

FACTS ABOUT

# HISTORY: DEER ISLAND

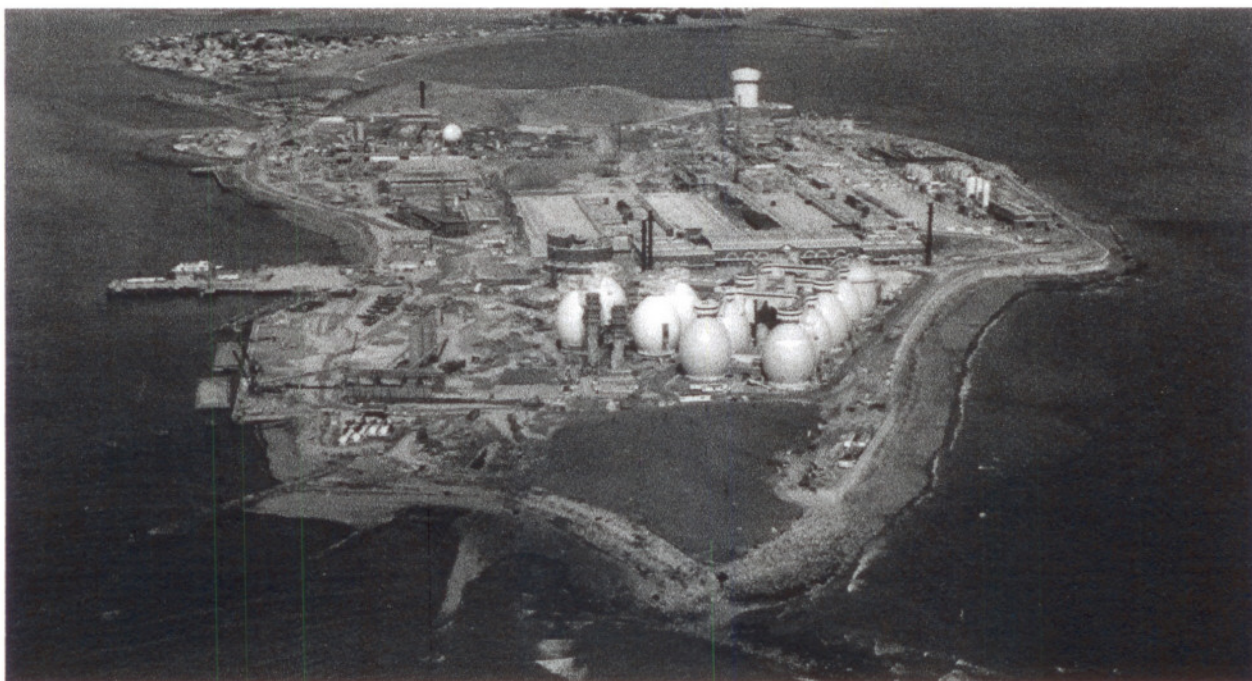
A MASSACHUSETTS WATER RESOURCES AUTHORITY PUBLICATION - FALL 1999

Deer Island has a long and diverse history as one of the gateway islands to Boston Harbor. At various times in its past, Deer Island has been home to Native Americans, quarantined immigrants, criminals, orphans, paupers and military personnel. Now a peninsula connected to Winthrop by a strip of land at Point Shirley, this 210-acre "island" is playing a vital role in the Boston Harbor Project, as the site of the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority's new wastewater treatment plant for Greater Boston. With its new landmark egg digesters, Deer Island stands out among Boston Harbor's historic islands.

## "DEARE ILANDE"

In 1634, four years after the city of Boston was founded, a writer described a place known as "Deare Ilande, so-called because of the Deare which often swimme hither from Maine [mainland], when they are chased by Wolves." At the time, Deer Island was covered with high forests and grassy glades, freshwater ponds, swamps and thickets. Tall bluffs lined the island to the north, east and south and the edge of the island was extended by broad tidal flats. On the west, a strait known as Shirley Gut separated Deer Island from Winthrop at Point Shirley.

Shirley Gut was reported to be navigable as late as 1895. By 1930, however, the depth of the water reached only three feet at high tide. A hurricane in 1938 filled the narrow channel with sand, joining Deer Island to Point Shirley and the mainland. In 1941 the U.S. Army built Fort Dawes



TODAY, DEER ISLAND IS HOME TO THE MASSACHUSETTS WATER RESOURCES AUTHORITY'S NEW WASTEWATER TREATMENT PLANT.

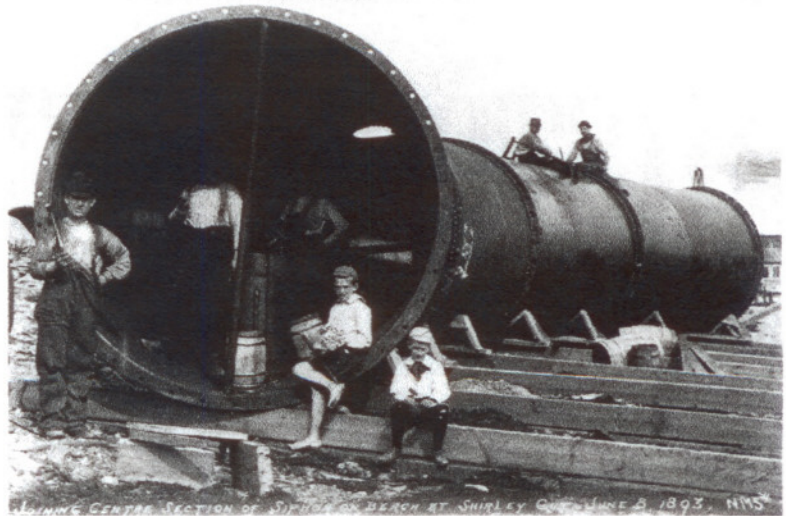


as part of the coastal defense initiative for Boston Harbor, and a road was constructed for easy access to the site. The name "Deer Island" became a misnomer.

The City of Boston was granted the "fine game preserve" of Deer Island for £2 a year in 1634 by the province of Massachusetts. In 1636 Bostonians were permitted to cut wood on Deer Island, a custom that continued even after the city leased the island to a series of owners beginning the next year. At one time revenues from woodcutting funded Boston Latin School.

### HOME FOR THE UNWANTED

During King Philip's War of 1675-1676, the Massachusetts Bay Colony began using Deer Island to house society's unwanted. In a panic caused by the war, about 500 Christian Native Americans friendly to the colonists were removed from their villages and sent to the island, where many died after a cold winter with inadequate food and shelter. Later in the war, some of the Christian Indians joined the



SHIRLEY GUT SEWER SIPHON CONSTRUCTION, JUNE 8, 1893. (PHOTO FROM METROPOLITAN WATER AND SEWERAGE BOARD, METROPOLITAN SEWERAGE WORKS: NORTH METROPOLITAN SYSTEM, VOLUME II.)

great that a receiving room was constructed at Long Wharf where these refugees could wait for transportation to hospitals. On June 8 of that year a quarantine hospital was established on Deer Island by the Massachusetts Legislature "as a precautionary measure to ward off a pestilence

## DEER ISLAND HAS BEEN HOME TO NATIVE AMERICANS, QUARANTINED IMMIGRANTS, CRIMINALS, ORPHANS, PAUPERS AND MILITARY PERSONNEL.

colonists in battle against other tribes. The survivors – mostly women, children and old men – were returned to their villages "in honor." Other Indians were imprisoned on Deer Island after the war, then sold into slavery in the West Indies.

Many died on Deer Island in the first two centuries of the new colony. Bodies of Indians, inmates, immigrants, patients and residents of island institutions, unclaimed by families or friends, were laid to rest in unmarked graves.

Deer Island was first designated as a harbor quarantine station in 1677 when passengers of an arriving ship were found to have smallpox and were housed there in temporary quarters. It was reestablished as a quarantine/hospital again in the 1840s during the height of the Irish famine, which caused thousands of Irish to flee their native land. In 1847 nearly 25,000 immigrants arrived in Boston. The numbers of ill and dying were so

that would have been ruinous to the public health and business of the city."

Between 1847 and 1849, 4,816 Irish immigrants were admitted to the island. Of this number, 4,069 were ill upon arrival. Most of the 759 who died were buried in the old Resthaven Cemetery on the island's southern portion. In 1908 the remains from the old Resthaven Cemetery were reinterred at a new location (the New Resthaven Cemetery) on the north side of the island above the prison in order to make way for an expanded military reservation. The last burials on Deer Island took place in 1946.

In 1990, several unmarked graves in the vicinity of the New Resthaven Cemetery were disturbed by construction. MWRA conducted an archaeological investigation of the site and protected the remaining graves. When construction is completed in 1999, MWRA plans to restore and





THE SUFFOLK COUNTY HOUSE OF CORRECTION WAS ONE OF MANY INSTITUTIONS ON DEER ISLAND.

maintain the cemetery. The Authority will construct a memorial to the Native Americans, Irish immigrants and residents of public institutions who died on the island.

### DEER ISLAND INSTITUTIONS

In the mid-19th century, Deer Island became an asylum for the city's social and economic outcasts. Starting in 1847, all ships entering Boston Harbor with passengers or cargo considered to be "foul and infected with any malignant or contagious disease" were required to anchor at the island.

In 1849 the first of a series of institutions serving the poor, the criminal or the delinquent was sited on the island. An Almshouse and a House of Industry were housed in a brick building completed in 1852. The Almshouse was established to serve the "virtuous" or "deserving" poor – individuals permitted to live on Deer Island when they were unable to support and care for themselves. Facilities provided for the Almshouse population included a nursery, schools, hospital, housing, workshops and a farm. According to **King's Handbook of Boston Harbor**, "On the hill-slopes are the vegetable-gardens, abundant and successful; and here are raised enormous...beets, some of which weigh twenty-five or thirty pounds each... In the barns or on the

hill are the gentle-eyed cattle; and, if one cares to see an endless number of pigs, an entire building is devoted to them on the southern point."

The inmates of the House of Industry, mostly adults, were sentenced by the courts to serve time at Deer Island for misdemeanors and crimes committed in the city of Boston, including drunkenness and idleness.

Although this criminal category of inmates was seen as a bad influence on the Almshouse population, it was not until the construction of a reformatory and schools for pauper boys and girls during the latter half of the 19th

century that a separation of the criminal and the poor was accomplished. In 1858 the House for the Employment and Reformation of Juvenile Offenders was located on the island for boys sentenced for misdemeanors such as truancy. A short time later, a House of Reformation for Girls was also established. The institutions for delinquent juveniles and paupers remained on the island until 1877.

In 1882 a House of Correction was established at Deer Island with the transfer of some inmates from the House of Correction in South Boston. By 1896 the institution formerly known as the House of Industry on Deer Island was established as a



A MILITARY BUNKER IS DEMOLISHED AS PART OF HARBOR PROJECT SITE PREPARATION.



nation's second-largest wastewater treatment plant. The new plant will give Greater Boston a modern, efficient wastewater treatment system and bring the region into compliance with federal environmental law.



THE NEW RESTHAVEN CEMETERY WAS REDEDICATED IN 1908. THE LAST BURIAL TOOK PLACE IN 1946.

#### MASSACHUSETTS WATER RESOURCES AUTHORITY

The Massachusetts Legislature created MWRA in 1985 to manage water and sewer services for 2.5 million people and 5,500 businesses in 61 communities. While the Boston Harbor Project is the best known of MWRA's projects, the Authority also maintains 400 miles of water pipes, aqueducts and tunnels, and 228 miles of sewers. Also underway are projects to control combined sewer overflows, provide adequate water delivery and meet all federal, state and local water and sewer standards.

*MWRA offers a wide variety of informational materials on the region's water and sewer systems and the natural environment. To find out what's available, contact MWRA's Public Affairs Department at:*

**Massachusetts Water Resources Authority  
Charlestown Navy Yard  
100 First Avenue, Boston, MA 02129  
617 242-6000**

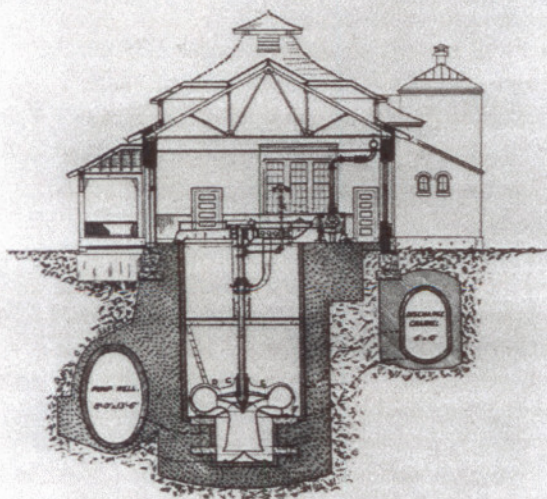
Find MWRA on line at: [www.mwra.com](http://www.mwra.com)

#### DEER ISLAND HISTORY

- 1630** – City of Boston is founded.
- 1634** – Province of Massachusetts grants Deer Island to City of Boston for £2 a year.
- 1675-76** – During the King Philip's War, Christian Indians are removed from mainland villages and sent to Deer Island.
- 1677** – Deer Island designated a harbor quarantine station for smallpox-infected immigrants.
- 1775-76** – Continental soldiers capture British supplies and force retreat of occupying British forces in two Revolutionary War battles.
- 1847-1849** – Waves of Irish immigration bring more than 4,800 people to Deer Island.
- 1847** – Quarantine hospital established on Deer Island after thousands of Irish immigrants are found to be ill upon arrival.
- 1852** – Almshouse (to serve "deserving" poor) and House of Industry (to house those convicted of petty crimes) built on Deer Island.
- 1882** – House of Correction established on Deer Island with the transfer of inmates from a South Boston prison.
- 1896** – Deer Island House of Industry designated as Suffolk County House of Correction.
- 1899** – Regional sewerage commission constructs steam-driven pump station on Deer Island to pump screened wastewater into the harbor.
- 1904** – Addition of the Hill Prison building increases island prison population to 1,000.
- 1919** – Metropolitan District Commission (MDC) created to provide water, sewer and park services to the region.
- 1938** – Hurricane fills the narrow channel between Winthrop and Deer Island with sand.
- 1941** – US Army constructs Fort Dawes, part of the World War II coastal defense system, and constructs access road from Point Shirley.
- 1968** – MDC's Deer Island plant provides primary treatment for region's wastewater.
- 1985** – Massachusetts Water Resources Authority created to provide region's water and sewer services and build new treatment facilities at Deer Island.
- 1995** – First phase of Deer Island treatment facility completed.
- 1999** – Deer Island open to public, including access to New Resthaven Cemetery. Cemetery will memorialize Irish immigrants and others who died on the island.



## PLATE A



SECTION THROUGH PUMP.  
DEER ISLAND STATION.

SCALE OF FEET.

ENGINEER'S DRAWING OF THE DEER ISLAND STEAM PUMP STATION. THE FACILITY WAS CONSTRUCTED IN 1899 AND OPERATED UNTIL 1968.

## SEWAGE TREATMENT

Deer Island was first used for sewage treatment when a steam-driven pumping station was built by the regional sewer commission between 1894 and 1899. By 1900, the North Metropolitan Sewerage System, serving 14 cities and towns, was fully operational. The pumping station at Deer Island was the largest of three stations constructed to pump sewage through the system. Wastewater sent to the island for treatment was screened to remove large objects, then pumped without any treatment into the harbor.

At the turn of the century, water, sewer and park services were provided by separate regional commissions. That system changed in 1919 with the formation of the Metropolitan District Commission (MDC), which took responsibility for the three services in the region.

The MDC designed and constructed the Deer Island primary treatment plant that handled most of the region's waste-

water until January 1995. The plant, which opened in 1968, was outmoded and could not provide the secondary treatment required by law since 1977. The Massachusetts Water Resources Authority, which took over the area's sewage infrastructure in 1985, opened a new primary treatment plant in 1995 and will start up a new secondary treatment plant in late 1996 as part of the Boston Harbor Project.

The original steam pump station, eligible for the National Register of Historic Places, has been restored for use as an administration building and training center for the new facilities.

## THE FUTURE

Deer Island of the year 2000 will bear little resemblance to the game preserve of 1634. The large hill in the center of the island has been leveled to make way for the new sewage treatment plant and some of the earth moved to create a new hill at the northern end of the island. The new landform shields Winthrop residents from the treatment plant. The island's history as home to generations of unwilling guests came to an end in December 1991 when Suffolk County House of Correction inmates were moved to a new building in South Boston. The old House of Correction was demolished in 1992.

In the next century, Deer Island, the site of many public facilities over the years, will host the

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Capt. Albert A. Swanson, 1990 interview.

Noel Baratta and Alfred K. Schroeder, Metropolitan District Commission, interview 1990.

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Suffolk County institution and designated as the House of Correction at Deer Island.

The first prison building on the island, New Prison, housed inmates until it was razed in the 1960s. In 1902 the last of the inmates housed in the House of Correction in South Boston were moved to Deer Island's House of Correction, the only City of Boston institution still located on the island. All other residents of the Almshouse and schools had been moved to other locations.

A second structure, built in 1902 and known as Hill Prison, increased the total island prison population to nearly 1,000. For its time, Hill Prison for women was a model facility for inmates, offering classrooms, shops and a dining hall. Demolished in December 1991 to make way for the new primary and secondary wastewater treatment plant, the old Hill Prison, by then known as the Suffolk County House of Correction, housed approximately 350 inmates. Relocating the House of Correction to South Boston in 1991 ended Deer Island's tenure as the site of one of the oldest continuously-operated penal institutions in the western hemisphere.

#### STRATEGIC DEFENSE LOCATION

Deer Island has played a role in at least three wars because of its vantage point in Boston Harbor. In 1775 during the Revolutionary War, the

Continental Army captured 800 sheep and many horses from a British barge and crew on the island. The valuable supplies were sent to American forces in nearby Cambridge. The Battle of Shirley Gut, fought on May 19, 1776, forced the retreat of the local occupying British forces. The *USS Constitution* ("Old Ironsides") used Shirley Gut to avoid a British blockade during the War of 1812.

During World War II, a system of coastal defenses included manned forts on all of the islands within Broad Sound, the harbor's main shipping channel. Deer Island – site of Fort Dawes – became the harbor entrance control post; its defenses included bunkers with walls over 12 feet thick and concrete-reinforced walls and roofs measuring nearly 17 feet thick, as well as a pair of naval guns capable of firing as far north as Gloucester and as far south as Plymouth. Nets to prevent submarines from entering the harbor were strung from Deer Island southwest along President Roads to Moon Island, and mines filled some of the harbor channels. Observation posts and other buildings were also a part of the 1940s-era Fort Dawes.

All of these remnants of World War II have been removed to make way for new sewage treatment facilities. The debris from all of the bunkers served as a base for a hill constructed on the Point Shirley side of the island.



DEER ISLAND'S FORMER STEAM PUMP STATION HAS BEEN RENOVATED AND IS NOW USED AS AN ADMINISTRATIVE AND TRAINING CENTER.