

Op-Ed for MV Gazette

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COMMENTARY

Beware Shortsighted Answer to Erosion

- [David R. Foster](#)
- <https://vineyardgazette.com/news/2013/03/28/beware-shortsighted-answer-erosion>
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History and Planning at Wasque

When George Santayana wrote “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” he was not envisioning people repeating their own mistakes. But that is what is transpiring at Wasque Point on Chappaquiddick this spring. In 2007 the Schifter family completed a large house about 300 feet from the bluff edge. Six years later, with the house poised to fall into the ocean they are proposing to move it about 300 feet from the edge while damaging the environment and native artifacts and disrupting users of this magnificent landscape. The relocation should be denied by local boards that might have rejected the original plan if they had paid closer attention to history.

In 1886 Henry L. Whiting, a Vineyard resident and Assistant to the Superintendent of the U.S. Coastal Survey summarized a 40-year study of erosion on the island. The south shore had receded an average of 175 to 200 feet and waves had carried sand 500 feet into Chilmark Pond and 680 feet into Great Herring Pond (Edgartown Great Pond). The upland at Wasque was the most rapidly receding landscape on the Vineyard eroding over 500 feet.

Newspaper accounts of the recent erosion have tied the rapid rate to the 2007 breach in the Norton Point beach and cited experts that such activity is unprecedented and unforeseen. These statements were quickly countered by Tom Dunlop whose update of the timeline for breaches developed by Pete Ogden in the 1970s demonstrated that breaches occurred frequently accompanied by significant erosion.

Additional historical work paints an even bleaker picture for the Schifter proposal. In a 1869 report Whiting states that before that date the barrier beach was only intact for a few months around 1800 and “with this exception, there is no record or tradition of the non-existence of an inlet through Cotamy Beach since this section of the coast has been known.” Whiting’s conclusion is supported by Freeman (1807) who pin-points the

closing at 1792 when it “remained shut during six months; at the end of which it was again opened by a north-east storm: it was never shut before or since.”

A revised timeline shows that a southern inlet into Katama Bay is actually the norm (and favored by 19th C residents); the past century is unusual. In fact, the longest stretch for an intact barrier beach in known history was from 1977 to 2007 preceding the Schifter construction. The decision to allow that house occurred during an anomalously quiet period.

With rates of sea level rise increasing and our region in a period of active coastal storms erosion will increase. Wasque is the most dynamic spot on the island. The breaches responsible for this can last a year or a century or more.

In our land planning we should incorporate as deep a historical perspective as possible. When we do that for Wasque it is clear that this house move should be reconsidered.

