

Historic Waterfront

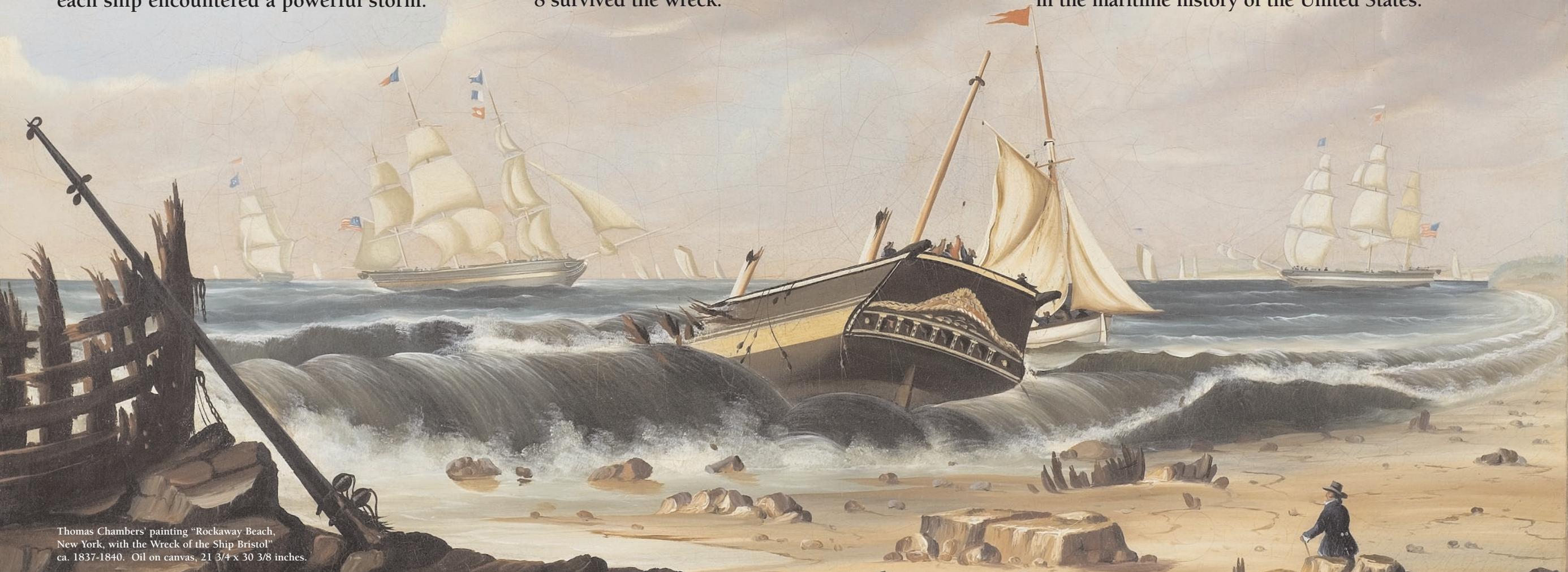


Tragic Ocean Shipwrecks off East Rockaway

Two merchant ships, the *Bristol* and *Mexico*, set sail from England for America in October 1836. Loaded with cargo, they also carried poor Irish and English emigrants, who endured the harsh Atlantic Ocean crossing in dreadful quarters. The ships arrived within six weeks of each other at the treacherous entrance to New York Harbor, but no harbor pilots were on duty to guide either ship safely into port. Forced to wait overnight in the open ocean, each ship encountered a powerful storm.

Disaster struck the *Bristol* when it ran aground off Rockaway Beach on November 21. The *Mexico* wrecked on Long Beach 42 days later. Heroically, men from East Rockaway and the nearby area launched surfboats into the violent seas to rescue helpless victims, as women tended to survivors on shore. Aboard the *Bristol*, 100 people drowned and 44 lives were saved. Many of the 115 people who perished on the *Mexico* froze while clinging desperately to the ship's rigging and each other; only 8 survived the wreck.

Deeply moved by the disasters and as a tribute to the lost souls, citizens established the Mariners Burying Ground in present-day Lynbrook. The deceased did not die in vain. Paintings, poetry, and newspaper reports of the tragic wrecks raised public awareness about the dangers of ocean travel. Public outcry prompted improvements to onboard passenger conditions, lifesaving capabilities and harbor navigation. The wrecks of the *Bristol* and *Mexico* remain among the most horrific disasters in the maritime history of the United States.

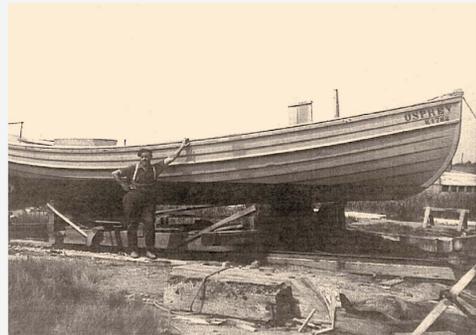


Thomas Chambers' painting "Rockaway Beach, New York, with the Wreck of the Ship Bristol" ca. 1837-1840. Oil on canvas, 21 3/4 x 30 3/8 inches.

Historic Coasts



Bounded to the south and east by West Bay and Mill River, East Rockaway is defined by coastal waters. Until the late 1800s, traveling overland was slow and arduous—a bone-jarring stage coach ride from East Rockaway to Brooklyn took six hours, and early trains traveled little faster. Waterways were the region’s main highways. Native Americans traveled in canoes carved from massive tree trunks. Settlers built wide, flat-bottomed packet boats to gather shellfish from West Bay. Until the 1870s, sailing vessels regularly carried goods through Hog Inlet (now East Rockaway inlet) to and from markets in New York City.



Maritime Heritage

Long before this village was named East Rockaway, it was known as Clinktown, a name that recalls its boatbuilding history. The name came from a construction technique known as clink-building. When siding the hull, boatbuilders used long, overlapping boards held fast with nails that were “clined” or bent on the inside of the hull.

In 1836, two of the worst shipwrecks in Long Island history occurred off nearby Long Beach. Villagers buried 139 of the 215 victims in Lynbrook’s Old Sand Hole Cemetery and erected a monument to them, known as Mariner’s Grave.

Boating Today

Talfor Boat Basin has a long and rich seafaring heritage. Restoring this public boating and fishing area helps ensure that community members and visitors can continue to enjoy this tradition. Although commercial shellfishing and freight boats no longer crowd East Rockaway’s waterways, recreational boating remains a central part of village life. Sailboats and motorboats dot West Bay. Sea kayakers explore the bay’s islands and inlets. Contact local marinas for information about boat rentals and charters.



Top, Left: E. Rockaway, 1920/E. Rockaway Historical Society.

Top, Right: Sunfish race in Hewlett Bay/John Baroni.

Right: E Rockaway Waterfront, 1898/E. Rockaway Historical Society.

Historic Waterfront



If you stood here in the mid-1800s, you'd be in the heart of one of the South Shore's busiest seaports, then known as Near Rockaway. Behind you, horse hooves clattered along the dirt street as farmers hauled grain to Haviland's grist mill, a block downstream. The din of hammers and saws drifted across the mill pond for Davison's lumber yard, just across Mill River from here. Downstream, schooners sailed toward West Bay, bound for New York City with shellfish, flour, bread, and beeswax. Others tied up along Dock Street to unload coal, apples, molasses, and dry goods.



Grist Mill and Bakery

In 1688, Joseph Haviland built a tidewater gristmill on Mill River. A year later, he erected a public oven nearby. Farmers throughout the region came here to grind grain, bake breads, and ship goods to market. Once a hub of village commerce, the gristmill now serves as a historical museum in Memorial Park. Don't miss it!



Iron Wheels of Change

Though the Long Island Railroad improved overland travel, its arrival dealt a two-fisted blow to East Rockaway's economy. Completed in 1869, the Montauk Branch moved commerce three miles north to Pearsall's Corners, now called Lynbrook. Soon after, the Long Beach Branch causeway closed Hog Inlet to seafaring traffic, ending East Rockaway's seaport days.



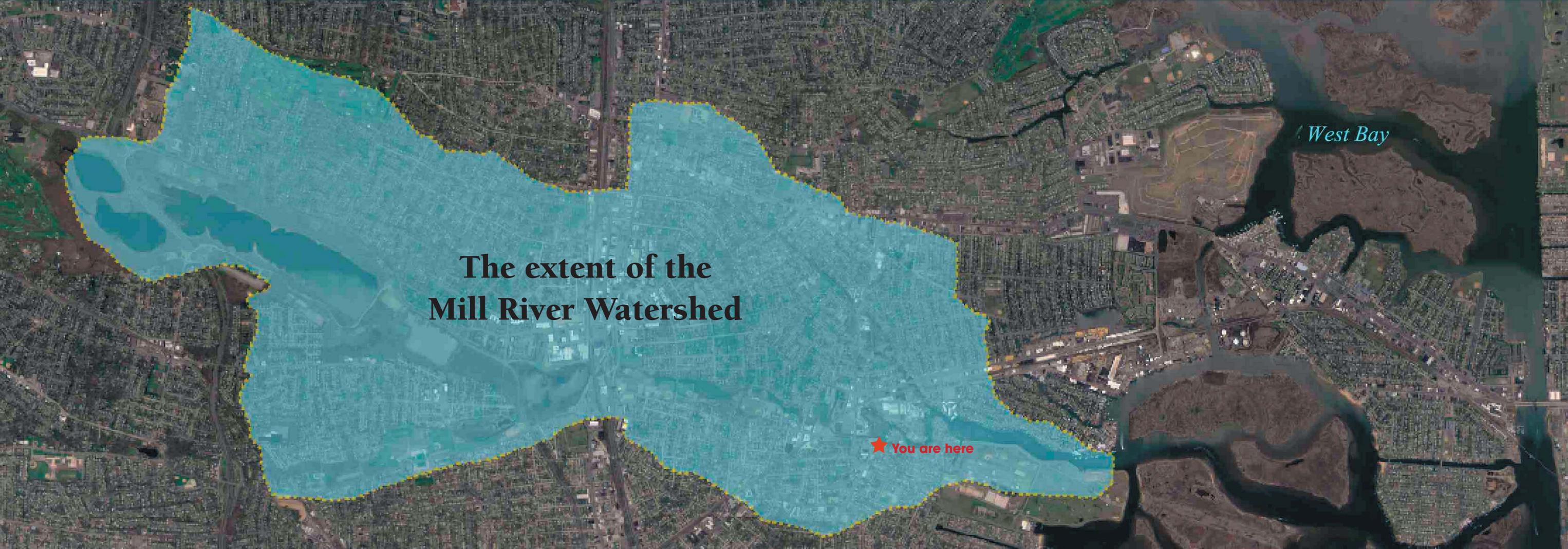
Rockaway's Early Inhabitants

People have lived here for thousands of years, drawn to the remarkable abundance of land and sea. Algonquians knew this land as Rockawanahaha, or "sandy place." Traveling by dugout canoe, they caught fish and shellfish, gathered wild plants, and grew crops. In 1657, local tribal leaders signed a deed transferring land ownership to settlers.

Top: E. Rockaway Waterfront/E. Rockaway Historical Society.

Bottom (l to r): Grist Mill/E. Rockaway Historical Society; Railroad Depot/E. Rockaway Historical Society; Early Inhabitants/Garvies Point Museum.

Natural Waterfront



The extent of the Mill River Watershed

One of 106 tidal creeks that flow into the South Shore Estuary Reserve, Mill River carries fresh water from its source in Hempstead Lakes State Park. In East Rockaway, the river mixes with tidal salt water, and just downstream, it opens into the salt marshes and mud flats of West Bay. An astounding spectrum of aquatic plants and animals occupy these varied habitats. Here in Talfor Basin, osprey plunge, feet-first, into the water—and sometimes rise gripping a fish. Herons hunt, statuesque, near shore. Dozens of gull and waterfowl species frequent Mill River—how many can you see?



Home Away From Home

While many of Mill River's fish live here year round, others, like river herring and white perch, live in the ocean most of the year, then return to coastal tributaries to spawn. American Eels do the opposite—they spend most of their lives in coastal rivers, then return to the ocean to reproduce.



How's the Fishing?

On the public fishing pier across from you, anglers catch snapper, weakfish, and fluke in summertime. Bluefish linger into early winter, and anglers hook striped bass year-round. Spring and fall are the best seasons for flounder fishing. Dip your net for crabs in late summer and fall. You'll find gear and advice at local bait and tackle shops.



Help Keep It Healthy

Today, polluted stormwater runoff poses the greatest threat to the health of Mill River and the South Shore Estuary Reserve. Fortunately, this is a problem that people working together can solve. Homeowners can reduce stormwater pollution by bagging pet wastes, limiting the use of pesticides and fertilizers, and properly disposing of hazardous chemicals.

Protecting the Waterfront



In the early 1900s, this waterfront was the heart of community life in East Rockaway. Shellfishing packet boats tied up along the docks, laden with oysters and clams. Oyster floats dotted the marina, where baymen stored their catch before sending it to market. Businesses lined Dock and Front Streets.

By the mid-1950s, the shellfishing industry had ended, and the waterfront fell into disrepair. In 2000, village planners launched the Waterfront Revitalization Project, which restored bulkheads and installed the boardwalks, fishing pier, gazebo, and floating docks you see here. This restored waterfront creates a vibrant community gathering place and boosts the local economy.



Healthy Habitat, Healthy Communities

Restoring the South Shore's ecological health goes hand-in-hand with waterfront revitalization. Some 1.5 million people live within the 500-square mile South Shore Estuary Reserve, which stretches from the Queens/Nassau County line to the village of Southampton. Human activities have taken a significant toll on the estuary habitats of countless plant and wildlife species. Established in 2001 by the New York legislature, the South Shore Estuary Reserve exists to protect and restore these habitats which, in turn, sustain the economies and maritime heritage of South Shore communities.

Top, Left: Egret/South Shore Estuary Reserve (SSER).
Top, Right: Wetlands Restoration/SSER.
Far Right: E. Rockaway, c. 1900/John Bishop.

Enjoy and Protect

The fruits of coastal revitalization surround you. Cast your line from the waterfront's renovated fishing pier, or charter a fishing boat and test the waters of the Western Bays. Consider renting kayaks to explore the bay's inlets and salt marshes. Bring your binoculars and watch for birds and other coastal wildlife along the way. You can help protect the South Shore estuary. The South Shore Estuary Reserve Office in Freeport welcomes volunteers to help Reserve partners with their many stewardship projects, from storm drain stenciling to wetlands restoration. Please contact the office at (516) 470-BAYS or www.estuary.cog.ny.us to learn more.

