

## *Plum Island Gathering: West Newbury's "Great Play Day of the Year"*

Each year at summer's end between the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and the late 1930s, West Newbury's "Plum Island Gathering" served as the Town's collective vacation day. According to [Leonard Woodman Smith](#), who was born here in 1844 and lived in Town until his late 40s, West Newbury Day at Plum Island was "the [great play day of the year](#)," eagerly anticipated by young and old. For most, he said, it was the only beach day of the year.

Plum Island in the early days of the outings was, [as described in Joshua Coffin's history](#), "a wild and fantastical sand beach, ... thrown up by the joint power of winds and waves into the thousand wanton figures of a snow drift." [Not much else was there](#) aside from the lighthouse and the salt hay, which West Newbury farmers collected in the fall. The turnpike was [completed around 1805](#). Plum Island Hotel, which initially housed the [construction workers](#), was built at the end of the causeway a little earlier. The first life saving station was erected in 1874.

Increased steamboat traffic in the 1870s made the island more accessible. The bridge was at times daunting: an 1893 notice in the *West Newbury Messenger* provided the dubious assurance, "Those who know say that Plum Island bridge is as safe as it has been for years." In 1880, Simpson Cottage became the [first summer house](#) on the island, and others soon followed, often available for weekly rental. Later in that decade the horsecar railway reached the island, opening Plum Island to more tourism. A [pavilion](#) used for concerts and dancing opened in 1886.

Smith, who participated in the Plum Island excursions over many decades from boyhood to [at least his 60s](#), described [consistent rituals](#) in the outings' earlier years. "The day before the gathering all the good housewives were busy preparing the food for the next day; cold meats and roast chicken were the foundation of the repast." Chowder and pies, cake, and turnovers were also staples. "The next morning, if the weather was good, all the family carriages, from the well kept and showy ones down to the heavy farm wagons, all appeared on the road to Newburyport with the load of happy folks..." Also lined up were "barges"—long wagons holding 30-40 people. The [parade-like morning and evening processions](#)

[through Newburyport](#) were doubtless an important part of the day.

The men collected water in milk cans just before entering the turnpike. Once over the causeway, tolls paid, the expedition took a hard right at the hotel, traveling south to the "High Sandy beach," where they found a level place surrounded by dunes. Horses also delighted in the seashore: upon arrival they were quickly unharnessed to accommodate their immediate compulsion to roll in the sand.

As men prepared fires for tea and chowder, women unpacked food, plates, cutlery, and all items needed for a feast. They spread white tablecloths end-to-end on the ground. "[I]t looked like a great white ribbon stretched around the great amphitheatre; it made a unique sight looking down upon it from the sand dunes, loaded with every dainty the good mothers had provided, and when three or four hundred people sat or squatted on the sand each side of this improvised table, good fellowship kept everyone in fine humor."

"When the dinner had been eaten," [Smith recalled](#), "the mothers of the company washed the dishes and packed everything back under the seat of the vehicles ready for the home trip; the children enjoyed the short afternoon by sliding and rolling down the sand dunes, while the elders sat on the shore enjoying the beaches, and renewing friendships; some of the people from the extreme limits of the township only met once a year at this town holiday..." He commented that notwithstanding the work involved (there was an [organizing committee](#)) and the long travel time required, "[I]t was like children let out of school after a hard day of work." And indeed, factories in Town were known to close for the day.

In later years, the [trip became easier](#) (and perhaps, in view of the [Plum Island bridge](#), safer) with the trolley. [Sporting contests](#) like horseshoes were introduced and [dancing](#) at the pavilion became an important part of the excursion. Ironically, in [1925](#) it was said that "quite a large party of people went to the island for the day, but not as many in the days when transportation was by teams and barges"—and was more arduous. Participation dwindled until 1937, when the last outing was [reported](#).

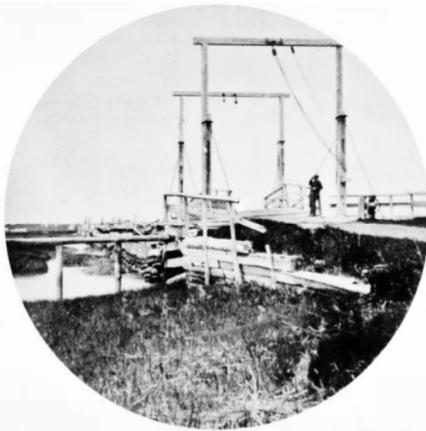
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Source: G.A.R. Library Elizabeth Thompson Collection

**ANNUAL**  
**West Newbury Gathering**  
**At Plum Island**  
**Wed. Aug. 31st. 1898**  
**NEAR THE NEW PAVILION**

Source, above & below: G.A.R. Library Thurlow Scrapbook



Plum Island drawbridge in the 1800's. Note the pulleys used to open the bridge for boat traffic. (Courtesy, Historical Society of Old Newbury)

Source: [Plum Island the Way It Was](#), by Nancy V. Weare

PLUM ISLAND HOTEL.  
 ESTABLISHED 1804.

ALL NEWLY FURNISHED. J. EUGENE FOWLE, PROP.

*Destroyed by fire 1914*



**A Day At The Beach** - West Newbury residents pose for a picture on the beach at Plum Island sometime around 1920. Children in front row are (L-R) Albert Knowles, Leah Knowles and Olive Jackson. Adults in rear are (L-R) Gladys Sauvan, Clara James, Fred Poore, Mary Knowles, Georgie Pennell, Gertrude Winship and Belle Kennett

Source: *West Newbury News* 11/6/1996 in G.A.R. Library Collection



PLUM ISLAND BEACH.

Source: [History of Plum Island in Massachusetts](#) by Rebecca Beatrice Brooks