

Boston Harbor Islands

IslandCache Program

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Site 3: Reconnection and Renewal

N 42° 19.612' W 070° 59.256'



“Here is exemplified the commendable Old-World thrift, by which useless refuse is converted in products of value, by the aid of ingenuity and industry.”—M.F. Sweetser

Spectacle Island 101

Prior to European contact in the late 17th century, Spectacle Island had two drumlins connected by a tombolo. From an aerial view, the island greatly resembled a pair of spectacles. The City of Boston purchased the land in 1912, and over the course of forty years, added over 36 acres and over 80 feet of refuse and fill to the island,

rendering the land unrecognizable from its original shape and character. You are currently standing on a man-made hill, terraced with retaining walls, roads and vegetation. On a clear day, visitors can see four lighthouses and more than half of the park’s islands from the top of the drumlin.

A “Colorful” Island

Often called an “attractive place to conduct less than attractive business,” some visitors could argue Spectacle Island has the most colorful history of all the islands in Boston Harbor. The location of Spectacle Island, a quick four miles from the busy port of Boston, made for a great location to conduct some of the island’s less than desirable activities prevalent in a major city. In 1717, a quarantine station was erected on Spectacle Island, inspecting immigrants for infectious diseases before they entered the city. Spectacle Island also housed a horse rendering facility owned and operated by Nahum Ward in

1857, which processed more than 2,000 horses a year into hides and glue. Between the 1860s and 1910s, Spectacle also hosted a casino, brothel and a few resort hotels. When the city of Boston purchased the land in 1912, the island was zoned for use as a garbage site, and a grease reclamation plant. In addition to its industrial and commercial uses, Spectacle Island was also home to many families for several generations. To get a taste of what it would have been to live here, you can read about the last resident of Spectacle Island in the visitor center’s exhibits.

Reconnecting and the “Big Dig”

A recent construction project—aptly named “the Big Dig”—removed over 15 million cubic yards of soil from the Central Artery corridor in order to generate space for two four-lane tunnels beneath the city. Over 4,400 barges were used to bring the excavated soil to the island, and “cap” off the varied history of the landscape. After laying 5 to 6 feet of top-soil, and planting over 20,000 plants, Spectacle Island stands today as

the city’s symbol of reconnection and renewal. The island is fully equipped with a state-of-the-art visitor center, which is powered by solar technology. The island also features “zero emissions” electric maintenance vehicles and self-composting toilets. You can reconnect with Spectacle Island by exploring the five miles of hiking trails, and walking along the west-facing beach.

Next Clue: Artifacts excavated during the “Big Dig” have revealed that Native Americans utilized this island long before the European settlers arrived. This evidence was discovered in the form of a midden—a large mound containing shell debris, animal bones, and stone tools—dating back to over 8,000 years ago.

N 42° 19.146'
W 070° 59.153'