

VILLAGE VIEW

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Fair weather flying provides a view of Earth otherwise unattainable; when aloft over familiar territory it's easy to recognize features of the land below, but once beyond well-known areas or lacking outstanding landmarks, pinpointing location is difficult; over a strange landmass or the ocean, knowing where you are requires navigational skills.

Seen from the air, the most striking thing about the land between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains is a checkerboard pattern. Nearly every highway goes either directly north/south or east/west, forming huge squares, each containing one square mile (640 acres). The roads were laid out to follow lines drawn by government surveyors mapping the country after the Louisiana Purchase in 1803.

Ignoring the contours of the land, streams and wetlands, these roads march, military-fashion, from horizon to horizon.

In sharp contrast, especially during seasons when leaves are off the trees, is the experience of flying over New England; not only do roads and highways twist and turn, often following shorelines and river banks, but the hand of man is also to be seen in the miles and miles of stone walls. What an enormous labor these stone fences represent! Years and years of effort went into their construction. In some northeastern states, before the Civil War, a slave could earn his freedom upon the satisfactory completion of seven miles of stone wall!

The walls are rarely straight; instead, like New England roads, they follow the contours of the land. More particularly, they often delineate where now abandoned old roads or "ancient ways" tracked across the countryside.

Before Europeans came to settle New England, and before Indian tribes wandered the hills and valleys east of the Appalachians, many of the paths traced by the stone walls we see today were already in existence. They were made by the animals, the deer, the bears, the foxes and wolves, the big cats, the small bunnies and raccoons living in and roaming the forests.

If you've spent much time in dense woods, you know animal trails can be quite distinct and are often the only way through otherwise impenetrable underbrush. If unleashed dogs run in your neighborhood, you know they always pass through a hedge at its weakest point and soon create a gap that defies closing by the most vigorous plant.

When the Indians arrived on this continent from Asia, they used the animal trails. After landing on our eastern shores, Europeans, too, traveled those paths. The ones they found convenient were widened to accommodate a horse and, finally, a horse-drawn wagon.

Eventually some of those roads were paved. In seaside New England villages like Osterville, many roads were originally paved with shells. As recently as the 1920s, Bay Street, West Bay Road, Bridge Street, and the section of Parker Road between West Bay Road and Main Street were shell paved. Whenever a fresh load of shells was brought up from the shore, dumped on the road and spread over the surface, the result was not only odiferous, but bred millions of flies.

Today many of the old roads in Osterville are either little used or have been entirely abandoned. There remain, however, visible vestiges of these ancient ways. Stone walls, a line of large old trees, or, possibly, three ruts, faint but clearly present, disappearing under the low branches of

thickets, tell the story. A horse-drawn wagon created two ruts; the third was made by horses' hoofs.

Certain characteristics help identify old roads; some, or parts of some, are still in use in an around Osterville as well as in other nearby villages. First, the old roads were never called "Avenue" or "Drive." They were referred to as "Way" (Pitcher's Way or Mill Way), or "Path" (White's Path or Old Connecticut Path), or "Trail" (the Mohawk Trail or the Pequot Trail). In the South, an old road was often called by that romantic term "Trace;" (the Natchez Trace ran from Nashville, Tennessee to Natchez, Mississippi). In some places, old roads were called "pikes." And some ancient ways were called simply "street" or "road."

Secondly, they were seldom straight for any distance. Animals, whether wild or domestic choose the easiest path; they go around a hill rather than over it, cross streams where the water is shallow, and circle bogs and swamps on level ground with firm footing.

Thirdly, old roads rarely intersected one another at right angles. They forked and branched and merged; traffic was light; speeds moderate, to put it mildly; and collisions were unlikely since the creak and rattle of an approaching wagon could readily be heard in the quiet of the wooded paths.

Using these criteria, we can identify several streets of doubtful lineage in "old" Osterville. We can cross off Wianno Avenue. It's too straight, and its name gives it away. The same is true of most of Sea View Avenue. Parker Road from West Bay Road to Third Avenue is "new"; but where it passes the golf club house, it's "old."

Going north, Parker Road turned at Third Avenue 30° east and ran more or less parallel to its present route, 150 yards east of it, until it crossed the present First Avenue. Then it swung east again, and took off in the general direction of the Post Office corner.

Going south on Parker Road from the golf club, the road is "old" until just past Hathaway Road. There it turned 45° west and came out where the present Sea View Avenue goes around the head of Eel River, and continued on to West Bay Cut. Before the Cut was made, it was possible to cross at what was then called "the Wading Place" and reach Dead Neck (now known as Sampson's Island); the "real" Sampson's Island was separated from, and west of, Dead Neck. The water that lay between them formed the old entrance to Cotuit Harbor. Today the old entrance is completely closed on the Vineyard Sound side of the island, but can easily be

seen from Seapuit River.

Back in the center of the village near where the new Bass River Savings Bank has recently replaced the Lovell Homestead, parts of which are very old, Parker Road merged with another road that old maps indicate was called Lovell's Lane.

Westbound, Lovell's Lane was later to become West Bay Road from Main Street to Bridge Street; eastbound, it crossed what is now Main Street and climbed what we call Tower Hill, following the road by the same name, more or less, parts of which are very old. As late as the 1930s, Tower Hill Road did not form a "T" at the top of the hill, but continued on through a field rapidly filling with small pitch pine trees. The old road went east of Sam's Pond (on its present route), crossed Pond Street at what is now Waterfield Road (the intersection has been altered to make 90° corners), and continued in a northwesterly direction, more or less, to join Main Street just south of what is now "The Old Greenhouse," about at the entrance to Osterville Bike & Mower Shop.

This road was once the only road leaving Osterville in the direction of Mystic (Marstons Mills). Later, as the village grew, Poverty Lane (now Main Street from Mulberry Corner to Pond Street) came into use, then Pond Street stretched to meet the road leading to Mystic. And later still, Main Street followed Pond Street for about 100 yards and then, at the bottom of the dip, turned left and went up to what is now Milne Road, then turned west again, following the path of the earlier road.

Simeon Leonard lived across the street from the present Wool Shop, and his blacksmith shop stood where Pond and Main Streets now meet. He and his sons, Lucien, James, and Henry, cut through the road that is now Main Street, north of Pond Street.

At one time, Pond Street crossed Main Street and went through what is now the front yard of Cazeault Roofing, Inc., turned southwest just east of the swamp, skirted it, crossed Bay Street on what is now a private driveway, and angled off toward the boat shops. It crossed both the present golf fairways and continued to the public landing at the corner of Bridge Street.

Incidentally, a few hundred yards west of this old road and between the fairways, is the remains of an enormous Indian midden (shell heap). This knoll was the site of an Indian village. Many arrowheads, some of them beautiful specimens, have been found in this area.

Arrowheads can be found anywhere, of course; often a wounded animal or bird ran or flew off with an arrow in its body. The arrow may then have dropped out, or the animal may have died far away from the hunter, or the hunter might have missed his target and been unable to find his arrow. Should you find an arrowhead and pick it up from the ground, you might muse, "The last man to touch this arrowhead was an Indian!" Their ghosts are all around us.

To trace another ancient way in Osterville, place yourself at the corner of Wianno Avenue and Bates Street, both "new" roads. On the west side of Wianno Avenue, opposite Bates Street, a small lane angles to the southwest. This is an old road. It originated near the intersection of Main Street and Old Mill Road. Just east of E.E.C. Swift's store is an old house, the original Fuller Homestead. A strip of land, west of the old road, stretched all the way to Neck Pond and was all Fuller land. The old road drove southwest, crossed our present Wianno Avenue, and passed just east of the south end of Neck Pond.

There the road forked. The right fork went southerly and westerly, more or less between the fairways, until it joined Parker Road near Hathaway Road and continued to The Wading Place. The left branch crossed the present golf links to a swamp where the village dump was located. It wasn't much of a dump because the village was very small; furthermore, people threw away very little. In the 1930s the dump could easily be found. More ghosts.

None of the old abandoned roads can be seen from an airplane, but should you notice something while out walking some day that makes you think an old road might once have crossed one of our well-traveled streets, you'll probably be right.

Before we came, others passed this way . . .