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A Short History of Fishers Island

Fishers Island, Long Island and many others were left at the foot of the receding glacier during the last Ice Age. Long before the founding of the Fishers Island Yacht Club in 1886, yachts were sailing at Fishers. The first was the 44-foot sloop *Onrust* in which Dutch explorer Adrian Block discovered the Island in 1614, and named it either for his mate William Vischers, or for the many Indian fishermen he found there.

The son of the founding Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and future governor of Connecticut, John Winthrop Jr., purchased the island from the Pequot in 1644. Winthrop became Connecticut governor in 1657, and ensured that Fishers Island was included in the state's royal charter. But another royal charter granting the Duke of York Long Island and adjacent islands soon complicated ownership of Fishers in 1664.

A joint commission in 1889 finally resolved the ownership dispute between Connecticut and New York. Since then, Fishers Island has been a hamlet of New York, despite its close proximity and later ferry connection to Connecticut.

Fishers can be a stormy place. A U.S. Navy Meteorological study has characterized the lower Thames River as a “hurricane haven” that is such a magnet for bad weather that eighty-four tropical storms, including thirty-two hurricanes, passed within 180 miles of Fishers Island between 1886 and 1996, including the great hurricane of 1938 that could easily have ended organized sailing at Fishers.

Not on that list is the hurricane known as the Great September Gale, which caused one of the Island’s and New England’s greatest ecological disasters on September 23-24, 1815. Most hurricanes blow through in less than twelve hours; this one took forty-eight. First came a day of heavy rain and a brutal north wind. There followed a daylong, vicious southeasterly that had two appalling effects. First, a 17-foot storm surge flooded coastal towns. Second, salt spray thrown far inland turned wells brackish and destroyed thousands of trees, either blowing them over or killing their sap.

The consequences for Fishers Island were visible for almost a century and a half. A panoramic photograph taken from Reservoir Hill in 1910 shows more boats in Hay and West harbors than there are mature trees. Until the 1950s, Fishers had the look of Ireland: stone walls, few trees, and windswept moors. Since then, growth of seeds blown in by the 1938 hurricane has returned Fishers to its pre-1815 foliage.





Today Fishers Island has about 600 homes, a K-12 school, volunteer fire department and post office, about six local contractors; three gift shops, churches and three clubs, two art galleries, pubs and two service stations, one gas dock, café, liquor store, ice cream parlor, craft shop, hair salon, hardware store, boat yard, laundromat, and a seasonal movie theatre and bowling alley.

The year-round population of about 275 mostly works on the island, but a few commute to the mainland. In the summer, the population swells to about 2000. They are unanimous that Fishers Island is a paradise, kept that way by the absence of a bridge to America.

*Based on John Rousmaniere's book **Sailing at Fishers**, published by Mystic Seaport and the Fishers Island Yacht Club in 2004.*

