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Sea Kayaking Narragansett Bay: Native American Footpaths and Soul Freedom

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“Williams(Roger), lacking the resources... got about by canoe, sometimes likely with a sail rigged... Canoeing, even in protected bays meant confronting sometimes breaking surf and routinely strong currents, heavy swells, whitecaps, and wind; occasional exposure to open ocean increased the danger exponentially.” (4; Barry, p. 182.)

Last June, I spent a week in Narragansett, Rhode Island, sea kayaking off the rocky coast and hiking the area's Native American footpaths out of intrigue, interest, and recreational fun. At the close of my week I was able to tour Providence and Newport, which were both the stomping grounds of Rhode Island's founder, Roger Williams.

Roger William's influence as well as the Industrial Revolution, which has its roots at the base of Narragansett Bay, instilled in America the acceptance and freedom to enjoy our leisure and recreation.

Fleeing persecution for his beliefs, Roger Williams fled on foot through snow and bitter cold and survived through the assistance of the Native Americans. Eventually, when he reached the upper bend of a bay he called it Narragansett after its inhabitants. In 1636, he bought land from the Narragansett chiefs at the headwaters of the Narragansett Bay near a fresh water spring which became Providence. The land was once a low, marshy shoreline of a large saltwater cove to the west that had a 7,000-year history of activity by native Americans.
Williams stood in defense of Indian property rights and objected to the high-handed dispossession of the Indians by the British since John Cabot's claiming of the New World for England in 1497. When he published, “Key Into the Language of America,” he hoped to improve communications between Europeans and the Indians. A first of its kind, the book was a sympathetic guide to Indian cultural patterns as well as a phrase-by-phrase translation of Indian language, mostly the Narragansett dialect.

The Puritan settlers of New England came to the New World to establish a society based on a strict Calvinist interpretation of the Bible. Calvin established an autocratic system of government in Geneva in 1541 that was directed by a group of Presbyters, morally upright men who controlled the social and cultural life of the community to the smallest detail. They not only ruthlessly suppressed heretics and burned dissenters at the stake, but were determined to force old codes against play and idleness which led to periods of strict limitations on leisure and recreation throughout many Christian cultures.

Today, not far from Providence, Rhode Island, over 100 beehive-shaped piles of stacked stones (pictured above) are an important historical feature that have been preserved. These mysterious stone cairns, like other unusual stone structures found throughout New England have provoked many questions. As with many activities there are no references to them in the old town records and this makes it difficult to attribute their construction to the last 200 years.

Recently a large field of about 100 rock cairns south of Providence, in Hopkinton, has been an important topic of conversation as a subdivision was proposed that would divide up the property. When asked for his opinion on the matter just last April, Doug Harris, preservationist for ceremonial landscapes and deputy tribal historic preservation officer for the Narragansett Tribe, referred to the cairns as “ceremonial stones” that had been “left by the ancients.” According to Harris, every stone had been placed in prayer and a prayer was spoken into it and placed on the earth and that was to be received by their Mother Earth which in turn would bring balance and harmony to the Narragansett. He also added that it was their church, in a sense, because they have that intimate kind of relationship with the landscape. (6; The Westerly Sun)

A tribal, pre-technological society usually works when it is necessary and infuses rites and customs that lend to variety and pleasure. In the tribal society, work tends to be varied and creative rather than a narrow, specialized task demanding a sharply defined skill, as in modern industry. Ritual often accompanies work that is essential to harvesting, building, or a hunting expedition. Rituals often involve prayer, dancing, and feasting which where all part of their world of work. (9; Jones & Bartlett)
The first weekend of my trip I camped and explored some trails at the Mills Norrie State Park in Staatsburg, New York, along the Hudson River. I also enjoyed learning to use the Greenland paddle and several different types of canoes with Atlantic Kayak Tours.

Robin Read demonstrates her graceful Greenland roll; 6/20/14.

Robin Read and Alan Mapes instruct Greenland paddling classes and lead tours at the Norrie Point Paddlesport Center on the Hudson River. Later, Robin joined me in some canoe classes as well as a few days in Narragansett, Rhode Island, for some ocean sea kayaking.

In 1607, Henry Hudson sailed up the Muhheakantuk (The River that Flows Two Ways) and
met the Mohican people. In 1693, the 4,000 acre tract of land from the Mohicans including Hopeland and the waterway was named Hudson's River. By the close of the 19th century, agrarian estates began evolving into recreational retreats for the wealthy where they enjoyed horseback riding, hunting, fishing, yachting, tennis, and golf. Compared in natural beauty to the Rhine River Valley of Germany, the Hudson River was nicknamed “America’s Rhine.” In 1997 it was designated as one of the American Heritage Rivers.

The American Heritage Rivers Protection Program was created by an Executive Order signed by Bill Clinton in 1997. The recommended rivers were to represent a variety of stream sizes, diverse geographical locations, and a wide range of settings from urban to rural and ensure that relatively pristine, successful revitalization efforts were considered, as well as degraded rivers in need of restoration.

The Industrial Revolution created a reduction of work time which made possible new forms of leisure time (9; Jones & Bartlett). The Blackstone River Valley, also an American Heritage River, meanders for 46 miles from Worcester, Massachusetts, to the mouth at Narragansett Bay in Rhode Island, and marks the location of the beginnings of the American Industrial Revolution.

In 1790, American craftsmen built the first machines that successfully used water-power to spin cotton. Along with scenic water trails, the story of the American Industrial Revolution can still be seen as thousands of structures and landscapes have been preserved for us to see how radically peoples lived had changed during that time. Here we can more keenly see how the force of technology and invention, labor and management, commerce and government, and in lieu of it becoming “the hardest working river” making it one of the most thoroughly exploited and polluted rivers in America, of pollution and recovery affect us today. (10; National Park Service)
Along with canoeing and Greenland paddling, I spent a little time with Greg Paquin. In the picture above, Greg spent some time discussing towing skills he had just learned recently. He also answered my question on how to rig my tow belt so I don't need to purchase a separate short tow rope.

Greg Paquin is the founder of Kayak Waveology and is on staff at Tom Bergh’s Maine Island Company. Paquin is very familiar with the tide races around Fisher’s Island Sound where the annual Autumn Gales Rough Water Sea Kayaking Event offers top notch coaching with coaches from Whales, including Nigel Denis and Phil Clegg.

The Rhode Island paddling following this event included Chicago coaches Alec and Sharon Bloyd-Peshkin who had just spent some time in Whales training with Phil Clegg. The ocean is very unpredictable—which can be very exciting. I usually research my paddle locations as well as the coaches and their motivations before I go so I can see what they are doing during their training to help prepare me. I found the following perspective by Sharon humoring—especially if you are a paddler from the Midwest like me:

Alaska has Denali; Hawaii has Jaws; Oregon has the raging Columbia River Gorge. The Midwest has Lake Michigan, and Midwestern paddlers are tired of dismissive remarks from kayakers on both coasts.... that's why you paddle across Lake Michigan. Because if you have enough skill and you have the right equipment and the weather looks good, you just might make it. And then again, you just might not. Sharon Boyd-Peshkin, Chicago Magazine, May, 2007
I felt a little crowded out at our first surf beach where the group rode two sets of swell that came together, but then I just moved down the beach a little ways and caught a few long rides all by myself and I was good.

Then we paddled along a stretch of rock gardens en-route to Whale Rock Island (pictured above). I was watching ahead of the whole group and focusing on the incoming swell and how often it would come and totally change a safe area to a route that should be avoided. Scott had taken the lead and wove quickly far ahead of the group.

“The primary strategy for paddling in surf and rock gardens involves reading and handling these waves; knowing how to judge them, when to avoid them, and how to handle them when necessary.” John Lull (11)

I watched Scott pass through a narrow area with large, jagged boulders on both sides of it that had been totally covered by wave surge just minutes before he had passed through.
Wondering how long until the next surge, I watched. It took a good 6-7 minutes before that would happen again and it was just in time for Ralph to get pinned by it in total surprise. Fortunately, unlike me, he had taken out his plastic boat that day. As he was repeatedly beat up against the shore-side boulder with no way to bail out. Doug attempted to help but had to roll to get out of the surge safely himself. Next Alec climbed up the boulder from behind but was still unable to get to Ralph until finally the wave surge had ended.

“...getting to more advanced levels doesn't happen by taking courses. ...Judgment on the open sea, surfing, kayaking in rock gardens, 'sea sense,' seamanship, and other important skills cannot be taught in the same way. They depend on experience, and to some extent, a mentoring process."

*John Lull (Soares; 12)*

On our way back we had two students lead the way and they chose to repeat the same scenario expecting the group to follow until they were hit by wave surge and needed to be rescued as well.

Rafting our sea kayaks together en-route to **Block Island**, we took advantage of the wind and a hand-held sail as we paddled out from **Point Judith**. Picture courtesy–Lorrie Rugh.

The late Eric Soares, co-founder of the **Tsunami Rangers**, came up with a **sea conditions rating system** as a way to classify general danger and difficulty on the sea. Wind, fog, water temperature, wave height, surf, and rocks are all rated and for every 20 points the class rating increases by 1; a total score of 40 equals a class II.

Reefs and rocks combined with large waves can present considerable risk when kayaking in rock gardens. Tsunami Ranger and author John Lull writes, “Large surf often requires some miscellaneous danger points added in, due to such hazards as powerful rip currents and steep pitching waves. Most rock gardens rate at least a class 3, especially if breaking waves are present. If the swell is large, most rock gardens rate class 4 or higher, depending on exposure to the waves.” (11; Lull)

Breaking waves will result from swells entering shallow water and you can watch for a pattern in the sizes but swell size patterns are not always so predictable, and trying to time your movements to the smaller ones can be hazardous.

The number of waves in a set can vary, and sometimes there are no sets at all, with swells
arriving in truly random sizes. This situation occurs when a storm creating the swells is close
by, or when the storm is at your location—which would make all of the waves big. The more
distance the disturbance, the greater the time and space for the swells to sort themselves
our into some pattern as they travel.

Even the best defined sets, wave sizes and patterns of arrival are always somewhat erratic.
The swells will look small and then all of a sudden, you get nailed by a big one. On the lower
tides the rocks will cause breakers on almost all swell, but on higher tides, only the largest
swells break. Intertidal rocks, which are the likely candidates for boomers, are marked on
your chart by an asterisk. If you can't locate them just paddle a wide berth and watch for
patches of foam from previous boomers as well as kelp which is a sign of a shallow rocky
area.

Rebecca Merz, Sue Thomson, Robin Read, Lorrie Ruh, Bill Lozano, John Loughlin, and Sharon
Bloyd-Peskin, Newport, Rhode Island; 6/26/14.

This was Rebecca's first ocean experience, but she's had some great surf practice on Lake
Michigan with another Midwestern coach, Keith Wikle, who lives near her in Michigan. Moving
on from her first BCU training just prior this trip she was all geared up to advance on with
several of the same coaches. I enjoyed watching her progress in her skills.

As I began my week of ocean kayaking in Rhode Island I was asking others to help carry my
boat when I felt my back catching again on me—a re-curing injury from last summer from a
non-kayaking event. It turned out that Robin, John, and I were all nursing back or shoulder
injuries during the trip. Whereas my injury was from improper lifting, John's shoulder was
injured by a very large steep wave last year.
Rounding the tip of Block Island.

One night both John and Robin held ice packs on their injuries and I tried some techniques to relieve my lower back pain. Throughout the week, John and I did not always join in and we'd take a rest, and when we arrived on Block Island, after our surprise in doubling the length of our trip, John capsized when he lost balance due to his injury and needed rescue. It's an important call to make when paddling a long day with an injury as to whether or not to go, yet we did not know our trip would turn out as long as it did until we were already halfway through.

Crossing East Passage from Newport Neck to Jamestown with a storm approaching; 6/26/14. Picture by Lorrie Ruh.

The reason the Block Island paddle was unexpectedly almost double in length, 21 nm, was the unexpected boat traffic from the sailboats racing around the island for Block Island Race.
After pausing to weave between them, we chose a landing just behind them and then circled the southern end of the island and up to the ferry dock. It thought it was a great paddle and my back did well although my boat seemed a little off in the following seas which concerned me.

I would find out later that I had paddled the whole day as well as the rest of the trip with my bow filled with water from paddling in the downpour the day prior. I wondered why my boat seemed so heavy. I had seriously thought of replacing it—badly. It wasn't until after I had my boat off my car in Chicago that I figured out why it seemed so heavy. The water in my bow the following day at the Charlestown Breachway, where the current in a constricted area got very strong during ebb tide, didn't effect my balance or my roll “in conditions,” but my back sure needed some rest toward the end of the day. (Charlestown Breachway YouTube).

At the age of 70 Roger Williams rowed 25 miles from Providence to Newport to debate the Quakers. He mistrusted a religion that relied more on “inner-light” than on the New Testament. No Quaker, however, in Rhode Island was ever punished for their beliefs or practices, whereas in Massachusetts some Quakers were hanged. Williams likened Rhode Island to “many a Hundred Souls in one ship.” The captain should punish those who “refuse to obey the common laws and orders of the ship,” but “non of the Papists, Protestants, Jews, or Turks [should] be forced to come to the Ship's Prayers or Worship; nor, secondly, compelled from their own particular Prayers or Worship, if they practice any.” This compelling image of the state’s role would set the pattern for a nation.

In 1643, and again in 1651, Roger Williams journeyed to England to obtain royal charters for his colony. Then, in 1663, he received notification of the King's written word that they would have freedom in religious matters. During his return to secure the charter, and in the context of the English Civil War, Williams wrote “The Bloudy Tenant, of Persecution, for Cause of Conscience.” It was his life's work, and it pushed the conversation about church and state beyond religious toleration to complete religious freedom. Attacking the idea that God gave material blessings or punishments to nations on the basis of their collective obedience to God's will, his book challenged the notion, made popular by John Winthrop and the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay, that Old Testament Israel could serve as a model for modern society.

Termed “soul freedom”—liberty of conscience, Williams challenged both established religion and established government. His theological basis for separating church and state was under the Protestant concept of the Ten Commandments which divided them into the first four that were concerned with the relationship with God, and the remaining six, which dictated behavior toward fellow human beings. He felt that the state or civil authority could have no say in how or whether a person followed Commandments I through IV.

“…our royal will and pleasure is, that no person with the said colony, at any time hereafter, shall be anyway molested, punished, disquieted, or called into question, for any differences in opinion in matters of religion…” Rhode Island State House Charter Museum

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References

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8. Lemons, Stanley. *“Roger Williams Champion of Religious Liberty”.* Providence, RI City Archives.
9. Jones & Bartlett Learning, *“Early History of Recreation and Learning.”*
12. Ibid, p. 179.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
"Had an amazing Sunset Sea Kayak Tour around Horseshoe Bay on Magnetic Island. Craig was full of info about island life on and off land. Truly fascinating. A beautiful paddle around the bay with the bonus of seeing the sea turtles. Highly recommended." – Jenny W., TripAdvisor. "Wonderful afternoon". "Greg was amazing guide and we got to see sea turtles in the wild feeding on sea grass and small coral reef. The sun set was stunning and was the best way to end a magical day. Thanks for a great afternoon." – Kim O., TripAdvisor. "A great introduction to sea kayaking trips in the stunning Bay of Islands, New Zealand's marine paradise! Explore the islands, see marine life up close, paddle under a waterfall or enjoy a camping adventure... Enjoy great weather, magnificent scenery and white sand beaches...... This is the best sea kayaking to be had in New Zealand. Small groups and real adventures is what we do! We are proud to say looking after our manuhiri (guests) and our whenua (land) are our number one goals while offering you an unforgettable and safe adventure in the Bay. It is our mission to show you a piece of true Aotearoa (New Zealand) with yo An ongoing photo essay of
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