



WALKING TOUR OF THE HEAD OF WESTPORT

The village at the Head of Westport gets its name from its location at the head of the tide of the Westport River—the furthest upstream that the tidal change can still be experienced. Once known as Acoaxet Village before Westport became an independent town, the village is now simply The Head.

For untold centuries this area had been inhabited by Wampanoag people drawn to its forests and access to the river. Along with Westport Point, the Head was an important village well before Westport separated from Dartmouth in 1787. The earliest known European settler was Richard Sisson, who moved his family from Portsmouth, Rhode Island in 1671. Their homestead, about a half mile south on Drift Road, was burned during King Philip’s War (1675-76), but the family escaped. After the war, more settlers moved in, attracted by the cheap farmland and religious tolerance of Dartmouth, which drew many dissenting Quakers and Baptists.

Industrial development began about 1700. The streams to the north were harnessed for water power that drove grist mills and saw mills, and the local bog iron was processed in a forge that featured a water-powered trip hammer. This industrial village caught the attention of New Bedford whaling entrepreneur William Rotch, Jr., who purchased the forge and adjacent mills in 1795 to supply timber, iron products, and ships for his maritime enterprise. There were shipyards on both sides of the river, with stores, taverns, and lots of activity. The Head was a busy and boisterous place—especially on launch day which was a drinking party for the locals.

As whaling declined after the Civil War, the Head became less industrial, but still an active commercial center. Beautiful homes of sea captains, maritime agents, and store owners were built in the nineteenth century, and the Head became more residential. The coming of the automobile in the early twentieth century led to the demise of the stores—why shop locally when there were fashionable department stores in nearby Fall River and New Bedford?

The Head is a quieter place now, but retains much of its nineteenth-century charm. We hope you enjoy your tour of this historically significant part of Westport.

PARKING:

The best place to park is at the Bell Schoolhouse, 25 Drift Road.

The Head is a busy place, so please watch out for traffic.

Except for the Bell Schoolhouse, all of the houses in the tour are private residences. Please respect the privacy of residents.

Start your tour at the Bell Schoolhouse.



#25 DRIFT ROAD

The Bell School was built in 1841 in the latest Greek Revival style. It was one of twenty school houses that dotted the town in the nineteenth century. The second floor was converted to a library in 1909 while the first floor was Alumni Hall, used for concerts and social events. Since 1974 the schoolhouse has been the home of the Westport Historical Society.

Cross the street to the south end of the Town Landing, and walk toward the gate of the “Stone House” at **#42 DRIFT ROAD**.



There have been several houses on this site, including one that the Sisson family moved to after King Philip’s War. A later one (c. 1790) belonged to John Avery Parker, a businessman whom the Selectmen regarded as a potential pauper who would rely on town welfare, so he was asked to leave Westport. Within a few years, Parker was the wealthiest man in New Bedford!

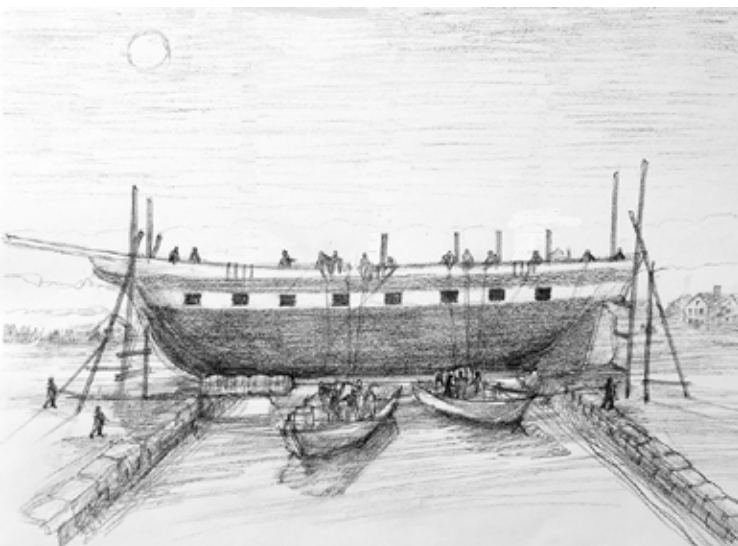
Humphrey Howland built the stone house in 1830 from locally quarried granite. Note the crenellated stone wall—not at all typical of Westport. The gazebo in back of the house is new, but fits in beautifully with this lovely and unusual Greek Revival.



Shipbuilding at the Head of Westport, drawing by Ray Shaw

Walk along the **TOWN LANDING** with the river to your right. This land was set off by the town of Dartmouth in 1712, before Westport became a separate town. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the landing (on both sides of the river) was a very busy place, with shipyards, a saw pit, harness shop, blacksmith, cobbler, and a temperance hall.

As you walk along the river, note how the river has been channeled to a narrow stone-lined canal, which aided the busy maritime activity and boat building. Early on, the vessels built here were sloops and schooners for cod fishing; later the emphasis was on whaling. Five whaling vessels were built at the Head between 1805 and 1828. The *President*, built by Andrew Hicks in 1815, went on 26 whaling voyages. The last whaler built at the Head was the *Thomas Winslow*. On its 33rd voyage, the ship was lost at sea. The captain and six men drowned.



Floating hulls down the river, drawing by Ray Shaw

Note the cuts in the stone walls on either side of the river, allowing for boat launching, and perhaps for horse and buggy crossing at low tide. Across the river is the site of the old fairgrounds, an indication that the Head was the social and commercial center of town well into the 20th century.



Walk to the **BRIDGE**. A bridge has spanned the river here since at least 1790 (the current one was built in 1966). In the nineteenth century there were two large stores, one on each side of the bridge. On the east side was George A. Gifford's general store (1889), later called Shorrock's. On the west side was Peckham & Howland's clothing store, dating from 1821.

Old County Road is a busy cross town road. Once called Rhode Island Way, it connected New Bedford and Cape Cod to Howland's Ferry in Tiverton, and on to Newport.



Walk east across the river to **#493 OLD COUNTY ROAD**. Once the Head Garage, a car dealership and auto repair shop (c. 1900), and a blacksmith shop, the building is now being renovated as the home of the Westport River Watershed Alliance. This was also the site of a harness shop, a tailor, and a shoemaker.



#497 OLD COUNTY ROAD

Shipbuilding partners Lemuel Milk and John Avery Parker built this house in 1795. Note the graceful Georgian entryway. There was once a tavern in the ell in back, later uses as a physician's office by Dr. Thomas Richmond.

This is a poor place to cross the road, so from here look across the street and to the right.



#504 OLD COUNTY ROAD

This Second Empire house (c. 1870) was built for J. L. Anthony, who was very successful in retail businesses and whaling. The Anthonys had owned houses on this lot since the eighteenth century, and parts of a 1720 house were used for the ells in back.



#498 OLD COUNTY ROAD

This three-quarter Georgian house was owned by Captain John Gifford, who evaded the British Navy to smuggle goods to the Patriots during the Revolutionary War. The house also served as an inn, and for many years there was a coffin shop and funeral business in the barn.



#496 OLD COUNTY ROAD

Another Georgian (c. 1800) was originally owned by William Cornell, and later sold to Abner Gifford, a lawyer, justice of the peace, and member of the Massachusetts Legislature. The ell in back, originally a separate house, was relocated from Drift Road.



Cross the street (*please use the crosswalk*)

The **TOWN LANDING COUNTRY STORE** is located on the site of J. M. Shorrock's store.

#480 OLD COUNTY ROAD

This building was once Washingtonian Hall, built on the town landing by the Washingtonian Temperance Society in 1841. The Washingtonians faded in the 1850s as other prohibitionist groups gained popularity, and the building became a cultural center (Riverside Hall) and later David Allen's ice cream shop. It was moved to its present location by an owner who, ironically, converted it to a tavern known as "The Landing." It is now a private home.



#476 OLD COUNTY ROAD

This relatively new house (1930s) was constructed from parts of the old Gifford-Kirby store that once stood in the triangle across the street.



#472 OLD COUNTY ROAD (corner of Gifford Road)

This 1842 Greek Revival was the home of Christopher Church, a prominent businessman, store owner and member of the state legislature. Church tried to whip up enthusiasm for the Civil War by offering bounties to Westport men who enlisted in the army.

Cross to the **TRIANGLE** (*please use the crosswalk*)

The **TRIANGLE** is town land where there was once a house, store, and barn. The house was moved to the northwest corner of Gifford and Old County by Joseph Shorrock in the 1890s. In the middle of the triangle is the **POWDER HOUSE**, built just after the War of 1812 to store powder and shot for the Home Guard. Originally on the East Landing, it was moved to its present location by the Westport Historical Society in the 1970s. The Powder House was restored in 2017 with the help of a Community Preservation grant.



From the Triangle, look west to the house on the corner.

#469 OLD COUNTY ROAD. This 1795 home was also a tavern, and served as the first Head of Westport Post Office, in 1818.





Walk up to Drift Road (this is an active street, watch for traffic)
Note the two houses (**#3 AND #5 DRIFT ROAD**) that are about two feet apart. We don't know why the houses were built so close—it was certainly before modern zoning regulations!

#3 DRIFT ROAD (c. 1805) had a store in the basement, which was later used by Mr. Wings, a black cabinetmaker.

#5 DRIFT ROAD (c. 1795). Note the tin roof on this and the adjoining house. The story goes that a tin roof salesman lived at the Head and convinced several of his neighbors to install them. There are a few in other parts of Westport.



#11 DRIFT ROAD (c. 1818). In the 19th century Wilson Wing manufactured hats here. An early historian of the town noted: “you can get any size or style from bell top to low crown and regular Quaker hats all stiff brims and guaranteed not to provoke discipline.”



#15 DRIFT ROAD (c. 1830). This Cape was the home of Charles Chase, one of the last whaling captains in the area. He was well known among the youth of the Head into the 1930s and 40s for his exciting tales of whaling. In the nineteenth century the house was owned by Captain Jonathan P. Tripp, who carried coal to New England from Chesapeake Bay ports in his four-masted ship *Marguerite*. The captain's son, Louis Tripp, with his wife Eleanor, bought and preserved the Handy House, now owned by the Westport Historical Society.



#17 DRIFT ROAD. The northern section of this house was built about 1740, making it the oldest still standing in the village. It was the home of Aaron Childs (“a gentleman of color”) who entered the second floor by means of an external ladder.

END AT THE BELL SCHOOL. Please stop in if the Historical Society is open to view the current exhibit.

While you are in the area, you might want to take a short drive up Reed Road to visit the historic cemeteries or take the trail down to the river at the Mill Pond Conservation Area, owned by the Westport Land Conservation Trust.

We hope you enjoyed your tour of the Head. This walking tour was created by the Westport Historical Society, 25 Drift Road, Westport, MA 02790. **WWW.WPTHISTORY.ORG 508-636-6011**