

An island resident (below), and lighthouse, farmhouse and beach in Tarpaulin Cove (right).



A brief history of the wild Elizabeth Islands off Cape Cod, including how a prominent Boston Brahmin family has, for generations, shared its wealth with recreational mariners.

Story and photos by [REDACTED]
For [REDACTED]

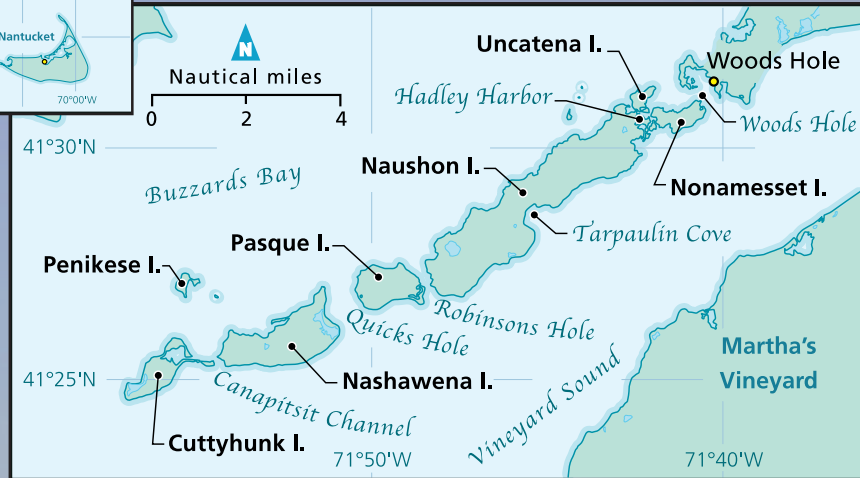
With clear skies and a light northwest wind blowing on the morning of May 6, 1778, 800 British soldiers stormed the beaches of Naushon Island, in the Elizabeth Islands chain just off Cape Cod. The few resident islanders quickly surrendered and watched in horror as the redcoats marched the narrow island from east to west in a great line with interlocked arms, successfully flushing out 1,884 sheep onto the beach at Robinsons Hole.

The hungry soldiers loaded the sheep into small boats and rowed them out to the HMS *Harlem* and the 16 smaller warships that accompanied her. The Brits got mutton for nuttin', and the islanders were not happy about it. Maybe that's why, today, Elizabeth Islands farmers raise heavier, more prickly beasts that would be harder to herd onto rowboats and abscond with.

I first spotted the successors to this replacement livestock – I call them Elizabethan cattle – from

Lure of the Elizabeths





the safety of my cockpit while anchored in Quicks Hole. Coffee cup in hand, I poked my head out of the companionway to have a look around at the new day, and there they were: A dozen massive Scottish Highland bulls walking the beach. There are more than buzzards in Buzzards Bay these days. And on a private island, the leash laws are lax.

At the time of the 1778 sheep heist, James Bowdoin, founder of Bowdoin College, owned Naushon Island. Island residents were his tenant farmers. In 1843, the Bowdoin family sold the island to John Murray Forbes, who gained his vast wealth in the 19th-century tea and opium trade with China. Subsequent generations of the Forbes family have since diversified into cattle ranching in a most unexpected spot.

Who knew there existed an enclave of rural Americana on the coast of Massachusetts in the heart of the busy Northeast Corridor? Not many. With the more-celebrated neighboring islands of Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket getting all the attention, the unassuming Elizabeth Islands fly under the radar and are overlooked by most.

The archipelago is made up of seven islands and nine islets that stretch out to the southwest from Woods Hole on Cape Cod. They dot the map in a more-or-less straight line, separating Buzzards Bay from Vineyard Sound. All the islands are privately owned by the extended Forbes family with the exception of

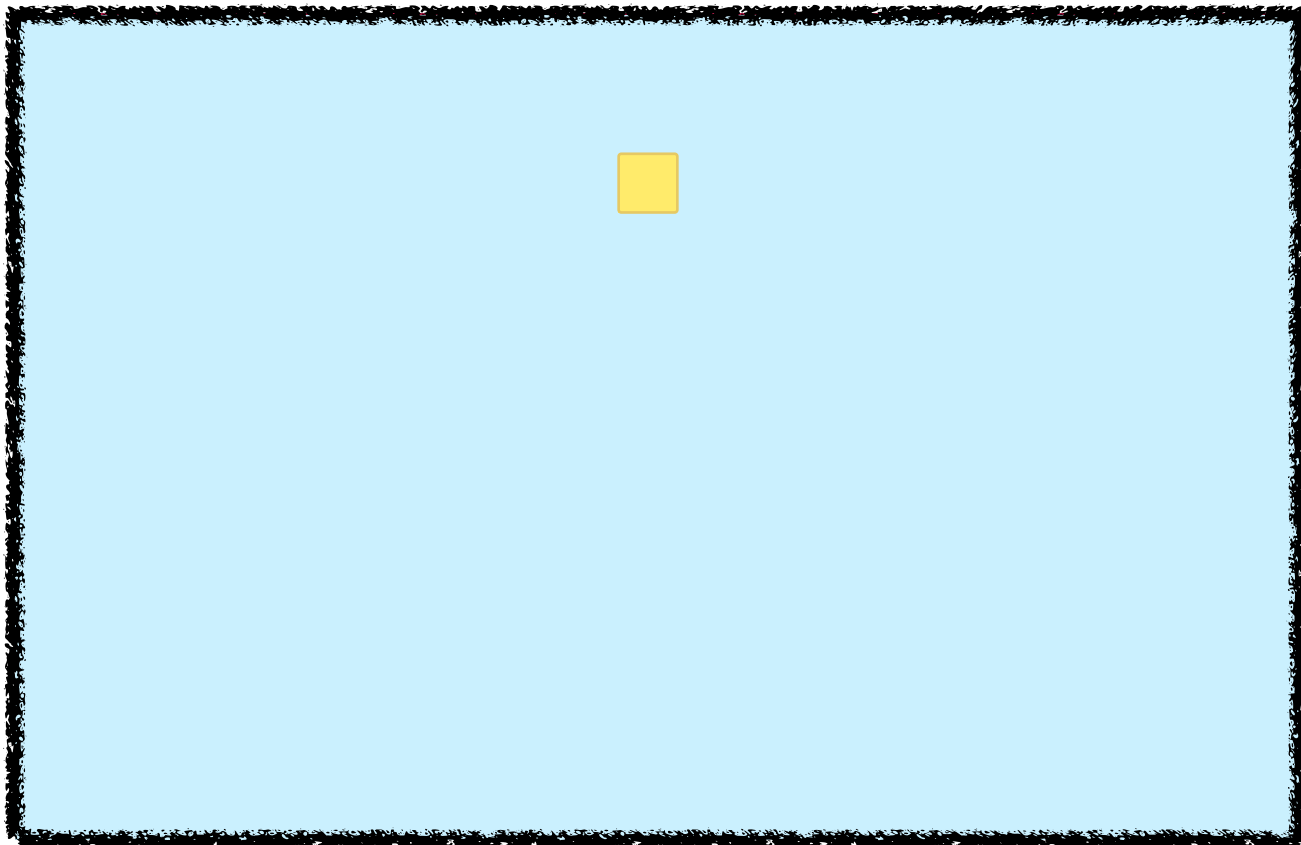
Cuttyhunk Island, which is a public town in Massachusetts, and Penikese Island, a state-owned wildlife sanctuary.

There are four natural breaks in between the Elizabeth Islands. From east to west, they are Woods Hole, Robinsons Hole, Quicks Hole and Canapitsit Channel. Some are deeper than others, but all are navigable. This abundance of options makes it easy to dart from one side of the island chain to the other in search of wind, current or a protected anchorage.

On Long Island Sound, the summer afternoon sea breeze often cancels out the prevailing southwesterlies, leaving little wind to fill a sail. Closer to Cape Cod, the opposite holds true. Because of the geography of Vineyard Sound and Buzzards Bay, the afternoon sea breeze reinforces the prevailing summer southwesterlies.

As a result, there is almost always a stiff breeze to sail on, and it is almost always out of the southwest. The current runs strong in these waters, especially in Vineyard Sound. When the current is against the wind, a steep chop builds, providing for the sort of boisterous ride that sailors delight in, while giving powerboats with low deadrise angles cause for complaint.

Back in 1658, Watertown, Mass., native Thomas Mayhew obtained a deed for the Elizabeth Islands from the Wampanoag Indians by promising freedom from disease and eternal salvation in exchange for the

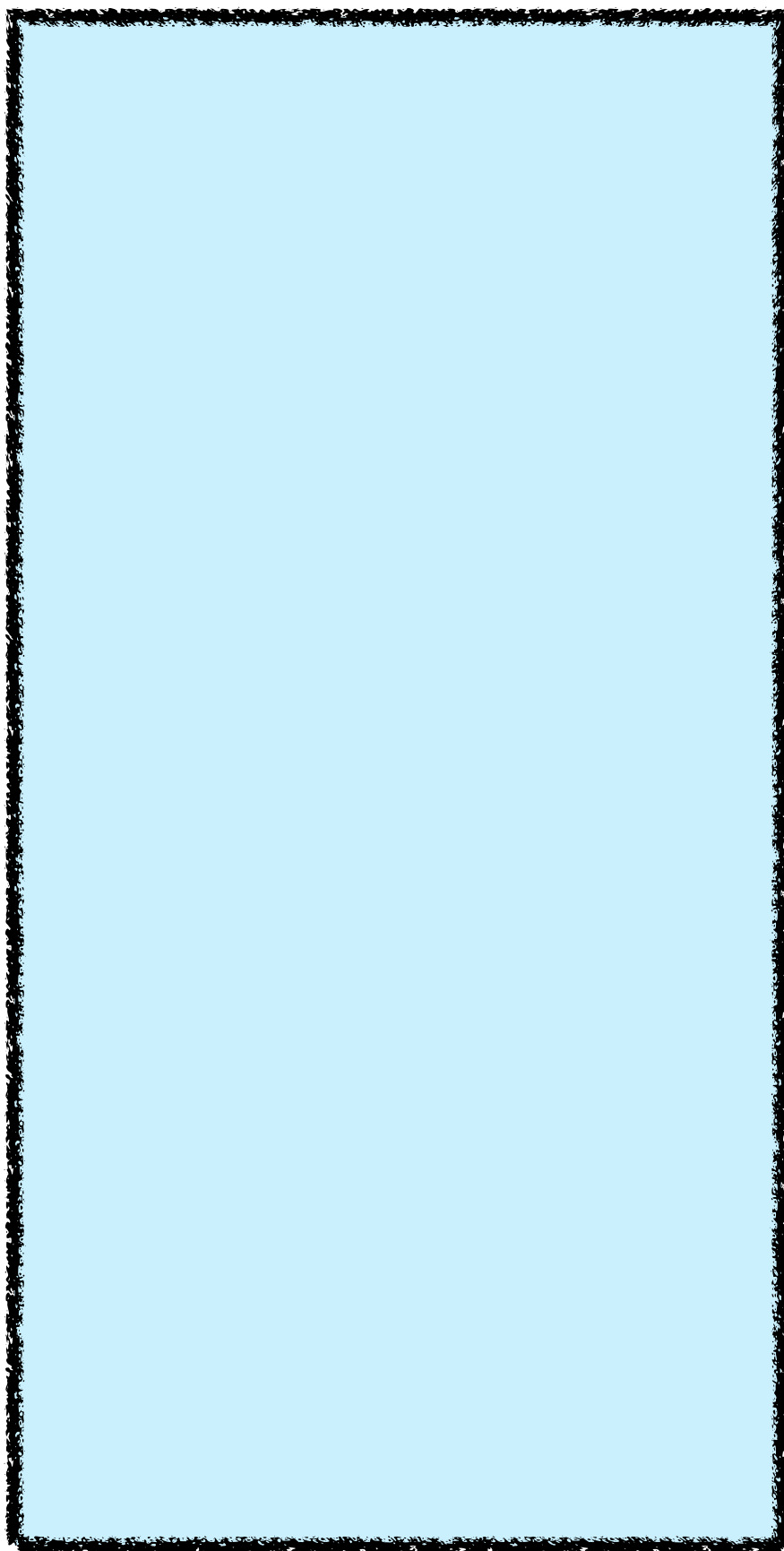


islands. On the former, he definitely failed to deliver. I have my doubts on the latter, too. (And we thought “mutton for nuttin” was a raw deal!). Before anyone bothered to hold him accountable, in 1862, Mayhew’s grandson sold the islands to Wait Winthrop, grandson of the governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony. Wait lived up to his name and held onto the archipelago for a long time. His grandson finally sold the islands to Bowdoin in 1730. When the Forbes purchased the land from the Bowdoin, they became only the fourth non-indigenous family to lay claim to the Elizabeth Islands.

The current generation of Forbes do a surprisingly fine job of sharing their islands with the public. While some beaches remain private, others – including Weepecket, Kettle Cove, West End Beach, Quicks Hole and Tarpaulin Cove – are clearly marked with signs welcoming visitors. The signs also spell out a few common-sense rules, and prohibit excursions into the interior of the islands.

In Hadley Harbor, the private moorings are shared graciously at no charge. Bull Island, within that harbor, is also made available for dog walking and picnicking. I’m hard pressed to list many other private islands that share the same policies towards welcoming the public. This practice is especially noteworthy considering the Elizabeth Islands’ history of ship-board thievery from strangers. Perhaps underlying the celebration of the public space has something to do with the Wampanoag tradition of sharing land, which, for this family, is only four handshakes back in history.

On the Forbes-owned islands, there are no restaurants, bars or shops. Nor is there fuel, water, ice or services for the boat of any kind. What you do get is shelter from wind and waves, with good holding in pristine anchorages and





The Forbes boathouse in Hadley Harbor, where the family also keeps 20 free moorings for transients.

beaches to match. As a bonus, you might also be surprised by a bull while sunbathing.

Above the sand, the landscape is mostly carpeted with rolling fields segmented by stonewalls. This relic of the sheep farming days gives the islands a dramatic British Isles look befitting the Scottish Highland cattle that thrive there. At night, it's not uncommon to have an anchorage all to yourself. It's an amazingly quiet place compared with the crowded ports of Martha's Vineyard, Nantucket, Block Island and Newport, all of which are just a short sail away.

For centuries, on both sides of the American Revolution, Tarpaulin Cove, on Naushon, was the center of commerce in these islands. Local tavern owner Zachaeus Lumbert built the first lighthouse above Tarpaulin Cove in 1759 for the "public good of whalemens & coasters." Shipping traffic between Boston and New York often stopped there to await favorable current and wind.

When the Cape Cod Canal opened in 1914, much of

the ship traffic shifted away from Vineyard Sound and into Buzzards Bay, on the other side of the island. The advent of the steamship also lessened the need for stopovers to wait for wind or current, and Tarpaulin Cove became commercially irrelevant. The tavern and the Seaman's Aid Society chapel are gone. The old farmhouse that once served as a post office has been converted into a summer home. The lighthouse still stands. It's been rebuilt several times and remains in service today.

Piracy plagued New England during the age of sail. With a heavy volume of traffic confined to narrow shipping lanes, the waters around the Elizabeth Islands offered the perfect spot for a pirate vessel to stalk her prey. A notorious pirate is known to have made a fateful visit here. On June 26, 1699, Capt. William Kidd last walked as a free man on the sands of Tarpaulin Cove before sailing to Boston, where he was captured. He was then transferred to London, where he was hung. Sensing that the authorities were



The *Cormorant*, a private ferry that plies the short route from the Forbes-owned pier to the parking lot in Woods Hole.

closing in on him, Capt. Kidd, according to legend, buried some of his pirate booty in Tarpaulin Cove before sailing off for Boston. Many have come to look for it. None have found it – yet.

Hadley Harbor, at the eastern end of Naushon Island, is the hub of activity for the Forbes family when on-island. It's also a public waterway with room to anchor and plenty to see. A large mansion sits on a hill above the harbor with commanding views out toward both Buzzards Bay and Vineyard Sound. Presidents Grant, Cleveland, Taft, Coolidge and Clinton have all been entertained in the house. And each has a tree planted on the grounds to commemorate their visits.

Hadley Harbor is the home of the *Cormorant*, a private ferry that plies the short route to the family-owned pier and parking lot in Woods Hole. A boathouse on the harbor's edge, with a nifty marine railway, cares for the family's fleet of boats. Between the boathouse and the hill-top mansion sit a barn and a pasture where horses frolic.

Anglophile Thomas Mayhew named the islands for England's Queen Elizabeth I. Forbes, on the other hand, was a Scot. Today, an abundance of Scottish heritage and pride can be found in the Elizabeth Islands, despite their name. The sound of a bagpipe in the distance can occasionally be heard from the deck of a boat in the harbor. One of the larger Forbes-family yachts is named *Highlander*. At sunset, more often than not she has a kilted bagpiper stationed on the bow. I suspect this ancestry strongly influenced the selection of the Scottish Highland breed of cattle as well.

John Murray Forbes spent a number of years in China in the early portion of his trading career. Racing sailboats became a favorite pastime with other expats – both American and British – who were in the same line of work, and living on the Pearl River in the southern Chinese port of Canton. Upon his return home, Forbes was instrumental in introducing yachting as a sport in America. On Aug. 3, 1835, John Forbes, along with his brother Robert, sailed out of Hadley Harbor



aboard the s/y *Sylph* to participate in what has been described as the first formal yacht race in America.

The sport flourished in both the family and the country. In 1885, J. M. Forbes' son, John Malcolm Forbes, successfully defended the America's Cup aboard the Edward Burgess-designed *Puritan*, which Forbes both owned and skippered.

The entire harbor is extremely well-protected in all directions from both wind and waves. The omnipresent calm within comes as welcome relief from the fury of Woods Hole traffic and the blustery bays and sounds beyond. In addition to the deep water in the central vein of the harbor, Hadley's also offers several shallow estuaries that are home to many birds and fish and are a joy to explore by dinghy.

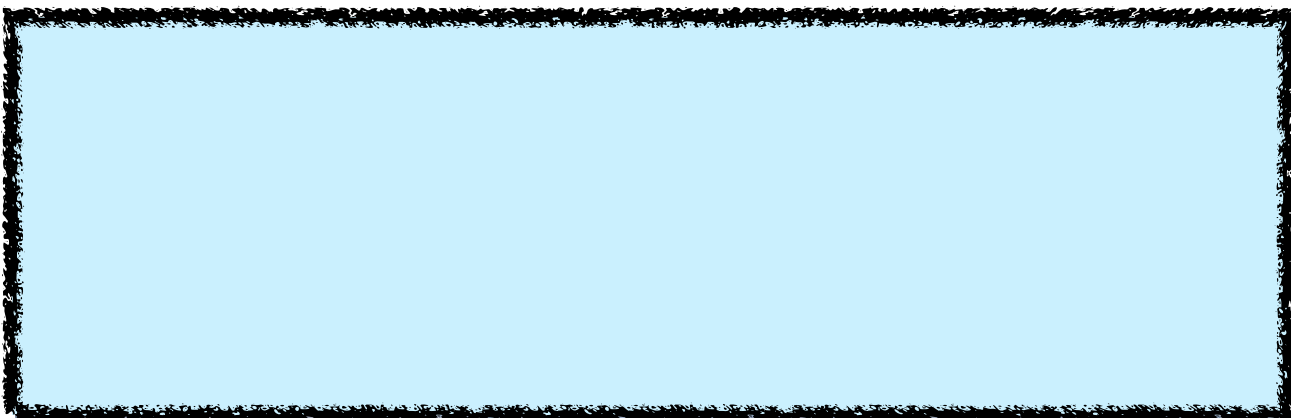
For the adventurous dinghy skipper, an adrenaline-pumping thrill is hidden in the back corners of the harbor. Three of the winding backwater channels offer narrow, foot-bridge covered, harbor exits. One leads out into Buzzards Bay and two out into Vineyard Sound. The current runs strong in these shallow and narrow channels, the water sometimes bumping up in rapids you might expect to find in a river. A dinghy propelled by motor is likely to find a rock, and transit in such boats is not advised. A rower swept out and unable to return by the same route will need to choose between waiting for the tide to change, or tackling the long, per-



A local boat out for a sail in Hadley Harbor. The entire harbor is extremely well-protected in all directions from both wind and waves.

ilous row, perhaps in the fog, and likely against tide or wind in unprotected waters back around to the main harbor entrance.

When you do take this long row, the history around you is inescapable. The largess of clipper-ship wealth still holds firm to the



island, just a stone's throw from your port oar. The view of Martha's Vineyard over your starboard oar is more or less unchanged from what the redcoats enjoyed as they digested their lamb stew. In this same spot, you could have been spectator to piracy, or to the first American yacht race, had your timing been different. And when the blisters start to form, you can apply the mental balm of knowing that the Wampanoag have paddled there even farther.

A row like this also gives you time for thinking about island sheep and cattle. I recently learned that the coyote is the true reason for the arrival of the large cattle. It turns out the four-legged tan-coat was an even bigger problem on the island than the two-legged redcoat. The Brits did take those sheep back in the day, but, after they left, the islanders got new ones. It was the swimming coyotes from Cape Cod who became the relentless enemy that was most difficult to overcome. Eventually the island farmers gave up raising defenseless little sheep and, instead, brought in the heavy cattle with the long horns that would make a coyote think twice before attacking.

The coyotes are still there. You occasionally can see them on the beach at twilight. A pack of them will often get into a fit of howling in the middle of the night. Their cry is a close cousin to the bagpipe on a foggy moor, and it's an eerie call to listen to from your bunk in an otherwise silent and empty anchorage. They sound close and hungry and desperate. You can almost hear them whimpering, "We're tired of hiding from these larger beasties, and sick of eating the odd rabbit or tick-covered mouse. Who moved my sheep?"

Frequent contributor

