

Prudence Island Narragansett Bay Research Reserve

Background

Prudence Island is located in the geographic center of Narragansett Bay. The island is approximately 7 miles long and 1 mile across at its widest point. Located at the south end of the island is the Narragansett Bay Research Reserve's Lab & Learning Center. The Center contains educational exhibits, a public meeting area, library, and research labs for staff and visiting scientists. The Reserve manages approximately 60% of Prudence; the largest components are at the north and south ends of Prudence Island.

The vegetation on Prudence reflects the extensive farming that took place in the area until the early 1900s. After the fields were abandoned, woody plants gradually replaced the herbaceous species. The uplands are now covered with a dense shrub growth of bayberry, blueberry, arrowwood, and shadbush interspersed with red cedar, red maple, black cherry, pitch pine and oak. Green briar and Asiatic bittersweet cover much of the island as well.

Prudence Island also supports one of the most dense white-tailed deer herds in New England . Raccoons, squirrels, Eastern red fox, Eastern cottontail rabbits, mink, and white-footed mice are plentiful. The large, salt marshes at the north end of Prudence are used as feeding areas by a number of large wading birds such as great and little blue herons, snowy and great egrets, black-crowned night herons, green-backed herons and glossy ibis. Between September and May, Prudence Island is also used as a haul-out site for harbor seals.



History of Prudence Island

Before colonial times, Prudence and the surrounding islands were under the control of the Narragansett Native Americans. They referred to Prudence as Chibchuwesa, "a place apart." There is no archeological evidence of a long standing, permanent indigenous community on Prudence and it is believed that it was used on an occasional basis for specific purposes such as hunting, fishing, and gathering.

Roger Williams, founder of Rhode Island, acquired the islands from Narragansett Sachem Canonibus, but there is also a record of the Wampanoag Massasoit Ousa Mequin bestowing this same gift upon him. The Narragansetts have the stronger claim however, with documentation in the form of a deed turning the islands over to Williams and Governor Winthrop of Massachusetts. Williams is credited with naming the islands Prudence, Patience and Hope after three virtues that everyone should possess.

Prudence Island was agricultural during the Colonial era, although it was abandoned for a time during the Revolutionary War. For the next century, the island remained sparsely populated with fewer than two dozen families in residence.

Farms were also located on Patience and Hope Islands during that time. The Patience Island farm was burned during the Revolutionary War, but was rebuilt and operated until the early twentieth century. Little is known about the Hope Island farm.

By the late 1800s, Prudence began to attract summer residents, and cottages were built along its western shore. The community was known as Prudence Park. Transportation was provided by steamboat from Providence. Later, a ferry from Bristol was started by Halsey Chase, who owned a hotel on the island. The Prudence Island Navigation Company was chartered in 1921, bringing a new era of development on Prudence. Many cottages were built in several small communities along the eastern shore.



The US military established a presence on Prudence with an army camp built during WWII. It provided a base for search lights and light artillery, and was abandoned in 1947. A Naval Magazine was constructed on Prudence Island in April of 1942. Pictured above is the south end of Prudence Island in 1943 with an active Navy base. Hope Island was also

used as a munitions dump at that time. The Navy kept possession of the base until 1972. The land was subsequently turned over to the State of Rhode Island, and was designated a National Estuarine Research Reserve in 1980.

Prudence Island has been sheltered from the impact of the large population densities normally associated with coastal New England, largely because it has always remained comparatively inaccessible and because commercial development has been actively discouraged by its residents. Approximately 150 people spend their winters on Prudence. The population swells to more than 10 times that number during the summer. Patience, Hope and Dyer Islands are uninhabited.

Prudence Island has benefited from active conservation measures. About 70% of its land area has been designated as an Estuarine Reserve or acquired by local conservation organizations.

Patience, Hope, and Dyer Islands have been preserved in their entirety, ensuring that these unique and important resources will remain a haven for wild things for generations to come.