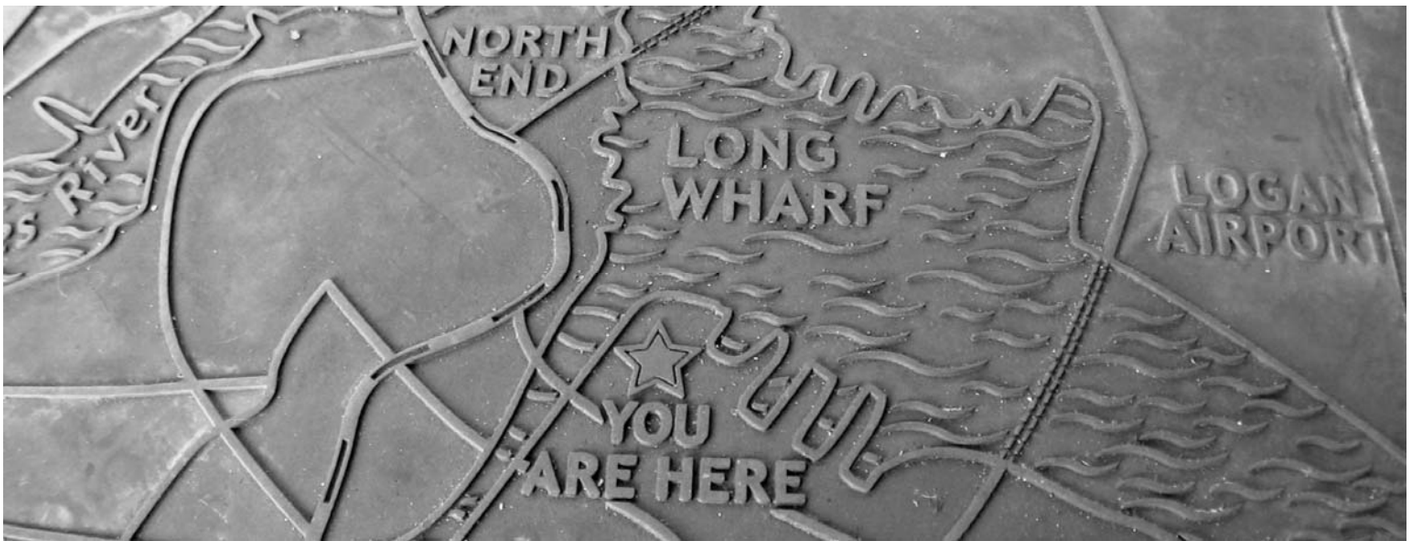
Boston Harbor Islands

IslandCache Program

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Site 1: Introduction to Boston Harbor Islands

N 42º 21.261’ W 071º 02.879’



“America, the new world, compares in glamour and romance with the old, and Boston Harbor is one of the most delightful places in America.”—*Edward Rowe Snowe*

The IslandCache Program begins at Fan Pier in front of the Discovery Center at the John Joseph Moakley United States Courthouse. You are standing on a bronzed map of the 34 islands and peninsulas that make up the park. On the left side of the map you will find a star identifying your present location. You should also be able to spot your relation to other landmarks around the Boston Harbor, including Logan International Airport and the North End. IslandCache will take you to a handful of the islands shown on the map, and introduce you to the histories, cultures, and natural resources of Boston Harbor Islands.

Drowned Drumlins

The 34 islands and peninsulas that comprise Boston Harbor Islands are the artifacts of a major glacial event that once covered the entire state of Massachusetts. More than 15,000 years ago, during the Wisconsonian Epoch, the Massachusetts Bay region was covered by an ice sheet more than 1 mile thick. As the land glacier slowly scraped over the earth’s surface, it moved sand, rocks and boulders, and formed tear-shaped mounds of glacial debris called drumlins. As the ice sheet retreated, the melt water filled in the scoured basin, and submerged almost 200 drumlins. Most of the islands in the park have only one drumlin. But the largest islands, such as Peddocks and Long, have several drumlin hills that are connected by tombolos—or rocky sandbars. The “drowned drumlins” you will visit today are a very rare geologic feature. In fact, the only other drowned drumlin field in the world lies off the coast of Northern Ireland.

Features Associated with an Island Park

The drowned drumlins provide for the existence of other exceptional natural features that make Boston Harbor Islands a unique natural landscape. The park has over 35 miles of shoreline and 3,200 acres of coastal and intertidal terrain. The beaches on most islands are abundant with glacial debris, such as cobblestones and small boulders—not sand. These rocky shores, however, are excellent habitats for waterbirds and intertidal marine fauna. The North Drumlin on Spectacle Island is the tallest drumlin at 157 feet, and offers excellent views of the city skyline, Boston Harbor and the surrounding islands. Plants on the inner islands greatly differ from the plant life found on the outer islands, mostly a result of the harsh, marine conditions the remote islands. As you continue through the program, notice how the ecosystems change between the islands. Imagine how each species of bird, plant or mammal adapted to its natural and built environs. And try to imagine how the natural features you will see are associated with the drumlins and geology.

Boston Harbor Islands: A national park area

Boston Harbor Islands was designated a National Recreation Area by Congress in 1996. The National Park Service manages Boston Harbor Islands in cooperation with the Boston Harbor Islands Partnership—a board of representatives from 11 federal, state, local and non-profit partner agencies, including the U.S. Coast Guard, Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation, City of Boston and Island Alliance. Together, the Partnership manages the park in order to preserve and protect the natural, cultural, and historic resources on the islands.

Next Clue: Before it was a unit of the National Park Service, Boston Harbor Islands was an integral part of the city’s robust maritime trade. Your next site is located at the terminus of the oldest—and longest—wharf in America—the historic “nucleus of maritime trade”.

N 42° 21.649’
W 071° 03.004’