

# Transportation to Westport Island – *How to Get There from Here*

(History text derived from “Westport Island, Maine, 1605-1972” by Cora Tarbox, 2011)

## Introduction

Of course, being an island, Westport Islanders required a water crossing to come and go. Through history, many methods were used, or tried, until the bridge we all take for granted was dedicated in 1972. This is a brief history of “How to get there from here”.

For thousands of years, Abenaki families traveled to “Jeremysquam” in the spring by canoe from their inland winter villages. When European settlers arrived, they arrived by boats, which was the only mode of transportation until well after the Town of Westport was founded in 1828. Westport separated from Edgecomb largely due to displeasure that island residents had to travel, by boat, to mainland Edgecomb, where the meeting house was located. That travel requirement caused residents of Jeremysquam Island to petition for separation so they could have their own meeting house, with no traveling off island required.

After town formation, residents endeavored to establish a bridge or ferry service to the mainland. After debating a bridge or ferry, in 1847 a 1,350-foot long wooden bridge was built to Woolwich. Lasting to 1893, the bridge was then swept away by ice floes on the Back River. This was followed by scheduled steamship service and then the ferry service located at what is now Wright Landing. In 1950 a gravel filled causeway was built across Cowseagan Narrows just below the current bridge. Finally, the current bridge was constructed in 1972.

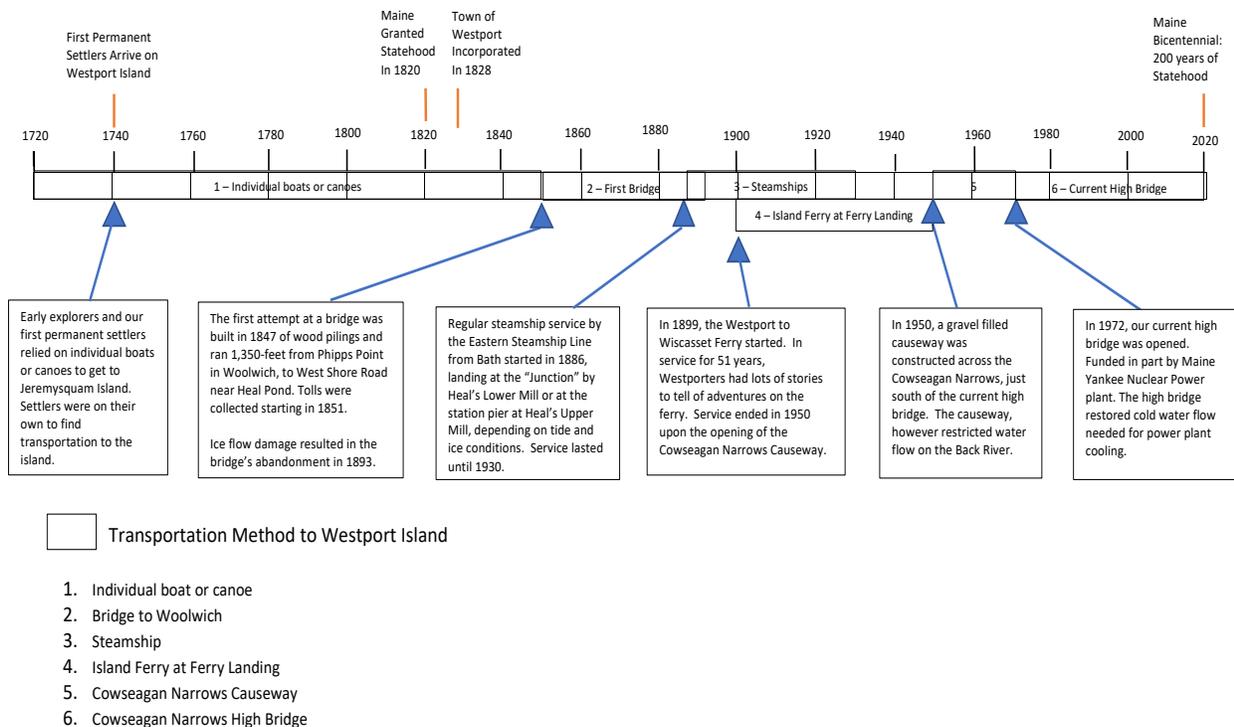


Figure 1 - Timeline of Transportation to Westport Island

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### 1. Individual Boats and Canoes

Until the first bridge was built in 1847, transportation was by individual boat or canoe. Abenaki natives traveled to Jeremysquam by canoe for harvesting fish, digging oysters and clams, hunting and harvesting salt grass for baskets. When Europeans started to settle, they came by coastal schooners, shallops, or dories. Boats were the only option.



Figure 2 - Abenaki Visited Seasonally by Canoe



Figure 3 - Early European Settlers Came by Shallop

### 2. The First Bridge – Bridge to Woolwich and the “Ferry or Bridge Debate”

As early as 1838, a group of prominent members of the town started a movement to establish a bridge from Westport to Wiscasset or Woolwich. Shipping activities had moved from Wiscasset to Bath. Trade with the West Indies had reopened in 1828 and 8000 tons of new and expensive vessels were registered in Bath in 1832. Each year new businesses were started attracting customers from neighboring communities. Transportation up the Sasanoa by sail by Westport residents was difficult at times.

Their first step was to ask the town to make a donation of \$100 for the purpose of erecting a bridge across the dike at Squam Creek. The town agreed on September 10, 1838. The next step was to grant a road “running from John Hodgdon’s north line at a certain place on said line to the Dike Bridge free of expense to the town.” Mr. Shaw and others, who lived at the north end of the island, were seeking a method to travel off the island. In 1844 a petition was sent to the Lincoln County Commissioners proposing a ferry be allowed across Cowseagan Narrows from the land of Joseph Rines on Westport to the land of John Young in Wiscasset. Rines had already constructed a boat suitable as a ferry. They wanted the county to erect a road from the ferry landing to the main road on Westport and a suitable road on the Wiscasset side to the County Road from Wiscasset to the Sagadahoc Ferry. (This was the new ferry across the Kennebec to Bath.) They also claimed that the Cushman Ferry at Parsons landing was not suitable for them.

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A meeting was held at the home of John Young in October 1844 to discuss the right of way across his land. An agreement was reached. The plan for a road across Joseph Rines property, edging the land of Simon Cromwell to the main road on Westport, was agreed upon.

On January 1845, the petition was recorded and twenty four months were allowed to “open and make said roads.” “Eighteen Months were allowed to pay the land owners.” The town clerks of both towns were notified.

The rates for the ferry:

- I. Carriage drawn by one horse, 25 cents and additional horse 8 cents.
- II. Each wagon or cart with one yoke of oxen, 50 cents, each additional oxen 25 cents.
- III. Each sheep and swine, 2 cents.
- IV. Each foot passenger, 8 cents, for horse and rider, 15 cents.

Mr. Rines was required to have two substantial boats, one for passengers and one for carriages. The petition had also stated they did not want any other ferry allowed north of their ferry landing property. James McCarty had purchased a 4½ acre lot just to the north of the ferry landing lot and sold it to the town in 1836 for \$59.50. He had considered it a good site for a bridge crossing. The tide through the Cowseagan Narrows proved to be too strong for the wooden pilings that would have been used. It is doubtful he would have chosen a ferry, but the new ferry owners wanted to be assured of no competition.

The bridge developers were interested in the narrowest crossing of Montsweg Bay between Westport and Woolwich. Samuel Tarbox still owned the 1.5-acre lot on the Woolwich side. John Hodgdon’s lot was on the Westport side. Samuel Tarbox and others applied to the Legislature of the State of Maine for the establishment of a company to build the bridge. The company applied to the Lincoln County Commissioners for a road from Moses Jewett’s north line to the proposed bridge and a straight road through the land of Andrew Tarbox on the Woolwich side.

The petitioners and all interested persons were notified to meet at the home of Andrew Tarbox on April 20, 1848 to view the projected roads. The Town Clerks of Westport and Woolwich were notified. The meeting was advertised in the Northern Tribune of Bath and the information posted in public places in both towns. After deliberations, all parties met again on May 1, 1848. It was decided to accept a road from Thomas Knight’s property east side of the Dike Bridge, along the property line of James McCarty to the proposed bridge, north through the land of Andrew Tarbox, Frank Wright and others.

On June 12, 1848, Westport voted to “raise a Committee of three to see what sum of money will be necessary to build a new county road and bridge”. Samuel Tarbox, James McCarty and Ezekiel Tarbox were chosen as a committee. The first attempt to raise money was by auction. This was rejected. The next was to raise \$300 for the road and bridge, then \$200 was added to be raised. This was not enough. Another vote added \$50.

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Unfortunately, the voters did not want any further expense to the town for roads and refused to accept a road from the Shattuck Mill to the new county road. Nor would they accept a bridge across the pond at the Shattuck Mill. All other roads accepted by the town would not be at the town’s expense.

The county commissioners received another petition from Thomas Shattuck and 36 others concerning a road from Shattuck Mills to the new county road and bridge. The bridge across the Shattuck Pond to a road extending to the new county road would allow all residents along the present West Shore Road and Post Office Road to reach the new bridge. A bridge was eventually built across Shattuck mill pond and lasted until 1947 when it collapsed. The town then voted to fill the spillway with large rock and fill for a road.

Other petitioners in Woolwich requested a road from Murphy Corner, on the new county road, to the home of James Gilmore be included as a county road. The petitioners were notified to meet at the home of Andrew Tarbox on April 26, 1849. All roads by the petitioners were accepted July 10, 1849.

In the meantime, John Hodgdon petitioned the commissioners through his lawyer that the damages to his property would be far greater than what he had been awarded. The south line of James McCarty’s property was actually the property of Andrew Dunton deceased. McCarty was a trader and he was holding the property until a buyer was found. The new county road passed over John Hodgdon’s property as recorded in town records.

The construction of the Westport to Woolwich Bridge began in 1849. The town voters were still debating the town’s contribution in 1851. The money that was raised had to come primarily from the company. The company sold shares at \$20 each. Forty-one shares were taxed to persons on Westport in 1849. These shares produced interest by dividend of \$12.50 in 1852, \$4 in 1860 and \$0 in 1861.

The constant cost of maintenance may have offset the income from toll fees. The length of the bridge was 1350 feet in length and the final cost of construction was about \$6000. The first toll

keeper may have been Charles Newdick, husband of Emma Mary Kehail followed by Thomas Bailey, J.

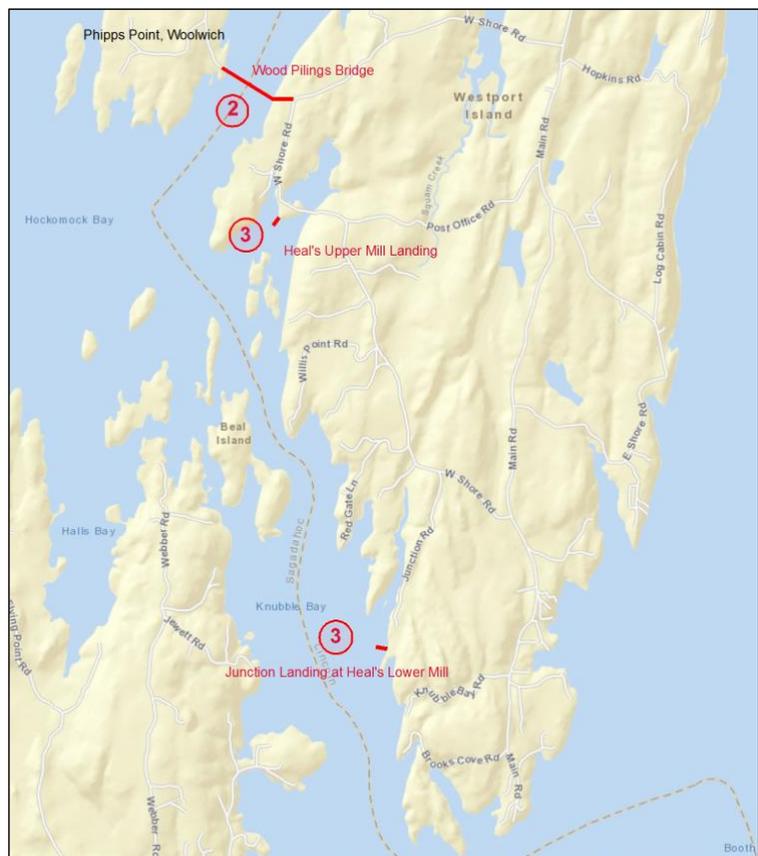
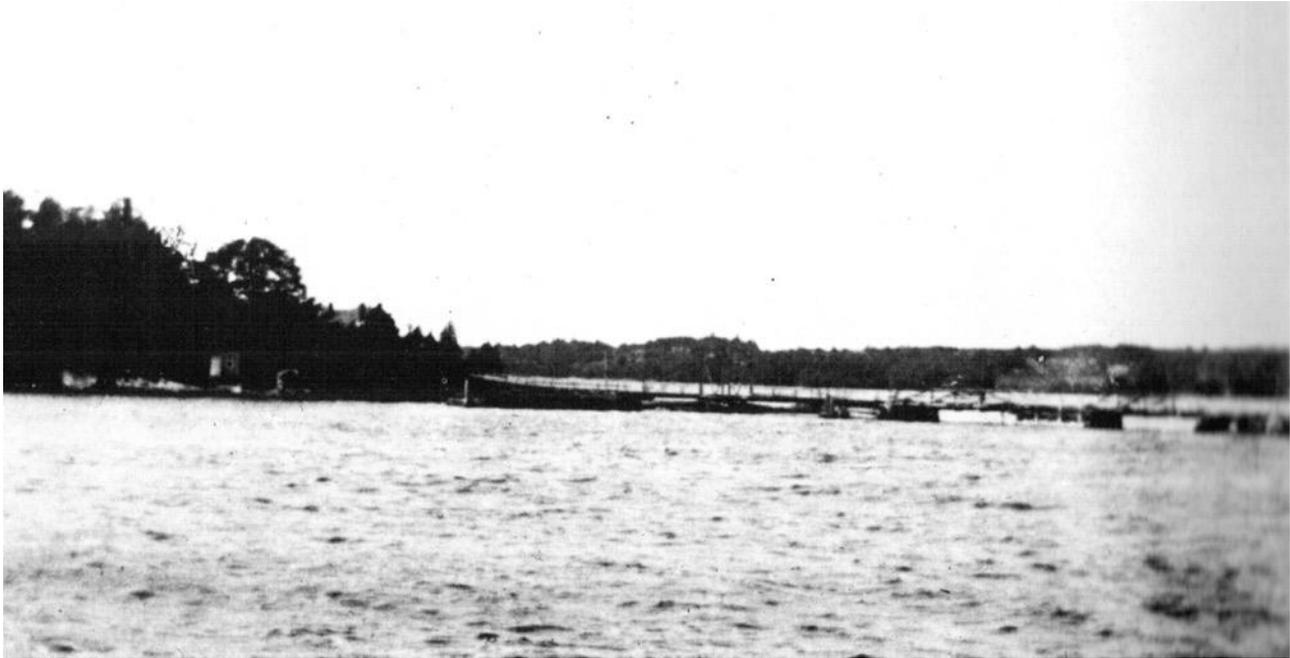


Figure 4 - South End Transportation Sites

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Higgins who lived on the Woolwich side and Stephen Tarbox, who worked for the town of Westport as the last keeper.



*Figure 5 - First Bridge, From West Shore Road to Phipps Point in Woolwich*

The town voted March 15, 1869 to purchase the bridge and repair it by raising \$1000. They also voted to lower the toll to 25 cents. The ice formation in the winter caused many problems. The hand driven piles collected ice around them in the winter. When the tide increased during the spring, the ice would push against the pilings. The winter of 1892-1893 was the most destructive. A large ice jam knocked out part of the bridge. At the March annual meeting, the question arose, should the town repair the bridge or abandon it and clear the obstruction. There was no conclusion. By November 6, 1893 at another meeting they were still discussing repairs or to raise \$4000 for a new bridge by issuing town bonds at the lowest rate of interest for 10, 15, or 20 years “to locate the bridge from Ruckley’s Point to Turner McKinney’s shore.” They met again the same month and voted not to build a new bridge. The remains of the old bridge had to be auctioned off for disposal. Phillip W. Day won the bid for \$20 and a piece of rope.

### **3. Steamboat Transportation**

The need for transportation from Augusta, Maine down the Kennebec to Bath and Boston began with the establishment of a ferry service along the river. This service was provided by sailing vessels until the steam engine came into use. The Kennebec Steam Navigation Company was formed in 1824. Two vessels were built which were similar to sailing vessels, “one deck, square stern, two masts and a copper boiler with a primitive engine connected to paddle wheels.” Wood supplied the fuel for the small engine, and the sails provided the necessary power on open water. This company went out of

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business four years later. These steamers were suitable for freight but not for travelers or businessmen.

Several steamboats were built and provided ferry service between 1840 and 1854. These were stern paddle wheelers. Excursion trips developed about 1850 between Waterville and Boothbay on the *Clinton* built at Gardiner with George Jewett as Master. It stopped at many towns along the Sasanoa River, but there was no indication that Westport was included. This was the first opportunity for travelers from Boothbay to reach Bath in comfort for travel to Portland and beyond by the new Kennebec and Portland Railroad. When the Kennebec and Portland railroad was extended to Augusta in 1850, it provided transportation for most of the business passengers, and freight.

Captain G. A. Lowe established the first steamboat “pleasure” service on the Sasanoa from Bath to Boothbay. The *Rival* was reported to be a fast sailing vessel carrying 25 passengers stopping at Georgetown, Westport and Southport. “Passengers will be called for at any point on the route by signaling with a white flag.” The landing location for this particular ferry is not mentioned. The Eastern Steamship Company was incorporated in 1869. Their first successful steamer, actually built in 1866, was the 21-ton *Spray*, which carried 60 passengers leaving Boothbay, arriving at Bath in time for the noon train for Portland. This provided service for both pleasure and business. It stopped in Riggsville (Georgetown) where passengers from Westport could board. The *Spray* was replaced with the *Samoset* in 1873, a one hundred fifty passenger vessel.

The first reported landing at Westport was 1877. Prior to this date a wharf may have been built at the end of Junction Point on the Sasanoa River. This was just to the southwest of the Heal Mill.



Figure 7- Waiting for the Steamship at the Upper Landing



Figure 6 - Waiting for the Steamship at “The Junction” (Lower Landing)

Passengers, freight and mail were unloaded and shifted to small boats to be transported to another landing near the mill. Later a road was built to extend from the end of Junction Road below the Howe property to the pier.

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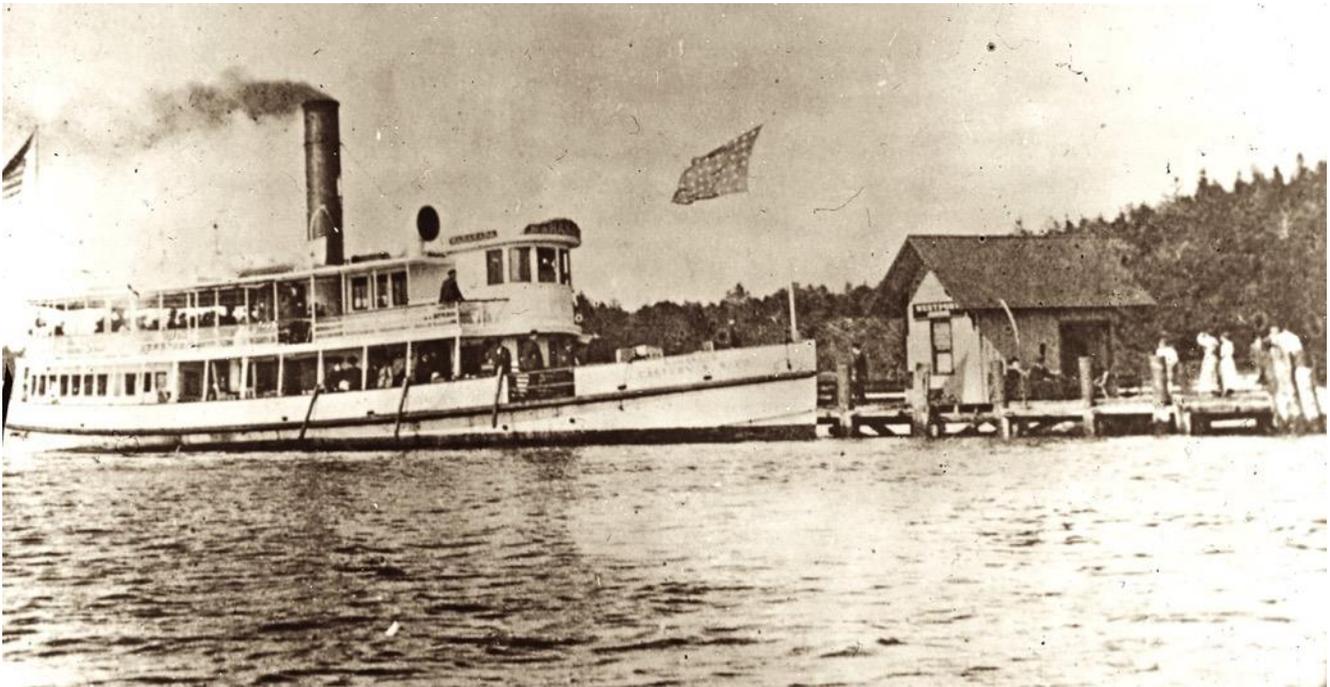


Figure 8 – Nahanada Arrives at Lower Landing

The *Samoset* sailed from Boothbay to Wiscasset during the winter months to connect with the Knox and Lincoln Railroad. She was sold to the Maine Central Railroad about 1884 to join the fleet of ferries that sailed between Bar Harbor and Hancock Point. The commodore for this fleet was Edgar Dickson (a.k.a Dixon), who had grown up on Westport. He may have received training on the *Sebenoa* built for the Eastern Steamship Company in 1870 and was one of the first of the larger steamers to join that fleet.

The *Wiiwurna* became the new ferry on the Bath to Boothbay route in 1884. She was followed by the *Nahanada*, which ran between Boothbay and Wiscasset in the winter. Both of these vessels were shallow draft and therefore could land at a long-extended pier at upper Heal Cove near the Heal Shattuck Mill. The piers were maintained by the company at a considerable expense. Susan Greenleaf, who lived near the upper landing at the Heal Shattuck mill, reported that the pier had given way April 28, 1913.

The *Winter Harbor* was added by the company in 1890 and sold to the Independent Steamship Co. in 1906. They used her for the Boothbay to Wiscasset route. The *Island Belle* was purchased by the Eastern Steamship Company in 1899. She had been built for usage on the Great Lakes and sailed on the Bath to Boothbay route which extended the season for steamships on the often ice bound Sasanoa River.

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The Kennebec Navigation Company started in 1921 using the *Wiiwurna* on the Bath to Boothbay route. Captain Ross Dickson was the master. He was the son of Edgar Dickson and was born and raised on Westport. The automobile came into increased usage in 1926 with the improved roads and the Carlton Bridge from Bath to Woolwich in 1927.

“The steamships *Westport* and *Southport* were built in 1921. Their size and draft were too great for the Bath to Boothbay route. They were transferred to the Mount Desert and Penobscot Bay runs to Vinalhaven until 1934 according to Roger F. Duncan, a noted Boothbay Historian.

### **4. The Island Ferry to Wiscasset** (History text from “Westport Island Maine, Once Jeremysquam”, compiled by John and Louise Swanton)

In 1899, the Westport-Wiscasset Ferry was established; and on June 10, 1908 John Cromwell received his captains license.



Figure 9 - Celebrating the New Ferry Service to Wiscasset

Starting at today’s Wright Landing at the end of Ferry Road, the ferry traveled about 850’ across the Back River narrows to the Wiscasset shore, connecting to Old Ferry Road. A steel cable ran between the two landings that guided the ferry. The cable ran over two stanchions at waist height located at either end of the ferry and the ferry operator manually pulled the ferry across using the cable as shown in in Figure 10. It could hold two average sized cars. Sometimes three. Sometimes even a truck! Here is how Verlie Greenleaf described the ferry, as she recalled it (in 1986):

*"I saw the first automobile come on the island, and I wish I knew the day.*

*We had our first ferry when I was eight years old. It was a flat-bottomed scow which took two cars and*

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*was pulled across the river by a wire cable. The cable was attached to iron posts on each side of the river. On the one side of the scow were wheels on rails called "gins" which the cable went through. First it was pulled by hand. Then they used a motor boat to push it across. They did not make regular trips.*

*The boat was kept on the Westport side – [the] ferryman lived there also. When you got to the landing you blew your horn. He would take you across. Blow your horn if you were on the Wiscasset side and he would come and get you. The ferry was established in 1899."*

In the summer of 1946, Dewey Richardson was crossing, when a truck loaded with cement and brick attempted to board behind him. Dewey's car and the truck's engine became partly submerged. A wrecker had to be called to haul the truck out of the river and the ferry then proceeded to deliver Dewey's car to the island.

With the advent of boat motors, in later years, a skiff would raft to the ferry to help drive the ferry across the narrows.



Figure 10 - Westport Island's Ferry Landing and Jetty (Circa 1900)

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Figure 11 - Ferry Arrives in Wiscasset (See Westport Ferry Landing on Far Shore)

This ferry was in service for fifty-one years, and all who used it, and that means everybody who crossed to Westport by car, has memories. Some of the memories are vivid:

- *Dropping off the loading ramp into deep water.*
- *In the wintertime, ice piled up on the shore so the ferry wouldn't reach the land.*
- *Home from the movies at 10:02 p.m., and the ferryman has quit for the night.*
- *On Sunday evening you have to get back to work after a weekend on Westport and there are 11 cars lined up waiting to be ferried across.*



Figure 10 - North End Transportation Sites

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Figure 11 - Closing the Ramp and Ready to Set-off. (John Cromwell, Ferry Operator)

- Teresa Richardson reported this story (she was on the ferry):

“It was on a Saturday afternoon in September or October of 1946. We were on our way home after a shopping trip to Wiscasset. We were the first vehicle on a two-car ferry to Westport. Behind us was a Wiscasset lumber truck loaded with cement and bricks! It was low tide and the rear wheels on the truck spun on the gravel making it impossible to board all the way. Also, the driver was unable to back off. The tide was coming in and the wrecker was late in arriving.

Rines brothers finally came and pulled the truck back off. As the car engine was thoroughly wet with sea water, Dewey



Figure 12 - The Richardsons Experience a Sinking (George Jr., 10, on the Truck Cab Roof)

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was in a hurry to get the car back to his place to get the salt water out of his engine. We climbed in Luther’s boat – 10-year-old George, Diana and Dewey and myself, and the ferry slipped out into the middle of the river. When the wire (caught) all of a sudden, we submerged several feet under the water and then the wire snapped and we bounced right back up again! It sure was scary for a few minutes!”



Figure 13 - Luther Cromwell Prepares for Landing (Luther Lived in the House by the Landing)

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Figure 14 - Loading at Ferry Landing on Westport Island

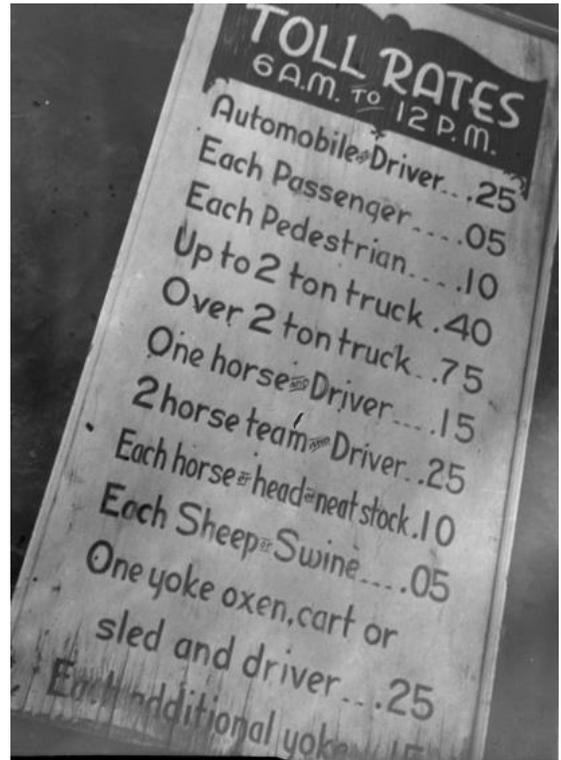


Figure 15 - Ferry Rates to Wiscasset



Figure 16 – Eager Deck Hands Make Ready for Departure

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### 5. Cowseagan Narrows Causeway- The 1950 Bridge

The islanders decided enough was enough. ***They needed a bridge!***

An effort to establish a new bridge began in 1946. More and more residents had found jobs off the island and crossed to Wiscasset via the ferry. Students were transported to Bath for high school. There were no stores on the island and other business had to take place off the island. Jobs at Bath Iron Works increased tremendously during the War. Gradually summer cottage owners returned, which increased the traffic on the ferry.

The river between Cushman Point and the Eaton property on the north end of the island was 570 feet in width. The banks on both sides were high. In the Fall of 1946, the engineering firm of Fay, Spofford and Thorndike was hired by John Swanton Jr. and his father to make a preliminary survey in cooperation with State engineers to determine the construction cost for a bridge over these “Narrows”. The initial estimate by the state was \$450,000.

A group of residents under the name of the Westport Improvement Association, raised a sum of money and hired Mr. Jason Thompson of Southport as an agent to approach the State Legislature regarding the possibility of getting a state financed bridge. Mr. Edward B. Denny, the State Senator from Lincoln County, became interested in the project. A traffic counter was placed at the ferry in July for six days and another one in October to determine the number of ferry users. The tax valuation for the town was another problem. It reached \$51,160 for residents and \$83,635 for non-residents. A meeting was held January 1947 with all interested parties. The State Highway Department engineer stated that there were insufficient funds for the project.

It was proposed that an act of the State Legislature to create a district that would have the power to issue bonds, employ engineers, construct and operate a toll bridge should be the next step. A bill to accomplish the foregoing was introduced by Mr. Denny and passed in April 1947. A five-man commission was established consisting of Edwin Cromwell and John Swanton of Westport, Dr. Di Perri and Harry Mosher from Wiscasset. The chairman, Mr. Edward Denny was appointed by Governor Horace Hildreth.

Several financial organizations were contacted, but they considered the number of island residents and the town property value to be insufficient for bonds. Mr. George Hinman, a contractor from Westbrook, Maine, said his firm could build the bridge for \$300,000. Mr. Denny took the information to the Legislature.

Authorization was obtained from the U. S. Army Engineers. Bonds were sold with the aid of Brewster Doggett and Lincoln County guaranteed the interest on the bonds. Work began in August 1949 and was completed on May 1, 1950. The bridge was actually a causeway composed of stone fill with a steel span of 60 feet covered with cement resting on concrete abutments.

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The cost did not cover the approaches to the bridge. Mr. Francis Eaton of Westport donated two rods of land as a park on either side of the Westport approach and Maine State Highway Commission appropriated \$25,000 toward the approach on the Wiscasset side. The town of Westport donated \$10,000.



*Figure 17 - Gravel Causeway Under Construction*

Special invitations were sent for the dedication and official opening of the bridge held on June 25, 1950. The invitations allowed the guests to cross the bridge in the dedication parade. Tolls were instituted which continued for five years. The 55 cents collected covered expenses, but not the bonds themselves. The suggestion of a toll increase to cover the bonds was not well received. In fact, the toll did not set well with the residents or visitors. The State Highway Commission agreed to take over the expenses.

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Figure 18 - Ribbon Cutting for the Westport Causeway Bridge

Inez Denny, the wife of State Sen. Edward Denny cut the ribbon officially opening the causeway bridge connecting Westport Island to Wiscasset and mainland Maine.

The cutting of the ribbon was the signal for a parade of motor vehicles and pedestrians to cross the new bridge. The "parade" was led by the Dunlap Commandery Band of Bath (now the Bath Municipal Band).

The causeway cost about \$100,000 less than a bridge with steel spans would have cost to cross Cowseagan Narrows, the channel where the Westport Causeway was constructed.

An opening under the roadway was constructed with 75-foot steel beams allowing a 30' horizontal clearance and adequate water flow for small boat traffic. Navigation by water required skill because of swift and erratic tidal flows.

Pictured l to r: John Swanton, Jennie Cromwell, Edwin Cromwell, Congressman Charles P. Nelson, Inez Denny, State Sen. Edward Denny (Damariscotta), State Highway Commission Chairman Lloyd Morton, (unknown), Brewster Doggett.

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Figure 19 - Causeway Bridge, Opening Day Parade of Cars

### **6. Maine Yankee and the New High Bridge**

The causeway/bridge was a problem solver for Westport commuters and visitors, but it brought forward new problems. The bridge was not sufficiently high or wide enough to accommodate the passage beneath it of many pleasure boats, particularly sail boats that required height clearance at high tide. Wormers who collected worms for fish bait on the many mud flats around the island found flats less exposed at low tide.

The reduced flow of water through Back River from the causeway caused an increase in temperature to the waters of Montsweag Bay. This presented a problem for Central Maine Power Company, who wanted to use the waters of the bay as the source of cooling for a new nuclear power plant. The power plant was planned to be erected on the Wiscasset side of the “narrows” near the old ferry landing. The high heat created by the nuclear reaction demanded a strong flow of cooling water. The proposed location for the plant offered tremendous business opportunities for the whole area, so there was strong interest in finding a solution to the cooling problem.

One of the possibilities of solving this problem would be to put a tunnel through Westport from a small cove opposite the site of the plant, across the island to Rum Cove and the Sheepscot River. This would allow cold water from the Sheepscot River to flow through the tunnel to the plant. A strip of land was purchased by the power company that crossed the island. The tunnel plans were soon discarded when cost estimates increased beyond expectations. The only alternative to increase flow of water was to remove the causeway and build a new bridge.

The new, or present, bridge was built along side of the short bridge and causeway. It was completed in 1972 as the power plant was underway. The causeway and small bridge were destroyed and removed.

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Figure 20 - High Bridge Across Cowseagan Narrows Opened in 1972

The promise of a new era began with an increase in property values and new jobs at the power plant. Sub-divisions were created for large sections of island property, and major development of land parcels for new homes, both seasonal and year-round, resulted in a growth of population from 228 in 1970, per the Census, to 420 in 1980, and a current high of 745 in 2000.

State Route 144 showing the bridge over Back River and linking Wiscasset to Westport Island. (Photo courtesy of PHIL DI VECE/Wiscasset Newspaper)



Figure 21 - Route 144 and Westport Bridge Today