

Montauk Point

by Hank Foglino



Two hundred million years ago, Long Island was simply a tiny spot in the interior of what is now the Appalachian Mountain system (Ref: "Long Island Sound," *LIBW* Dec., 03). These mountains eroded over the years, and after one hundred and sixty million years, the result was a rolling plain where the mountains had been. This is what gives Long Island the bedrock foundation on which it sits.

During the next one hundred million years, tectonic plate action and volcanic activity kept the area in motion, lowering it beneath the sea and lifting it out again. These upheavals and "dunkings" resulted in flowing rivers that cut swaths through the landscape and began forming the valley that would become Long Island Sound and the various harbors on the north shore.

About two and a half million years ago, ice caps started to form in Canada which eventually expanded south, causing the Ice Age with its glaciers reaching and retreating from the Long Island area. As the glaciers moved back and forth traversing the valley which is now Long Island Sound, they scooped more material from its base, deepening it, and with the end of the glaciers a huge or perhaps multiple lakes were left.

About three thousand years after its formation, the lake drained through an eroded gap in the moraine ridge near Fishers Island (The Race), opening a passage for the saline ocean water and Long Island Sound began to form. Today waters from the ocean flow in and out of the Sound with the tides and the remaining land mass to the south comprises what is now Long Island. Long Island is shaped like a fish with the tail to the east. Montauk Point is located at the tip of the lower tail fin.

Montauk gets its name from the Montauketts, the Indian tribe that inhabited the area. Their ancestors arrived on Long Island about 10,000 years ago, soon after the last Ice Age. Here they found ideal conditions for both the hunter-gatherers and those who farmed the land. There were many sheltered

areas that provided access to the warming sun and protection from the cold winter winds. The marine area was rich in fish and shell fish, and deer, ducks and other animals provided food from the inland areas. Also, the land was fertile and supported the various crops planted in the spring. The woodlands provided materials for building their homes, most commonly the oval domed-shaped wigwams and the long houses and also for the canoes they used offshore. The family and village were the center of their social organization. The villages were linked to other communities on Long Island and southern New England. These networks enabled the Montauketts to establish trade routes and military alliances. However, they were no match for the Pequots of Rhode Island, who slipped across Long Island Sound regularly to raid at will. The Montauketts were forced to pay tribute to the Pequots, whose demands, in time, became insatiable.



Montauk Harbor

In 1637, British troops with help from the Montauketts massacred the Pequots, and an alliance was formed between the victors. The Montaukett's sachem, Wyndanch, traveled across the Sound to meet with Lion Gardiner, the English commander of Fort Saybrook. Both men had iron wills and were

warriors and immediately formed a bond of friendship. Of particular appeal to Wyndanch was that Gardiner treated the Indians with civility and wanted to know them, not simply to conquer them as an obstacle to enlightened civilization. Wyndanch invited Gardiner to come and settle on a small island near his village. The island was called Manchonack, "the place where many died", perhaps because it was a site where the population had been victims of some sort of epidemic. Gardner named the island after himself and built a farmstead for his family. The relationship worked very well with Wyndanch acting as an intermediary quieting uprisings from some of the tribes and the English helping him as needed, including the recovery his daughter, Quashawam, from the Niantics, who had captured her in a raid on a Montaukett village. Wyndanch rewarded the English with what is now Smithtown and the tale of "Bull" Smith setting the boundaries by walking a circle astride a bull was born.

In 1684 Wyndanch and three other sachems sold the English a tract of land from Southampton's eastern boundary to Napeague for 20 coats, mirrors, hoes, hatchets, knives and 100 small metal drills. The Montauketts retained the right to fish and hunt in the area and in their remaining land stretching from the Napeague border to Montauk Point. The New England Governor sold the rights to those 31,000 acres to a group of colonists. It wasn't until 1665 that Wyndanch gave the settlers the right to pasture their livestock on Montauk. In 1689 the Montauketts sold Montauk to a group of East Hampton settlers. Unfortunately, the Wantauketts did not understand the concept of "selling" and individual ownership – the bounties of nature were for all to share. Although they retained the right to hunt and fish on the land, this became impossible when the settlers began putting up fences. The courts showed little sympathy, and restriction of their food sources, the resultant malnutrition and recurring epidemics of European diseases eventually weakened the Montaukett's reserves and they lost the land. However, they have maintained their identity. Today their representatives are working towards federal recognition for the tribe.

With the available land, the settlers had the necessary acreage to graze cattle, sheep and horses. The annual cattle drives were comprised of 1200 to 1500 cattle. While on Montauk, keepers guarded the herds and three houses were built to shelter them. Except for the lighthouse, they were the only buildings on Montauk until the late 19th century. The first house was located just where the hills called the Nominicks rise up from the flat plains of Napeague. It burned down in 1774 and was never rebuilt. The second house, built in 1797, is now a museum run by the Historical Society. The third house, overlooking Indian Field on the grounds of Theodore Roosevelt County Park, dates back to 1806 and is now run by Suffolk County as a museum.

During the American Revolution, the British navy kept a huge fire on the bluff overlooking the sea to serve as a beacon for the British ships blockading Long Island Sound.

After the Revolution, the new Republic knew it had to establish trade with other nations. In order to do this, some of the hazards along the coast had to be eliminated to allow for safe passage of the incoming ships, and Montauk Point was one of the more dangerous passages along

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the new trans-Atlantic route. The Montauk Lighthouse was commissioned by President George Washington in 1792 and was completed in 1796 to protect vessels heading towards New York City. The lighthouse was automated in 1987 and no longer needs a keeper. The 110-foot tower has been one of Long Island's attractions for more than 200 years and is the oldest lighthouse in New York State and the fourth oldest operating lighthouse in the United States.

Unfortunately, Long Island's eastern north shore is an eroding coast. In 1883 Montauk Point Lighthouse sat 220 feet from the water's edge. Over the years more and more of the coast has been eroded, and today it sits less than 100 feet from the water, raising some concern about the lighthouse's future. The efforts of Giorgina Reid, who devoted 15 years of her life to an innovative terracing project, stabilized the bluffs and saved the Lighthouse. More recently, large rocks have been placed on the shore around the Lighthouse to dissipate some of the wave energy in an attempt to slow down the erosion.

Montauk Point also has a history of pirates, including the infamous Captain William Kidd, and buried treasure. Kidd supposedly did bury treasure on Gardiners Island, but it was unearthed after his death and turned over to the authorities. With its open sea on one side and safe bays and harbors on the other, Montauk Point provides ideal places for vessels to be concealed and treasure buried for future

excavation. Treasure maps were sold on the streets of Sag Harbor for a few dollars or a bottle of whiskey. People still are falling for this scheme, though the maps have been proven fraudulent for quite some time. Real treasure, to some, spirits were landed at Montauk during the Prohibition Era. "Rum Row" lay off Montauk just past the legal limit, and many a boat made the trip back and forth. The liquor was dug into the dunes to be picked up by trucks and transported to New York City.

After the Indian Wars, there was no more bloodshed on Montauk. Two companies participated in the French and Indian War, but fighting did not reach the area. The Revolution came closer to home. In 1775 during the siege of Boston, a British ship visited Fort Pond Bay in search of provisions. John Dayton, who had limited troops at his disposal, marched his men to the top of a hill west of Fort Pond and then had them turn their coats around and do it all over again. This was repeated several times. The British commander, watching through his glass, thought that there were more men than actually were

there and turned to look for another port with fewer defenses. This is where the term "turncoat" is said to have originated.

Then came the Spanish American War in 1898, and reports that the Spanish Fleet might invade the United States coast precipitated the establishment of a Navy signal station at the Point, and construction began on Fort Tyler, but the war ended before the guns were even installed. The veterans

of that war were sent to Montauk, and Camp Wikoff was established. Here the veterans, some of whom brought back yellow fever and typhoid fever, were housed and cared for until they were well. During World War I, a United States Naval Training Station was established. Hangers were built to house one dirigible and three hydroplanes, which took off from Fort Pond and the facility was named Fort Hero.

During World War II, the army built up Fort Hero, renaming it Camp Hero. The facility was built to appear like a small village to avoid detection from the air. Most of the buildings

were designed to give a false impression when viewed from above, such as the gymnasium, which was built to look like a church. Four 16-inch



Hiking trails in Montauk cross miles of unspoiled landscape

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guns were installed to protect the coast from invasion. Years after the war, Camp Hero was transferred to the Air Force and renamed Montauk Air Force Station. This is supposed to be the site of the controversial and mysterious Montauk Project.

The Montauk Project was supposed to have been a series of secret experiments carried on by the government. The work was reported to be a continuation of the Philadelphia Experiment, or Project Rainbow, which supposedly took place in 1943 at the Philadelphia Naval Shipyard. Radar had been developed and knowledge was being acquired re: electromagnetic energy and radiation. It was believed by some that by manipulating electromagnetic waves, including reflected light, an object could be made invisible. During the project, the Destroyer USS *Eldridge* was



Surfcasting on the rocks at Montauk Point

reported to have been made invisible, and when it reappeared, some of the crew was missing and some returned mentally imbalanced. The surviving researchers wanted to continue the experiments, but the United States Congress deemed the project far too dangerous and rejected the plan. It was reported that it was carried out as a top secret project with the Defense Department's approval and funded from a portion of 10 billion dollars of Nazi gold found in a railroad tunnel by American soldiers in France.

Work began at Brookhaven National Laboratories on Long Island. However, it was determined that a large radar antenna was needed, and building one at Brookhaven would have aroused suspicion. Luckily, Camp Hero at Montauk had the necessary radar equipment and was rather isolated, not yet having a tourist trade. The project was moved to Camp Hero and set up in an underground bunker, and the experiments began with reports of street people and orphans being kidnapped and used in experi-

ments, people having their psychic abilities enhanced to the point where they could materialize items out of thin air, the creation of a portal from which a creature appeared which began eating the scientists until it was killed (Stargate SG-1 ???), personnel being transferred to other places (Star Trek's transporter??), et al. This tale is well documented. The Internet is full of material and several books have been written supposedly giving proof of the project, including one titled "The Montauk Files".

Finally, the best of all. Montauk is famous for its fishing, and called by some the fishing capital of the world. It has access to Long Island Sound and the vast Atlantic Ocean, availing accessibility to a wide variety of species in many marine environments - shallow, deep, open sea, protected, etc. As far as this writer is concerned, Long Island, with Montauk Point to the east and the Throg's Neck Bridge to the west, is a great place to live. Now if we had three more months of summer and half the people would leave, it would be heaven.

I'd like to thank Robin Strong, historian at the Montauk Library, for all her help in putting this article together.



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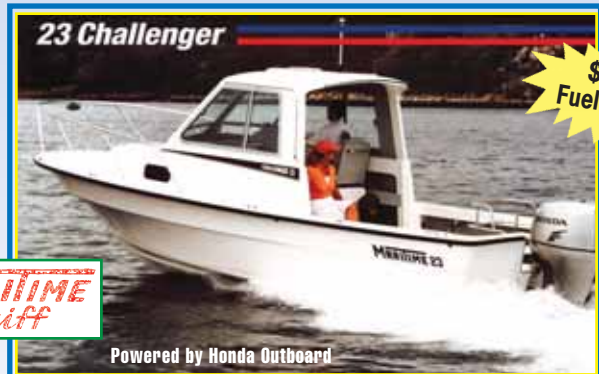
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