Introduction and Overview.

To fully appreciate Squantum and Moon Island, you must try to visualize this area before it was so called “improved.” The causeway to Moon Island from the Squantum area did not exist before the late 1870s and there was no bridge across Western Way to Long Island until 1951. The sand spit from Thompson Island to Squaw Rock existed as a fabulous clam bar for thousands of years until the sewerage outflow from Moon Island backed up in the local waters. Indians had been summering here and enjoying these juicy mollusks for thousands of years. Europeans are relatively late visitors to this part of the world.

Another two bars pointed from Moon Island toward Squantum, following the general path of the new causeway. Without the causeway, you would have had a clear view from Chappell Rock in Squantum to Hough’s Neck across Quincy Bay. Looking northwest, you would have had an unobstructed view all the way over to Dorchester Heights in South Boston. The land where UMass Boston and the Kennedy Memorial are now located was open water. The Marina Bay area was salt marsh leaving a much wider mouth to the Neponset River.

In the early years, Moon Island was recorded as having twenty-acres of land that was used for pasture that was connected at very low water to Squantum by two sand bars. There was a 100-foot bluff on the northerly side. The proper approach to this island in the late 1800’s was from the Quincy Bay side. This island was called “Mennen’s Moon,” and has been called “Moon Island” or “Moon Head.” It was used for pasture used since the arrival of European settlers in Boston Harbor.

Moon Island now consists of 44.5 acres, and is connected by a two-lane causeway to Squantum in Quincy. As with many of the other islands in Boston Harbor, Moon Island is owned by the City of Boston and is no longer available for public use. As municipal and federal authorities have taken ownership of the Boston Harbor islands over the centuries, their use has never been returned to the public sector, and, with the lack of funding as an excuse for failure to improve the recreational facilities, the public continues to be banned from these gems of Boston Harbor.

Squantum Point located at the mouth of the Neponset River held both a sacred and practical attraction for the Massachusuck or Massachussee Indian branch of the Wompanoag tribes, who annually summered here for thousands of years. There presence is attested by oral tradition and ancient artifacts discovered in this area. A cache of stone blades were discovered on a Squantum beach in 1961. In 1970, the skeleton of an Eskimo-type dog was found below heaps of shells. The dog’s remains were carbon-dated to 300 AD. Also, the remains of a few native Indians have been discovered here. The sachem Chickatauubut had his summer seat at Moswetuset Hummock in the early 1600s.

Indian legend holds that the god Musquot made Chapel Rocks by dropping rocks from the sky and formed a nearby rock (Squaw Rock) to resemble his wife Squanit. The Indians believed that the goddess Squanit had taught the Indians how to build their wetu (home), as well as how to farm and cook with pottery.
Chronological History of Squantum and Moon Island.

1613 - The Indians in this area were struck by a great pestilence in 1613 that decimated the tribes throughout New England. It was estimated that less than five percent of the local Indians survived. Chickataubut, the sachem of the Massachusee tribes assembled the remnants of his people in the Dorchester/Squantum area.

1615 - Captain John Smith, during his exploratory voyage around Massachusetts Bay, captured twenty-four Indians and took them to Spain where he sold many of them as slaves. Among this group was Tisquanto or Squanto who eventually traveled to England where he received some education and capacity with the English language. Squanto was later returned to New England in 1620 where he was very helpful to the new Pilgrim settlers in their early communications and negotiations with the local Indian inhabitants.

1620 - Captain Thomas Dermer, who had traveled with Captain John Smith in his earlier exploration of New England, returned to the Plymouth area about six months before the arrival of the Pilgrims. He released Squanto back to his home. Dermer was later wounded in a skirmish with Indians while on Martha’s Vineyard and he died of his wounds in Virginia shortly afterwards.

1621 - In the fall of 1621, the Plymouth leaders sent Miles Standish to Squantum to make a treaty with the Massachusee Indians. He took nine soldiers and Squanto with him. The party sailed all night from Plymouth and landed at Squantum in the morning. The area that they visited was known as Moswetuset Hummock where they met the Massachusee Sachem Obbatinewat. The Europeans settlers thought that they persuaded him to recognize the Puritan authority. Obviously, the sachem didn’t have the slightest idea of what it was all about. The Indians had no concept of ownership of land. While the pompous Puritans just presumed that they now owned and ruled this area even though they had just arrived at Plymouth in the previous year while the Indians had lived here for thousands of years. The King of England had given formal charters to the Puritans that indicated that they owned the land.

Although there are many explanations for the name of Squantum, the more likely case is that this area was named after the native guide Squanto by Miles Standish while on this visit. This is how it would have been indicated on any early charts.

1624 - Thomas Morton, of Merrymount, referenced a questionable spring at Squantum whose waters supposedly caused a deep sleep of 48 hours to those who drank 48 ounces, and so on proportionally. Morton also indicated that a Knight of the Holy Sepulcher (Knights Templar), Sir Christopher Gardiner, lived just north of Squantum at the head of a beautiful cove, possibly around Savin Hill. Gardiner was deemed “a person unmeete to inhabit here” by Governor Winthrop and was deported back to England in 1631. Deportation of undesirables was a common technique used by the Pilgrims to get rid of persons who did not agree with their religious morals or who became too much of a competitor for their business endeavors. If you didn’t follow the religious beliefs of the Puritans, you quickly became an outcast. As an outcast, you were not able to survive. The Puritans left their homes in England to avoid religious persecution and became the great persecutor in their new land. In most cases, the Puritans considered the Indians as sub-human and treated them accordingly.

1626 - The first European proprietor of Squantum was a Scotsman named Thompson. David Thompson was listed as an early resident of Thompson Island where he established a trading post where imported goods were exchanged for beaver furs and fish with the Indians. Thompson pastured hogs on this island in the early years.

1632 - The rock at Musquantum Chapel in Squantum was noted as a favored landmark in the Boston Harbor area as early as 1632. The ledges of the rock formed a remarkable profile of a human face similar to the Old Man of the Mountain in New Hampshire.

1641 - On June 2, 1641, by order of the General Court of Elections, Moon Island came under the jurisdiction of the Town of Dorchester along with Squantum, a double-headed peninsula at the mouth of the Neponset River.

There was an old Indian tale of an Indian squaw who threw herself from the cliff in Squantum causing locals to call the rock, “Squaw Tumble,” hence Squaw-tum. Others feel the area was named after Tisquanto, an Indian who first
befriended the Pilgrims. The name of the area has now evolved to be “Squaw Rock” because it resembles the profile of an Indian’s face.

Rodger Ludlow, the Commander of the fort on Castle Island, was listed as the owner of the Squantum area. He was remembered as “a pious gentleman of good family.”

Mr. Newberry, the ancestor of a celebrated geologist, owned Squantum followed by John Glover who established a tannery here and had a large herd of cattle grazing in this area.

1659 – Moon Island was valued at twenty-eight pounds in 1659.

1665 - John Howard was the first recorded owner of Moon Island in 1665. Upon his death, the island was sold to Henry Ashhurst.

1669 - Chickataubut, the head of the Massachusee Indian in this area, abruptly broke camp in 1669 and, accompanied with 700 warriors, marched across Massachusetts to the Hudson River where he led an attack on the stronghold of the Mohawk Indians. The attack did not succeed causing the Massachusee Indians to retreat to back to Stockbridge. On the way, the Mohawks ambushed the retreating Massachusee Indians in the Berkshire Hills and destroyed nearly the entire command. Chickataubut and 58 of his sagamores were killed in the raid.

The remnants of the Massachusee tribe followed Chicataubut’s brother, Cutshamequin, who led them up the Neponset valley to Ponkapoag on the western slope of Great Blue Hill where the tribe faded away into history. The broad Indian cornfields in the Squantum area were quickly occupied by new settlers to this area.

1716 - During 1716, the Squantum area was being considered as a location for a quarantine hospital to receive small pox victims from vessels entering Boston Harbor. The people of Dorchester, Quincy, Milton, and Braintree made such a ruckus that the plan was abandoned and redirected to nearby Spectacle Island. Small pox was a hot health concern at this time because of the many outbreaks of this disease that had caused many deaths. Local inhabitants were very wary of new visitors to the area, especially from aboard ships. Visitors to areas around Boston had to check in with the local officials in order to even spend the night in the area.

1776 - British gunboats chased some Continental raiders from Long Island down Dorchester Bay. One American soldier was killed on Moon Island and the British gunboats cannonaded Squantum Rock while the American militia escaped inland with their booty.

There is reference to a Moon Island Redoubt (fortification) that was authorized in 1776. However, there is no evidence that it had ever been constructed.

1810 – “Squantum Feasts” originated in Squantum sometime before 1810, where, on the beaches and fields of the Squantum peninsula, to the east of the bridge over the “Neponsit River,” a Pilgrim Feast of lobsters, clams, oysters, quahogs, fish and chowder was served to people from all over the State spend the day in social glee and games. An August 10, 1812 advertisement for such a feast read:

“Friends of Old Squantum—in country and town, are notified that the original celebrators of the Ancient Feast will hold its ambrosia on Saturday, August 22, on the old consecrated spot under the superintendence of their respected brother, Walker. All who can bring good appetites and friendly hearts are invited to attend and partake of the fatness of the sea and sand. The wigwam will be pitched at 10 o’clock and struck down at sunset. Clams, fish, etc. at all hours. Chowder at two hours past meridian.”

As part of the Squantum Feast festivities, a Yankee women dressed up as an Indian woman, in blankets and moccasins, and “harangue(d) the people in the metaphorical manner of the Indians.” A man, dressed as a Sachem, presided over the feast and spoke in a mock Indian dialect. The attendees ate their chowder with clamshells, and drank from wooden cups as they imagined the early Indians had done. In 1812, Governor Caleb Strong and Lieutenant Governor William Phillips spoke to about 600 attendees. The Governor came with a military escort. When Commodore William Bainbridge attended, he was accompanied by “the beautiful cutter, Washington that was anchored off the point” and fired salutes throughout the day, making the festivities seem like the 4th of July. Squantum feasts continued each summer into the 1850s.

1850 - Boston’s first comprehensive public health report blames poor sanitary conditions for the high mortality rates among immigrants. The report recommended collecting the sewage instead of allowing it to drain into the harbor. At this time, Boston’s sewerage discharged into drains on the streets from houses and buildings. These drains discharged directly into local streams, bays, and from docks, polluting the sea,
poisoning the air, and leaving the effluent on the flats at low tide, which flowed back around the town docks and beaches on the flood tides. The odors on warm days at low tide were becoming unbearable causing the more affluent citizens to depart; smelly Boston during the summer months.

1878 – In 1978, state legislators approved the construction of the Boston Main Drainage System, which would handle the sewage from 18 cities and towns by pumping it to Moon Island for storage and release on the outgoing tide. The City of Boston began construction of a large 7.5-foot diameter brick sewer conduit from Old Harbor Point (Columbia Point) under Dorchester Bay to Squantum and out to Moon Island under the causeway. The shaft is 150 feet below the surface and a mile and a half in length and took 5,000,000 bricks and 8,000 barrels of cement to construct. There is a small brick building located at the end of the UMASS campus that faces Squantum. This was the location of the sewer system’s pump house. Initially, this pump house was on a long narrow peninsula. The land where UMASS is now located was under water at this time.

Leaving the tunnel, the sewage passed through Squantum Neck and reached Moon Island through another sewer conduit placed under the embankment that was built from Squantum to Moon Island. The sand and gravel needed to complete this project was stripped from Half Moon Island, a crescent-shaped island that was located at the mouth of Black’s Creek in Quincy Bay.

Four huge cut-granite storage tanks with capacity for 50-million gallons were built by the Cape Ann Granite Company on Moon Island. These storage reservoirs were used to collect the raw sewage. The huge vats were formed by digging out the northern section of the drumlin, then, cementing and brickling the excavation on their insides. This reservoir was divided into four compartments, each with four inlets and four outlets. At one end was the gatehouse. The outlets were connected with a power pump and a turbine that was used to open the gates on the outflow pipes. The 12-foot diameter outflow conduit extended 600-feet into the harbor from the northern end of Moon Island.

The original operating plan was to collect the raw sewage into the four storage tanks during the times of high water and, then, to open the discharge gates twice each day, two hours after the start of ebb (out-going tide) to allow the sewage to flow into the harbor. This allowed approximately four hours until slack water. The total outflow time was three to fours per cycle or six to eight hours per day.

The expectation was that the effluent would flow between Long and Rainsford Islands, through the small gut between Gallops and Georges Island in the Narrows, out through Black Rock Channel and Nantasket Roads through the Brewster Island channels to the sea. At best, the aromatic effect on the summer hotels and resorts in the Squantum area was not very positive during the hot summer months.

Unfortunately, as the population of Boston grew and with the addition of more communities to the system, the outflow time wasn’t long enough to handle the supply. It became necessary to discharge the untreated sewerage at longer and longer intervals. When I was a child, the phrase, “Shoveling the s _ _ _ against the tide at Moon Island” was a common term for expressing frustration or futility. Outflow during the incoming tides simply distributed the pollution throughout the inner harbor beaches such as City Point in South Boston and Wollaston Beach in Quincy. As kids, in the 40s, we would swim at City Point. In those days, with gas rationing, the only place to swim were beaches on the streetcar lines. I remember that filthy water of Boston Harbor that was full of all kinds of rubbish and other foul things.

The low-tide clam-flats and beach on the southern shoreline of Moon Island and the Thompson Island clam bar was polluted by the effluent from the sewer overflow.

It is important to note, that the only solution that planners and politicians could come up with for the Boston Harbor pollution problem was to move the effluent discharge further out into Boston Harbor. These solutions always came too late and, upon installation, were not always capable of handling the inclusion of additional cities and towns to the already strained system. Most new sewer projects were obsolete by the time that they were completed. As a simple matter, the pollution continues to this day when, on days of heavy rain, the storm basins overflow the Boston sewers into the Harbor. The major discharge point for sewerage has now been moved nine miles off shore into Massachusetts Bay. The overflow problem continues with work on shutting the catch basin system off from the sewer system in Dorchester. The overflow problem is South Boston may become a holding
tunnel stretching back to the old Calf Pasture area of Dorchester. Being very suspicious, this holding tunnel will be awful close to the old sewer tunnel that still reaches out to the old Moon Island storage tanks. Watch yourself Squantum, it looks like they have you in some future plans for sewer overflows.

1884 - The sewage plant on Moon Island was completed at a cost of $6-million dollars. At the time, this project attracted worldwide attention. The tanks were 900-feet in length and 150 feet in width, they were seventeen-feet deep and about seven-feet thick at the base. The bottoms of the tanks had gutters made of brick and set in the concrete to ease the removal of sludge.

A coarse granite seawall protected the shoreline of Moon Island from erosion on the northeast side and by riprap on the northwest side.

At one end of Squantum, near Thompson’s Island, was the Old Squantum House, which was then converted to a private home of General B. F. Butler.

The development of the Squantum area into a popular summer resort was obviously stifled by the Boston sewer development project. The line of summer cottages already existed in this area and was described “as a miniature Nahant, deep within the recesses of the harbor.”

1889 - The Metropolitan Sewerage District (MSD) was formed to build one of the first regional sewer systems in the United States. The system continued to expand through the early 1900s. The system provided no treatment. It merely collected the wastewater and effluent and pumped it out into Boston Harbor.

1892 - A garbage reclaiming plant was established on Moon Island in 1892.

1909 - Claude Grahame-White flew an airplane from Squantum to Boston Light in 1909. He took Eleanor Sears of Boston up for a ride. She was his first women passenger.

1910 - Squantum was host to the second Aero-Meet held in the United States in 1910. Wilbur Wright and other famous flyers attended this event. President Taft also attended the meet. The featured flyer at this meet, Claude Graham-White offered to take the President for a ride. The 300-pound Taft graciously refused.

Claude Grahame-White won the Harvard Cup for bomb dropping at this meet. This event peaked the attention of the military observers at the meet. He also won the Squantum to Boston Light and back race with a time of forty minutes. After the meet, he flew to Washington, DC where he landed beside the White House. Eleanor Sears was his first female passenger.

Cromwell Dixon piloted his dirigible (airship) at the meet contending for a prize for piloting the airship from Squantum to the State House and back. Dixon mistakenly turned back at the dome of the Christian Science Church and lost the contest.

From the 1910s, well into the 1940s, Squantum was the site of a U.S. Navy air station and a shipyard for the construction of destroyers and submarines servicing two World Wars.

1912 – The 20-year old garbage reclaiming plant on Moon Island was moved to Spectacle Island in 1912.

1919 - Severe pollution from Moon Island caused the closing of many clam beds and beaches within Boston Harbor. The MDC-Metropolitan District Commission took over control of the sewer system from the MSD.

1927 - Dennison Airport was established in Squantum in 1927 in the area now occupied by Marina Bay. Airplanes were coming into vogue during this time. In 1913, Captain Harry Jones flew an airplane from the Saugus Race Track, making a landing on the Boston Common ball field. His made a speed of 45 mph. The importance of this flight was it was the first delivery of air parcel post in the United States. John F. Fitzgerald, grandfather of JFK, used an airplane to advertise his mayoralty campaign in Boston.

1933 - The pollution in Boston Harbor worsened to the point that all clams taken in this area required purification processing before sale or consumption. Pollutions on the Boston and Quincy beaches also worsened.

1939 - A legislative committee finds that Quincy Bay and Hingham Harbor are “revolting” and “in violation of all public health requirements.” Boston and Quincy beaches have been closed due to sewage contamination since around 1890. More than 250-million gallons of raw sewerage was being dumped into Boston Harbor daily creating many polluted beaches throughout the Boston and Quincy area.

1940 - In 1940, State planners recommended the construction of sewage treatment plants at Moon Island, Deer Island off Winthrop, and Nut Island in Quincy.

1951 - On August 4, 1951, Secretary of Labor, Maurice J. Tobin, dedicated the two-lane steel bridge from Moon Head to Long Island East Head.
1959 - The Boston Fire Department constructed a fire-fighting training facility on the northern end of the Moon Island. A concrete building was designed and built to simulate the various roof designs and window shapes found in the City of Boston.

1960 - The Boston Police Department established an outdoor pistol range on the southern side of Moon Island. This facility was jointly used by the Boston and Quincy Police Departments.

1961 - A cache of stone blades were found on a Squantum beach. These artifacts belonged to the early Indians who lived in the Squantum area.

1967 - The Moon Island sewage facility was still operating until 1967, pumping about a millions gallons of sewage from Squantum and Dorchester daily into Boston Harbor. 15-20% of the sludge discharged with the outgoing tides returned near the harbors shore areas with the next incoming tide. The result was that all of the beaches in Boston Harbor and Quincy became severely polluted.

1968 - With the opening of the Deer Island Sewage Treatment Plant, the discharge of raw sewage from Moon Island was put on emergency stand-by status. All sewerage flow from Moon Island was diverted to Deer Island.

1970 - The Squantum Naval Air Station in Squantum was abandoned and in ruins by the 1970s.

In 1970, the skeleton of an Eskimo-type dog was found below heaps of shells in Squantum. The dog's remains were carbon-dated to 300 AD. Also, the remains of a few native Indians have been discovered here. The sachem Chickataubut had his summer seat at Moswetuset Hummock in the early 1600s.

1972 - Federal and state laws mandated primary and secondary treatment for all municipal sewer systems, effectively taking the option for lesser treatment away from the states.

1984 - Due to the extensive pollution on Quincy's beaches, the City of Quincy filed a lawsuit in the state court against the MDC. The Massachusetts Water Resources Authority (MWRA) was created to manage the clean up of Boston Harbor. Judge Troy made a judicial decision that prohibited the attachment of any new buildings or homes to the existing sewer system until a plan was established to solve the sewer overflow problem in Boston Harbor.

1985 - The newly created MWRA assumed control of water and sewer systems from the MDC. Because the level of wastewater treatment assumed by the MWRA was below federal standards, a federal court order mandated the construction of a new wastewater treatment plant for Boston Harbor.

1993 - National Guard bulldozers, with little public notice, began clearing the woods for a firing range that was planned to have lights for night shooting. Outraged local Squantum residents feared that that increased shooting on Moon Island would endanger them or even passing boaters. The Seaside Environmental Alliance claimed the Boston plan was a ruse, indicating that this expansion would affect any plans for use of Moon Island by the public. History has proved them correct because the public continues to be banned from Moon Island and Long Island in 2005.

1996 - The Boston Globe reported that Mayor Tom Menino and MIT engineer Clifford Goudey were planning a program to use the great tanks on Moon Island as a fish farm or temporary homes for tuna and lobster. The prices of both these fish types vary seasonally. The plan was to collect and store fish in the tanks and selling the fish at higher prices when they are out of season. The early confidence with this program faded and the tanks remain empty today.

2001 - Squantum Point Park was opened providing recreational opportunities for birding, fishing, running, walking, canoeing and kayaking, and picnicking.

Recreational Opportunities on Moon Island.

Moon Island is still owned by the City of Boston and it currently not open to the public.

Mosswetuset Hummock (MDC)
Wooded area within a salt marsh with a walkway. Scenic overlook, picnic tables, and free parking. Located on East Squantum Street facing Quincy Bay and Wollaston Beach. There is an arrow shaped mound. The tribal name of the Indians who lived here provided the origin of the word Massachusetts. This tribe sold land to the Pilgrims and the Puritans.

Squantum Point Park (MDC)
Ferry Pier, salt marsh and pebbly beach with picnic tables and free parking. This is a great spot for surf fishing for striped bass at the mouth of the Neponset River. Open year-round, dawn to dusk. Visitors can view the Boston skyline across the harbor and view dozens of species of wild birds at the park. The park was originally
part of the Squantum Naval Air Station and the Bethlehem Shipbuilding Corporation, which constructed destroyers here for the U.S. Navy during World War II.

Directions:
MBTA – Take the Red Line (Braintree Branch) to the North Quincy Station. The park is accessible from the #211 bus route.
By car: Take US 1 South to exit 12, Rte 3A South. Continue over the Neponset Bridge on to Quincy Shore Drive and bear left on East Squantum Street. Turn left and take Victory Road into the Squantum Point parking lot.

Squantum Marsh
Salt marsh for nature study and hiking. Free parking.

Nickerson Beach (Squaw Rock Park)
Rocky outcrop and sandy beach. On-street parking.

Orchard Beach
A Sandy Beach in Squantum for swimming with free parking.

Marina Bay
Largest marina in Boston Harbor with walkway, boat slips and storage, restaurants, bars, condo’s, and fast food shops.

Wildlife on Moon Island
Brown thrashers, songbirds, meadow mice, gray squirrels, skunks, and rats.

Note:
Moon Island / Squantum is a work in process and will become part of a book that will encompass over fifty islands within Boston Harbor—some with rich, long histories, many no longer in existence, and others with brief stories.
You also are part of the Boston Harbor story and I would love to include you in my book. If you have a story to tell, have old maps and charts of the harbor, pictures of places or historical events, or know of any event, business, organization, etc that contributed to the history of this area and should be noted in such a book as this, please let me know.
E-mail me at FLarkin1@earthlink.net or write me at 107 Concord Road, Acton, MA 01720, or call me at 978-263-3023. I am happy to receive any bit of information that helps tell the maritime history of the Squantum and Moon Island area.