



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
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Curriculum Unit 80.ch.09  
by Frank Olah

Black Rock sits today as a quiet backwash of the industrial city of Bridgeport, Connecticut. You wonder as you walk down her streets, how this place came to look as it does. Facing the water, you see the mountains of Bridgeport's dump. Looking in the opposite direction, apartment houses and triple deckers are interwoven into the fabric of single family homes. Some of these homes have threads weaving back into the 18th century. This patchwork is held together by a fascinating history. It is a history that spans three centuries, two towns, and many adventures to areas such as New York City, the coastal trading towns of the Atlantic Ocean, and over the sea to the West Indies. An yet, this place sleeps today.

Black Rock's history is tied directly with the history of the entire coastline of New England. As New England's fortunes developed, so also grew Black Rock's, except that Black Rock was unable to adapt as changes and time passed by her.

Black Rock was first settled by the Wheeler family about 1644. Thomas Wheeler was a member of Reverend John Jones' church which had settled in Concord, Mass. Jones moved into the Fairfield area in 1644 for reasons which seemed to reflect a growing dissension within the church at Concord. <sup>4</sup> The church members settled in Greenlea, a section across from Black Rock Harbor on what is now the University of Bridgeport campus. Another group settled north of Black Rock in the Stratfield area.

Thomas Wheeler, however, chose to settle in the Black Rock area of Fairfield. He built a home which had a flat roof with two cannons. One cannon pointed toward the Indian fort which was inland and the other pointed out toward these. <sup>5</sup> One does not know for certain, but one might think that Thomas Wheeler did choose to settle in a different location because of the relative, commercial importance of Fairfield, even at that time. The whole of the New England coast had some of the same basic geographical realities which Black Rock's Wheeler family faced. The soil proved, in the long run, to be too thin and stoney to farm effectively. Many New Englanders turned naturally towards the sea for their economic survival. <sup>6</sup>

The rivers of New England, however, posed major problems to the development of Harbors. The rivers carried with them, from the time of the melting of the glaciers, tons of silt which created the great marsh areas along the coast. This natural land development would fill in the harbor areas and cause great problems to shipping. Ash Creek, a shallow river west of Black Rock, drains the hinterlands for seven miles north. (For map of the area, see Appendix A). This river could not be used as a Harbor. Instead, tide mills were built on the Fairfield banks. The actual harbor was to be east of Wheeler's home. The Harbor was not affected by the silt deposits.

It was formed by an island, Fayerwesther Island, which protected the inlet area. Since the harbor was not located at the mouth of the river, it was naturally deep, with no build-up of silt, and it had good tidal and wind directions. In addition, the Wheeler's land, Grover's Hill, was the only area of high ground on the Fairfield coast. This land would prove valuable as a defensive feature.

Even with these unusually good geographic features, Black Rock grew slowly. The area was controlled by one family, the Wheelers. The Pequonnock Indians remained in the area. They were constantly feared and therefore were being pushed by the citizens of Fairfield toward the east and by the citizens of Stratford towards the west. <sup>8</sup> Black Rock seemed to be the area in which the Indians were to stay. In October 6, 1680, the Indian sachem (chief) and the officials of Fairfield signed an agreement giving the Indians a reservation of the "Gold Hills" of Stratford (now Trumbull). Geographic and Indian problems were experienced all over New England in the 17th century.

One need not look too far to discover why almost all the first settlements in New England were coastal. The interior forests, difficult to penetrate and none too promising as farmland, harbored in addition Indian tribes who were becoming increasingly hostile as the white population continued to grow. <sup>9</sup> New England harbors took advantage of their geographic features and became centers for ship building. The rivers of New England filled the harbor sites with silt, but they also provided an access to the hinterland where lumber for ship's hulls and masts could cheaply and easily be carried to the shore and then made into ships. New England ships, before the American Revolution, were "easily 30% cheaper than ships from the continent." <sup>10</sup>

Black Rock's situation geographically was complex. The Harbor, though naturally deep, did not have access to the hinterlands. The lumber so easily obtained close to shore went to building the homes and wharves of the settlement. <sup>11</sup> Once the land was cleared of trees, it was developed for farming and livestock. Black Rock, early in her history, could turn only to the farmers of the area just north of the harbor for goods to be shipped. Most other anchorages along the Connecticut coast became involved in coastal trading with the larger towns of New Haven and New York. Black Rock also developed these trading routes from the 1680's through the 1750's.

Realizing the limits of the environment by 1750, the Wheeler family in the person of David Wheeler III attempted to develop much needed capital. In 1753 he started to subdivide his lands into house lots along Grover Street. <sup>12</sup> He thought that the physical advantages of Black Rock Harbor the depth and the windward direction of its location would attract the merchants and farmers of Fairfield. The geographical reality of the location of Black Rock had for years steered people towards Southport Harbor. As can be seen by the map (See Appendix B). <sup>13</sup> Black Rock's wharves and harbor were separated from the main settlement of Fairfield by Ash Creek.

Ast Creek is a tidal stream and had been used as an area of mills. Because of Ash Creek, all of the roads bypassed Black Rock Harbor. The Kings Highway connected Fairfield with Stratford but the road ran well to the north of the Harbor. In other words, one of the finest natural harbors along the Connecticut coast was cut off from inland transportation and isolated a commercial center by Ash Creek!

David Wheeler corrected the situation by laying out a road (Balmforth Street) from the Harbor to the creek's edge. He then built a bridge across the creek. This roadway helped Black Rock become Fairfield's busiest port by the 1760s. Farmers brought livestock, lumber and vegetables to the port. These developments of the mid 1750s and 1760s helped bring into Black Rock many coastal sloops. This coastal shipping trade developed the support systems necessary for shipping trade. Black Rock, therefore, became an area of rapid economic

growth. The lower, middle and upper wharves added these support facilities. By 1760, Black Rock was well on her way to economic success.

New England generally was developing differently from Black Rock. In the very period of the growth of Black Rock's trade, New Englanders were building coasting sloops and larger ocean going ships, and were becoming involved in fishing as well. The New England coast, north and east of Long Island Sound, had open access to the ocean and therefore New England's economic growth, east of New London, during this period was linked directly with the open sea.

Other factors helped Black Rock's as well as New England's growth. The British Navigation Acts from 1660 through the 1770s articulated the principle of a closed empire where only British ships were permitted to trade within the empire. Black Rock, along with the rest of New England took advantage of these acts. Black Rock's coastal trade was expanded into the West Indies. The West Indies needed food stuffs because they operated a slave and plantation system for the cultivation of sugar cane. The plantation had to import all their needs from the outside world. For a discussion of the Navigation Acts and Connecticut's triangle trade, see Unit IV of this volume.

Black Rock Harbor, with its coastal trade of farm produce, reached over the sea to create a West Indian trade that brought great wealth to the people of the harbor. Since food was the basic energy source, Black Rock found itself in an unparalleled business position. Black Rock merchants carried the food south and brought back the molasses or rum which would become part of the mercantile system known as the triangular trade. Black Rock ships were important in the interconnections of food, money and slaves before the Revolution. On the eve of the American Revolution, Black Rock was in the middle of her economic golden age. The importance of New England shipping and Black Rock's large share cannot be denied. As Robert Albion noted:

The seamen, one-tenth the population of New England, had great influence over the colonies for the following reasons: 1. By shipping farm produce, they changed farming from random family farming to farming communities, creating a surplus to be sent out thereby raising farmers' life styles.

2. This created the need for support operations and urban centers which altered the way of life.

3. The civilizing effect of shipping . . . brought new ideas from about the world into the ports. <sup>14</sup> By 1775, Black Rock Harbor was an extremely important port with coastal and worldly connections. These trade connections would cause the port to become a major area of naval operations as well as the focus of energy attacks during the Revolutionary War.

As the revolution developed, Black Rock Harbor evolved into a central maritime base for Continental and Colony vessels and privateers of every sort. Their comings and goings were—for the towns people of Fairfield—a source of almost daily excitement, whether the vessel in question was hauling into port a "prized" craft taken on the Sound, unloading on the docks a captured cargo, or discharging a squad of British and Hessian into the Hands of the coast guard. <sup>15</sup> Black Rock had to adjust to the new wartime conditions as did every other port in New England. The first change was to build a fort on top of Grover's Hill to try and protect Fairfield from British attack. Although the fort did not stop the burning of Fairfield in 1779, it did save Black Rock from suffering the same fate. Black Rock was one of the best protected ports along all of Long Island Sound's Connecticut coastline.

The biggest change for Black Rock had to be the very trade it carried out. For sixteen years, Black Rock had enjoyed a prosperous trade with the West Indies. Now that the colonies were at war with England, that trade

had stopped because of tardy enforcement of the earlier navigation acts and the viscidities of war. Black Rock had to rely on her coastal trade which was also disrupted since New York City was in the hands of the British. Black Rock did retain some of her remaining coastal trade mainly because the harbor was relatively safe from British attack. Another form of trade occupied the interests of Black Rock Harbor during the Revolution: the "trade" which the privateers developed.

Most of the energetic captains' (privateers) prizes were brought into Black Rock Harbor, Fairfield . . . Incomplete records indicate the following captured prizes:

Aug. 9, 1780 . . . British schooner "Sally"

Oct. 1780 . . . British schooner "Tryon"

Oct 1780 . . . British sloop "Fanny" <sup>16</sup>The complete list would fill this page and it is quite obvious that Black Rock became the center for the handling of all these captured goods.

Black Rock also was the training grounds for many of these privateers. One example was the "training" of Samuel Smedley.

Samuel, the lad with a yen for the sea, in his early years, haunted the docks at Black Rock Harbor in Fairfield, where his father owned one-sixth of Ichabod Wheeler's large Upper Wharf and Well, and where Capt. Ebenezer Bartram of Black Rock, a seasoned master in the West Indian trade, was frequently to be found in between trips. From Bartram and other friendly sea captains, Smedley absorbed nautical knowledge of ships and sailing, latitudes and longitudes, quadrant and compass, winds and storms and no less important, dexterity with pistol and cutlass. <sup>17</sup>With the end of the war, Black Rock regained its West Indian trade.

With the "Greenfield," Capt. Smedley made regular trips to the West Indies from the mid 1780s through 1788, sailing out of Black Rock port in Fairfield to trade in Hispaniola, St. Franchoise, and Turk's Island. Outbound cargoes usually included horses, barrel staves, ship planks, oats, potatoes, and a variety of other vegetables. Capt. Smedley brought back from the islands: molasses, rum, brandy, sugar, and salt. <sup>18</sup>Black Rock's golden age of commerce seemed to be acknowledged in 1790 when she was designated as the official port of entry for Fairfield County. This post-Revolutionary era was also a prosperous period in the economic fortunes for all of the rest of New England. As the new United States developed its own international trading fleets, New England ship builders and her seamen enjoyed growing economic wealth. But this era was not to last for either New England or Black Rock.

In the Napoleonic Wars, the United States remained neutral. Our ships could trade with any country and for a decade New England trade flourished despite interruptions and captures by the British. But then, President Jefferson imposed the Embargo Act of 1806 in order to protect our shipping interests. This stopped all trade with England and France and their colonies. This embargo devastated the economic growth of Black Rock Harbor. In 1810, however, the Embargo was lifted and Black Rock was able to prosper again. When the embargo of the War of 1812 was imposed a few years later, Black Rock and New England again fell prey to circumstances beyond their control.

Despite this on again, off again prosperity from the end of the Revolution through 1815, New England men started to build ships in ever greater numbers. My small yards opened. The demand for small sloops increased with the increase in the coasting trade to the South which filled the needs of the people opening frontier

areas. These small shipyards needed only a master carpenter and about twenty workmen. <sup>19</sup> Black Rock's coastal trade helped to keep Black Rock economically viable during the years immediately following the wars. But the international scene changed once again and Black Rock resumed its Old West Indian trade which brought only short-lived recovery. This renewed reliance on coastal and West Indian trading was not to be the direction other New England ports would take. Their trade routes were in the direction of ocean fisheries, whaling, and international trade. Black Rock could not sail beyond the horizon. The very Harbor which gave Black Rock her advantages in the later 18th century, was too shallow for the new and larger ocean going ships with which the rest of New England worked.

By 1840, New England shipping had entered her golden age. Many outside conditions helped to stimulate this economic growth. During the 1840s, the China trade was developed. Immigration of the same decade brought the first great waves of newcomers from Ireland and Germany. In 1846-1849, the British changed their foreign policy restricting grain trade and repealed other navigation laws as well. The California gold rush of 1848 and the government subsidy of the American steamship lines helped bring great wealth to the ship building areas all along the coast of New England. All of these changes required new ships. The relative wealth of New England as compared with the rest of the United States will demonstrate the extent of the new wealth New England earned. New York City was the center of the vast trade network which had developed but New England was far more important:

ship tonnage owned . . . New England . . . 46%

. . . N. Y. C . . . 26%

. . . other areas . . . 28%

ship builders . . . New England . . . 82%

. . . N. Y. C . . . 11%

. . . other areas . . . 7% Black Rock, during the 1830s was to lose her West Indian trade, with the official end of the slave trade there and the decline of the plantation system. Nonetheless, Black Rock was able to hold on to its coasting trade by developing small ship building yards during the 1840s and 1850s. Black Rock tried to change to meet the needs of the changing economic times. Citizens there now built their homes four or five blocks away from the wHarf area to accommodate the machine shop and ship building areas. Capts. Daniel Wilson, John B. Brittin, Mr. Verdine Ellsworth, and the company of Sturges and Clearman all had ship building areas near the upper wharves. In 1856, these companies were united under the ownership of Capt. Wilson Hall. He built "some of the finest ships (sloops) in America before his death in 1860." <sup>21</sup>

The year 1860 seems to be a watershed for both Black Rock Harbor and New England. The Civil War broke out, and the men and ships of all New England were readied for war. New England provided the men and supplies which helped to win the war. <sup>22</sup> Black Rock, along with the rest of New England supplied shipmasters, sailors, shipwrights, and ships way out of proportion to its population. This provided a temporary lift to the local Black Rock economy.

Soon, however, technological advances were to change Black Rock's ability to survive as an economically viable port. As the war took the men and ships, technology outran the ability of Black Rock to produce or repair ships or to be involved in the traditional coastal shipping routes. The technological change from small wooded hull ships to large iron hulls and from sailing ships to steam ships left Black Rock unable to adapt

because of these new vessels' need of deep water ports. Black Rock could no longer compete with the newly developing ports and industrial cities like Bridgeport, directly to Her east. Bridgeport dredged her Harbor and developed her factory system along the railroad lines which connected the harbor with the factories. This march of technological change could have been noted as far back as 1815, when a letter to the editor of the (Bridgeport) *Republican Farmer* pointed to the developments which would affect Black Rock Harbor for the next one hundred years.

#### *TO THE OWNERS OF PACKERS AND STAGES*

Gentlemen—You are doubtless aware that a STEAMBOAT has been built by the citizens of New York for the purpose of running a packet between that city and New Haven; and to stop also at the intermediate ports—Those who axe thought the best judges have given it as their opinion that the experiment will succeed . . . If it does a complete line of boats is (will be) established between the two towns sufficient to carry all who pass to and fro. If these things take place, I need not tell you what will be the consequences . . . The steam boat has important advantages over a packet. It will carry more passengers. Its voyage is more certain, and will, never exceed 2 hours. The best accommodations can be afforded. The number of passengers will allow a very moderate fare. The fare will be much less tHan any owner of a packet can afford; and less than one-third the expense of a trip by the stage. <sup>23</sup> The steamships bypassed Black Rock because of the small size of her Harbor. The railroads bypassed Black Rock because Ash Creek was too difficult a natural obstacle to cross. Black Rock tried to find another way to survive. In 1853, Capt. William B. Howes used a Black Rock Warf for the coaling trade. The coal yard changed the face of the whole area with its walls of black coal and dust. In addition, the very shipbuilding yard which produced the "finest" ships built in America during the 1850s by the hall shipyards, was purchased by the Rew and Walen Company. They turned the yards into ship repair yards but even they went out of business in 1863.

The rest of New England continued its economic growth during the war, but by 1865, New Englanders were tired. New England had given greatly of its men and supplies for the war effort. New Englanders paid therefore a far greater share of the war effort. Because of these costs of the war men lost and ships destroyed New England shipbuilding industry, 1865-1914, started its long, economic decline into the 20th century; and Black Rock followed.

Black Rock had one last act to play before 1870. Black Rock had some industrial establishments within its boundaries line the Bridgeport Copper and Sulfuric Acid works; a local, ill fated wine making company; and some coastal shipping activity carrying bulk materials like Middletown's limestones, sandstones, and brownstones; the sands from Long Island; and timber from Maine into New York City. However, the shipping activity was abandoned as the ships wore out. Black Rock never became involved in the repairs of these ships. Black Rock Harbor was no longer the center of local economic life.

But the enforced quietude also had its appealing side. Grover's Hill which surrounds the Harbor, an area prized for its elevation during the Revolution, by 1870 was prized again. The rich saw it as a summer place. It was a place to go to get out of New York City's smells and dust. The rich also saw the growth of the industrial city of Bridgeport as an avenue for their investments. They lived in Black Rock which was still part of the town of Fairfield. As Fairfield was still a farming community which offered little hope for industrial growth, the process of incorporating Black Rock into Bridgeport began. This was a force not easily put aside. Black Rock was annexed into Bridgeport in 1870 with little problem.

In June of 1870, the *Southport Chronicle* reported:

. . . The friends of Fairfield will make a bold stand. The Bridgeporters are working arduously to accomplish their purpose, and our legislators have been wined and dined in Bridgeport, but we have faith that the majority of our legislators will not be persuaded to inflict so great an evil upon us as the division of the town of Fairfield. <sup>26</sup>In July of 1870, the *Southport Chronicle* had to report that the annexation bill was presented in the state senate and, “. . . there was no opposition . . . and the bill extending the limits of Bridgeport was unanimously passed.” In the House, the lone Fairfield legislator made a “bold” stand but,

. . . The Bridgeporters had everything in their favor and Mr. Clark could only protest. Consequently the annexation bill passed by a large majority. <sup>27</sup>From July, 1870, Black Rock well-being was to become part of the economic health of Bridgeport and the Harbor was to no longer see any other period of economic advancement related to ship building or shipping commerce.

## Notes

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1. Philip D. Jordan, *The Nature and Practice of State and Local History* (Washington, D.C.: American Historical Association, 1958) p. 4.
2. Jordan., p. 14.
3. Malcolm W. Brown, “Is Problem-Solving America’s Lost Art?”, *The New York Times* , July 29, 1980, sec. C, p. 1, col. 1.
4. Richard Jones, ed. *Black Rock, A Bicentennial Picture Book* . (Bridgeport, Connecticut, Black Rock Civic and Business Men’s Club, 1976) p.14.
5. Cornelia Penfield Lathrop, *Black Rock, Seaport of Old Fairfield, Connecticut 1644-1870* (New Haven, Tuttle, Morehouse and Taylor Co., 1930) p. 24.
6. Robert Albion, *New England And The Sea*. (Middletown Connecticut, Wesleyan University Press, 1972) p. 3.
7. Beers et. al., *Beers, Ellis, and Soule’s Atlas Of New York And Vicinity, 1867* . (New York, Beers, 1867) Map #30.
8. Elizabeth Banks, *This Is Fairfield, 1639-1940* .(New Haven, Connecticut, Walker-Rackliff Co., 1960) p. 39.
9. Albion., p. 21.
10. Albion., p. 22.
11. Albion., p. 33.
12. Lathrop., p. 5.
13. Lathrop., p. 126.
14. Albion., p. 43.
15. Elsie Danenberg, *Naval History Of Fairfield County; Men In The Revolution, A Tale Untold* . (Fairfield, Connecticut, Fairfield Historical Society, 1977) p. 8.
16. Danenberg., p. 58.
17. Danenberg., p. 125.
18. Danenberg., p. 145.
19. Albion., p. 94.
20. Albion., p. 99.
21. Jones., p. 20.
22. Albion., p. 160.
23. Letter To The Editor, signed “Fairplay”. (Bridgeport) *Republican Farmer* , March 15, 1815, page 2.

24. Jones., p. 20.
25. Albion., p. 162.
26. Southport *Chronicle* , June 15, 1870.
27. Southport *Chronicle*, July 6, 1870.

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\*\* Danenberg, Elsie. *Genealogy Tables Of Black Rock Families, Bartram and Wheeler* . Fairfield Historical Society Collection. Fairfield, Connecticut.

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\* Brilvitch, Charles. *Walking Through History , The Seaports of Black Rock and Southport* . Fairfield, Connecticut, Fairfield Historical Society, 1977.

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\*\* Lathrop, Corniela Penfield, ed. *Black Rock, Seaport of Old Fairfield, Connecticut 1644-1870* . New Haven, Connecticut, Tuttle, Morehouse and Taylor Co., 1930.

#### Other source materials

There are many files and other artifactual materials located in the following locations,

Bridgeport Public Library -

Fairfield Historical Society

Fairfield Public Library, Main Branch

Pequot Library, Fairfield, Connecticut

## Lesson Plans

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I see that this unit can be used best by coupling it with the basic course materials already used by the teacher. This means that as the teacher presents a unit of study; for example, the Revolution, the materials on Black Rock can be used as illustrations of how the abstract historical materials of the Revolution can be transformed into real life experiences using the study of Black Rock Harbor.

### *Week One:*

This week the teacher will use the basic map skills coupled with a walking tour of the Black Rock Harbor area to familiarize the students with the area. Since this area will be the focus of historical study intermittently throughout the year, this familiarization is necessary in the first few weeks of school.

Day One: Using a contour map of the Black Rock area, introduce the contour map as a tool. Give the students basic map skill questions. Have them find streets which define the Black Rock area. Find the natural areas of rise and fall of the land. Try to have the students understand the idea of a contour map. You might take another day mapping the contours of an out-of-doors location using a grid line arrangement.

Day Two: Having found old maps, show the students the geographical changes which have redefined the Black Rock area. Also have them note the changes in the roads and the placements of houses and wharves and factories. Why did these changes take place? Why did the people of Black Rock decide to build their homes as they did? Do maps answer questions about things which are just not directional? Have the students write a short thesis about the changes they see happening to Black Rock Harbor over the years. Is it becoming more or less populated? What part does geography play in the locations of buildings, homes, etc.?

Day Three: Having written a thesis statement about the changes seen through the maps, have the students complete the expository essay adding to the thesis statement with the facts from their maps.

Day Four: Walking tour of Black Rock Harbor. Note the buildings and what they look like. Note the location of the harbor and the old wharves. View the Ash Creek area and the limits that the creek put on the settlement of Black Rock. What modern buildings are around? What is the area generally used for: homes, industry, etc.?

Day Five: How does visiting the place compare with looking at the map? That would be the general discussion for the day. What facts could you have known only from a visit to Black Rock? What is your general impression of the area?

Other possible topics using Black Rock as a focus:

1. Frontier Settlement
2. American Revolution
3. Trade and Commerce in the 1800s
4. Civil War

## Appendix A

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*(figure available in printed form)*

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