

Converse Bay, Charlotte to Shelburne Town Beach

July 12, 2004

Distance: 8.5 miles

Weather: Sunny to start, South wind 10-20 MPH

Faced with a week-long forecast of cloudy days with likely rain and thunderstorms, not to mention the probability that Margy would have to spend the latter part of the afternoon in the office, we opted for a short route, a location close to Burlington, and an early start. The promise of 10 to 20 mile an hour winds from the south, suggested strongly that we should head north on as sheltered a shore as we could find within our untraveled shores. With these parameters in mind we managed between 6:30 AM and 9:00 AM to get ourselves into the water at the fishing access in Converse Bay, in Charlotte. This clearly was one of our more efficient starts.

This is one of the prettier launch spots that we have used with the islands dotting the bay giving us short and long views. We were preceded by another person in a kayak paddling close to the dock and a spectator. They turned out to be a father daughter team; it was her first time in the kayak and he was carefully watching. When she pulled into shore, we found that she was paddling a beautiful hand-made wooden boat: made by dad! Both were pleased with performance. As we left the landing, 5 or 6 cars from out of state pulled in, each with 2 kayaks atop. We asked if they were heading north and they said they didn't know; they were just going to explore. It seemed as if we might be seeing lots of other boats, but those were the last that we encountered close by. It was a reminder of how many ways there are to enjoy this lake by kayak.

The wind had already picked up significantly and we had to give wide berth to the cliffs on the north entrance to the bay which were producing very choppy backwash in the south wind which we estimated at about 15mph. By going further from shore, we could see some of the lovely turn of the century homes that top this bluff.

Picket Island was on our left reminding me (Margy) of the picnics that I had there with my daughters when they were little. It was a great adventure to paddle out to an island in our canoe and have lunch. This morning the island was deserted, populated only by ghosts of picnics past.

Once around the point, the tail wind propelled us along. There was just enough lee from the preceding points of land to protect us from the heavy waves. The only exception was Hills Point at the end of this paddle which again drove us into deeper water and out of the chop.

The old cottages along the shore of Cedar Beach were reminders of an earlier time. More modern architecture interspersed among the old reminded us of the pressure to renew and rebuild as waterfront land has become increasingly more valuable. We could see people already at the beach house of the colony which is more than 100 years old. Our paddling past the outcropping of land just north of Cedar Beach appeared to cause a colony of

geese to consider their options. WE gave them a wide berth and they stayed put.

Rounding into McNeil Bay , the water was serene. The Charlotte-Essex ferry was leaving and in the distance, we could see another approaching. Ralph Nading Hill states that "Soon after the turn of the century" (that is the 19 th century!) there was ferry service between this bay in Charlotte and Essex , NY . Between 1821 and 1827 the ferry on this route was powered by 6 horses "on each side of the deck, transmitted their power directly to the wheels through treadmills..The treadmills provided uncertain navigation, for if the horses on the left treadmill walked faster than those on the right, the ferry was bound to veer to the starboard regardless of what the helmsman might do. One ingredient of a straight true course was the long whip of the 'engineer' who sat usually in one of the passengers' buggies and applied encouragement to one team or another, depending on which was lagging." We sat in our 21 st century kayaks watching the modern ferries filled with tourists and residents headed for the other side of the lake, most with their cars on board, on a chosen course determined by a turn of the wheel. It is incredible to think that this ferry route in its many forms has been going on from this spot for 200 years!

We circled Meach Island which guards the southern end of the Meach Cove. It is an inviting peace of land, high on the lakeside and accessible from the landside. From the water we could see one of the tombstones of the earlier settlers buried there.

Most of the sailboats were still at the moorings on this tranquil morning, but it was easy to imagine a much busier day on a weekend. It must be a tricky passage for ferry and multiple tacking boats to maneuver safely in and out of the bay on a warm and sunny Saturday.

North of McNeil Bay the shoreline is the wooded or open waterfront of larger homes set back from the water. While the railroad set back from the water results in wooded shores on the sparsely populated New York side, it is the larger landowners whose landscaping gives the impression of open space in suburban Charlotte . Cliffs along this shore tended to be topped with many feet of dirt and the rock substrata was either covered by dirt or at a lower level. The water immediately along the shore was shallow but dropped off more quickly than we have seen along some areas on the Vermont shore. According to the charts, just a half mile off of McNeil Cove is the deepest part of the lake reaching a depth of 399' .

Ralph Nading Hill again described both the historic underpinnings and the current pressure when he poetically wrote:

"Nature designed the terraces of the east shore's ancient sea bottom for grazing. After the Civil War the clouds of sheep covering these grasslands drifted on to the west, but the dairy cows and apple orchards that have replaced them seem secure. If they are not, it is because a farmer's temptation to sell to a developer rises with his expenses and the value of his land."

Certainly the shoreline for many miles south of this point is pretty well developed, but it

is in this area that one begins to see more silos in the distance. Charlotte still has some working farms, Shelburne, which had a number of working farms when I moved here in the late 60's now has 1. Where farms remain, in many cases the farmer has sold off his lakeshore land in parcels just large enough to build a home or camp on. This has both reduced farmer's tax burden and helped to raise needed working capital.

The picturesque covered bridge which crosses Holmes Creek is just visible from the water at the south end of the Charlotte Beach. At this hour on a cool morning, the beach was almost empty. The northern half of Hills Bay is covered with houses close to the shoreline. Rounding Hills Point, the shoreline is wooded on top of high cliffs gradually lowering to rather dense development until the Shelburne Beach .

We circled Meach Island which guards the southern end of the Meach Cove. It is an inviting peace of land, high on the lakeside and accessible from the landside. From the water we could see one of the tombstones of the earlier settlers buried there.

Moses Pierson chose this area for his homestead before the American Revolution. I was always fascinated by the marker at the Shelburne Town Beach which commemorated his bravery. It was also such a reminder of the history of the area when it was read by children coming up from a day of swimming. It was easy to understand why Moses Pierson and his family would have chosen this protected bay with its gently sloping fields for a homestead. The story told is that he planted and harvested a sizable wheat crop in 1776, but then retreated to safer lands when threatening Indians and British were found in the area. The following spring when they returned to claim the wheat with a party of soldiers and men interested in purchasing the wheat, they were attacked by a party of Indians. After a long battle, in which it is reported that Mrs. Pierson's freshly brewed beer was used to put out a fire started by the Indians, the invaders were driven off. The Pierson family, including an infant, survived but some of the accompanying party were killed. The true identity of the attackers was revealed after the war of 1812 when one of the now adult Pierson sons found out from a British prisoner that he and other British soldiers had been among the attackers in Indian disguise.

No signs were left of these earlier events as we crossed the bay in the lee of Meach Island. The swimming raft was empty, a few mothers and children were beginning to gather on the beach, and the immaculate recreation area lay tranquil in the mid day sun. The security force was made up of two attractive young town residents who had managed to land the coveted life guard and gate check jobs for the summer.

We loaded the kayaks back on the cars and enjoyed our lunch on the shaded launch ramp talking about yet another gorgeous day on the water.