WAMPANOAG CANOE PASSAGE

For more than 10,000 years, Native American Indians, known today as Wampanoags, lived in the area today known as southeastern Massachusetts. They fished, hunted and canoed on the lands and waters between Boston and Providence, including Cape Cod, Martha's Vineyard, Nantucket, and the Taunton River.

The tangled growth of great forests provided a natural shelter and home to the Wampanoags and their beloved animals. The Native American Wampanoags lived in peace and harmony with nature. The arrival of the strangers from across the sea though, changed their lives forever.

The Wampanoag's chief sachem, Massasoit (Woosamequin), was among the first to greet the Pilgrims. He was a diplomat and peace-keeper. Massasoit was succeeded by his two sons. The eldest, Wamsutta (also called Alexander) died under mysterious circumstances and his body was returned to his people over part of the water route which is now called the Wampanoag Commemorative Canoe Passage.

Wamsutta's younger brother, Metacom or King Philip, served as the leader until he was killed by colonial troops under Captain Benjamin Church in the Great Swamp Fight near Mouth Hope in Rhode Island in one of the bloodiest wars in the history of the United States, King Philip's War. The same water route is believed to have been used by Captain Church to return Philip's body to the Plimoth Colony as a war trophy.

The Native Americans helped the Pilgrims to survive. But the newcomers adapted English lifestyles to their new world. Indian ways were rejected and the Pilgrims tried to force their culture on the Native Americans. A great rift in philosophical conflict of how the Native Americans used the land for survival and how the Pilgrims saw the land as a means of wealth, brought lasting conflict.

With the establishment of the Wampanoag Commemorative Canoe Passage, recognition is given to the Native American Indians for their contributions to the beauty of the environment of southeastern Massachusetts along the Taunton River.

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The Wampanoag Commemorative Canoe Passage is a water trail that twists and turns for more than 70 miles along river, marsh, brook and pond from Scituate on Massachusetts Bay to Dighton Rock State Park as the Taunton River flows into Narragansett Bay.

The water trail is one formerly used by the Wampanoag Indians long before the Pilgrims came
to America. It was re-established by the Plymouth County Development Council and local officials as an educational and recreational opportunity for all ages.

The route includes a number of portages (where the canoe must be carried across land). There is easy access to the passage at many points.

The passage is divided into three sections of nearly equal length. The first section travels from Scituate to Pembroke ending at Little Sandy Pond. The second extends from East Bridgewater to Middleborough, ending at Camp Titicut and the third from Raynham to Berkley, ending at Dighton Rock State Park.

To cover the entire route, it would take three to five days, so it can be explored a section at a time in day or half-day trips. Explorations by scouting groups and conservation leaders have led to the charting and reopening of this historic inland passageway. From the beautiful and unpolluted North River, which snakes its way through a broad valley of rushes and reeds, to narrow brooks where the paddler must watch for over-hanging branches and underwater beaver dams, the passage is a beautiful and pristine gift.

Paddling conditions vary along the route. At times there is white water along the Taunton as it starts its run to the sea. In drier seasons, the water levels in some of the streams are so low that the canoe will barely glide along. There is a tidal section of the river at either end of the passage and tide charts must be consulted before attempting journeys in these sections. The high point and drainage dividing point is at Little Sandy Pond in Pembroke. To the North, the drainage and current flow to the North River and out to Massachusetts Bay. South of this point, the flow is to the Taunton River and Narragansett Bay.

Below are maps and descriptions of each section of the canoe passage. Please note! You should always obtain permission before crossing private land. A careful check of tidal conditions is mandatory at either end of the passage to ensure a safe and enjoyable journey.

The Wampanoag Canoe Passage runs for more than 70 miles from Scituate on Massachusetts Bay to Dighton Rock State Park on the Taunton River as it flows into Narragansett Bay.

Maps were reproduced from the Wamponoag Canoe Passage Brochure, published by the Plymouth County Development Council. P.O. Box 1620, Pembroke, Mass 02359

Much of the material for the passageway description was furnished by Professor Thomas H. Clark of Northeastern University Graduate School of Education.
Section 1a: Near the mouth of the North River to Route 53 (14 miles)

Water conditions at the mouth can be treacherous. It is best to begin at the Route 3A bridge at the Marshfield/Scituate line. Easy access is available at either of two boatyards, one on each side of the river. The river is tidal to the Herring Brook in Pembroke and the upstream passage should be made on an incoming tide. Tidal charts should be checked carefully. High and low water times at the mouth of the river are nearly the same as those at Boston but the upstream high and low water times are several hours later.

As the river starts into the interior, it is a wide channel bordered on both sides by deep marshes. Motorboats are over this area during the warmer months. The first upstream bridge is at Union Street, Norwell, with access at the town landing.

Just above the bridge there are some boulders in the river bed (a Class 2 hazard on a scale of 1 to 5 with 5 the most difficult). Plaques mark the sites of the old shipyards. Historians believe that more than 1,025 vessels were built in more than 15 years from 1678 to 1871.

After the boulder hazard, the canoeist shortly comes upon Blueberry Island in the marshes to the left on the Marshfield side. It is the first good camping area of the trip. The river broadens here as it meanders through a marshy wilderness and soon passes under busy Route 3 (the Southeast Expressway). In a few miles, there is a commercial access at a marina on the south bank of the river in Pembroke, just before Robinson's Creek.

The river snakes its way from here on up to stone bridge (Old Washington Street) and the Route 53 bridge at the Hanover/Pembroke line. Good access can be found here on the right-hand bank, including one at Pantoosett Farms just upstream from Route 53.

Section 1b: Route 53 to Little Sandy Bottom Pond (5 miles)

Formed by the confluence of Indian Head River and Herring Brook, the North River starts about a mile upstream from Route 53. There is a short passage up the Indian Head to excellent access at Elm Street in Hanover. The main route goes southerly via Herring Brook, a freshwater stream alongside a cedar swamp. The brook is narrow, sometimes pinching down to the width of a canoe.

The next access is at Pembroke's Herring Run Park, where each spring schools of herring run for the spawning grounds of upstream ponds. The first portage (overland carry of canoe) of the trip is also here, across Route 14. The first 50 yards are especially tough going -- against brush, logs and large stones in a narrow brook. Soon the waterway widens into a marshy meadow.

The next portage is over a steep embankment at Mountain Ave. Next comes a shallow channel across cranberry bogs to a portage around a dilapidated grist mill on Mill Pond which features excellent pickerel fishing. Follow the culvert under Hobomock and Mill Street via a sluggish, shallow stream to another portage at Center Street. Right away, there is another portage around the herring ladder leading up to Furnace Pond. Then paddle
across the pond in a westerly direction to a dirt road near the shore.

Next is the longest portage of the trip (0.9 miles) along the east bank of Great Sandy Bottom pond, a town water supply, and a cranberry bog to a launch site on a private beach at Little Sandy Bottom Pond. Permission is required.

The vertical lift from the mouth of the North River to the point is 65 feet, the highest elevation of the passage. After a paddle across Little Sandy, the drainage and current flow is southerly to Narragansett Bay. The first step is a portage across Route 27.

Section 2a: Little Sandy to Robbins Pond in East Bridgewater (8 Miles):

This stretch begins with a 0.4 mile portage over a cranberry-bog service road and dikes to Stetson Pond. Next comes a portage over railroad tracks into inches-deep Stetson Brook. It is usually necessary to portage around Columbia Bog and then paddle through a half-mile of dense cover. The growth is high and wide on all sides. This wilderness brings the canoeist to the twin Monponsett Lakes, the largest bodies of water on the passage. A culvert under Route 58 connects the two lakes. As an alternative to paddling the full length of both lakes, there is a portage route from the seaplane base on the East Lake to the shore near the restaurant on West Lake. From there paddle to the northwest.

From West Lake into Stump Brook, the passage is wild and remote. To the right is an extended wetlands area, the Peterson Swamp Wildlife Preserve, with a large variety of birdlife. There is a portage over a concrete dam in Stump Brook until the two stump ponds are reached. This entire area is swampy.

There is a carry-over at Elm Street in Halifax and another at Furnace Street, where permission is needed. As an alternative, you can pull the canoe through a culvert with a two-foot drop. Then travel through the swamp reservoir to Robbins Pond. Cross the pond by keeping Osceola Island on the left to arrive at the Satucket River.

Section 2b: Robbins Pond to Route 495 in Middleborough (25 miles):

If the water level is too low at the Pond Street culvert, a portage is required. Then head down the Satucket River. Half a mile on the journey, there is a portage to the left of a willow thicket that obscures the entry on the right of Poor Meadow Brook. Double-check at this point to make sure the canoe is going downstream with the current.

Travel under the Washington and Bridge streets crossing and past Phillips Wildlife Refuge. Here the river runs down the center of a cow pasture. Just above the dam at Route 106 is a low wooden dock on the left. Up a short path is a fresh-water spring.

Portage over the dam by the bank or around the Carver Cotton Gin Factory. The river now flows between two well-defined banks. Several downed trees block the passage. Each is a minor portage. Downstream, in East Bridgewater, the passage turns into the Matfield River and now has a wide, sluggish flow. Approaching the confluence of the Town and Taunton rivers, there are transmission lines to pass under, and a hard-to-see turn into the Taunton. The canoeist should bear to the left. The last portage of
the passage is at a dam and spillway by Route 104. Approach cautiously on the extreme right and carry the canoe down the fish ladder.

The Taunton River is a broad, well-developed stream with a smooth-flowing current through farmland. Soon after Short Street, the Winnetuxet River joins the Taunton's flow. The next bridges are at Auburn and Summer Street, adjacent to the Bridgewater Correctional Institution. Four miles downstream, the Nemasket River empties into the Taunton. A side trip here leads to the former Tuspaquin Village and Wampanoag Royal Burial Ground, a National Historic Site.

At the Titicut Street bridge, there is a Class 2 whitewater hazard. The canoeist should pass in the center under the left span, a good access point. Next comes the Routes 18-28 bridge. From here to Route 495, the river is rocky with several whitewater spots requiring caution.

Section 3: Route 25 to Dighton Rock State Park (20 miles):

From here, the Taunton has a broad, majestic quality. It is deep and has steep banks bordered by thick woodlands. At one time at the Church Street bridge, there was a Class 3 hazard located here which was removed when the Church Street bridge was rebuilt.

The preferred passage is on the right. By East Taunton at South Street East, the river becomes tidal. There is access with a parking area available just north of the bridge on South Street. There are a number of factories along the riverfront -- a good example of pollution cleanup. Twenty three pipes jut into the river that no longer discharge into the river. One factory building just past the bridge has been converted to a condominium complex. This section of the river above Route 24 offers many scenic areas with little development. A variety of birds, turtles and other wildlife may be seen.

The river meanders under Route 24 and then parallels Route 44. The banks screen the canoeist from much of the urban sprawl. There is good access to the river via an inlet that runs up to near the back of the McDonalds restaurant. Municipal facilities, pumping stations, schools, factories, and residential areas are along the river banks through Taunton.

The river passes under Route 140, a railroad bridge and the Plain Street Bridge before passing the Weir Village Riverfront Park and the water pollution control plant on the right. There is also good access on both sides of the river with parking available at the park on East Water Street near the Berkley Street and Plain Street intersection.

After the Three Mile River joins the Taunton River in Dighton, the passage gradually broadens and deepens. It is bordered by a far-reaching tidal marsh. The last bridge is at Center Street. The end of the passage is at Dighton Rock State Park, marked by a monument building. If wind and tide are favorable, the canoeist can go the tip of Assonet Neck.

Narragansett Bay and Fall River are downstream, but it is open water exposed to the prevailing southwest winds and not suited to canoeing.