneck Beach Boat Ramp, just west of highway 88 on the north side of Horseneck Beach State Reservation. Across the estuary, the picture-postcard town of Westport Point showed cedar-shake shingled houses and stores, with a large lobster painted on the side of the Revolution Lobster Co. Appropriately, as the others got ready I paddled out and dumped the remainders of the lobsters and oysters we'd had for dinner the night before, returning their shells to the sea. [picture of Westport Point across from the launch]

Paddling up the Westport River under the bridge against a stiff outgoing tide, we passed the low-lying marshes of Little and Big Ram Islands. We are used to seeing osprey hunting down in the Chesapeake, but in this treeless area, we were surprised to see several osprey standing patiently on the shore staring down into the clear water looking for breakfast! We passed the larger outcrops of Ship Rock and Speaking Rock, passing close to the eastern shore, between Gunning and Great Islands, and then threaded Little and Big Pine and Lower and Upper Spectacle Islands. Rounding Cadman Neck, we passed Lakes Island and continued up toward the Hixbridge Road bridge. Near there, we spent some time admiring a fleet of four Westport Wherries, anchored below the bridge. These are apparently a student-built project of the Dharma Voyage rowing team (<http://dharmavoyage.org/the-spirit-of-westport-is-taking-shape/>). Wish we could have seen the kids in action, but the boats are sleek and trim and a sight worth seeing. [picture of islands in Westport River]

A little above the bridge, we talked to a couple chicken-necking off a boat along the eastern bank. We asked them what they were catching and were surprised to hear they were after our own Chesapeake blue crabs (OK, MASSACHUSETTS blue crabs). Small world!

Up and up the river we paddled past Doctors Point, Huddleston Point, Pelegs Point and Widows Point, where the river narrowed into pinched, but deep, channel lined with reeds. Being a little uncertain of our destination, we asked a couple kayaking in rental boats whether the town was still up ahead and then continued up river. We turned a corner and sighted the Old County Road bridge ahead in a classic New England landscape. On one side of the river was a small Doric temple of a screen room, complete with massive stone fireplace, a larger 1793 Greek Revival house built by Captain Howland, and a blocky wall of stone pickets offset to provide crenellations for kneeling musketeers. On the other, we spied rack after rack of rental and higher-end sea kayaks, the business place of Osprey Sea Kayak Adventures (<http://ospreyseakayak.com/>). The young man hauling renters ashore assured us we could land, have lunch and use their facilities, so we eagerly took them up on the offer. [Village of Westport, MA] [Osprey Sea Kayak Adventures] [1793 Captain Howland Greek Revival house]

We had a lot of fun talking to the proprietors (Carl and Samantha Ladd), some of the other staff, and other kayakers launching, landing, or just standing around gawking at the boats. Starting out as a paddle sports school, Osprey is now a full-service retail, rental, and instructional sea kayaking mecca centered on the southern New England coast. It was a pleasure talking to them, and we bought some of their nifty logo paddling shirts as souvenirs of our journey on the Westport River.

Rhode Island is known as the Ocean State, and our first visit two years ago focused on the more obvious destinations of Newport Harbor, Jamestown Island and Narragansett Bay. This time, our three-pronged exploration center, west and east of the state showed us more of the diversity and paddling pleasures available in, and around Rhode Island.

Unless otherwise credited, all pictures are by Ralph Heimlich.



Figure 1 Picture with Kevin



Figure 2 Pomham Rock Lighthouse



Figure 3 Squantum Club picture by Marla Aron



Figure 4 Squantum "Bakehouse" picture by Marla Aron



Figure 5 Providence skyline and the SeaStreak Ferry



Figure 6 Providence Hurricane Gates and tugs



Figure 7 Downtown Providence from kayaks picture by Marla Aron



Figure 8 Note the braziers for the WaterFire nights picture by Bob Shakeshaft



Figure 9 Along the picturesque Pawcatuck River



Figure 10 Marla in historic Watch Hill, RI



Figure 11 Shorebirds at Napatree Point picture by Bob Shakeshaft



Figure 12 Launch at Horseneck Beach and town of Westport Point



Figure 13 Islands in the Westport River



Figure 14 Paddling up to the Village of Westport, MA



Figure 15 Osprey Sea Kayak Adventures in Westport, MA



Figure 16 Doric screenhouse and 1793 Captain Howland Greek Revival house in Westport, MA