



The following is an article from 1976 about the soil survey mapping of Block Island, RI. Additional comments are provided by Jim Turenne (RI ASSS) 2014.

A Working Vacation


Craig Ditzler¹


Block Island sits about 12 miles off the Rhode Island mainland in that part of the Atlantic Ocean known as Rhode Island Sound. The island's 6,540 acres of rolling countryside are dotted with small cottages. The countryside is surrounded by high cliffs overlooking long, narrow beaches and clean ocean water. The island's resident population is about 400  the commercial center of the island is cluttered with tourist-oriented businesses, 19th century hotels, and the island's life line to the outside world — the ferry boat landing. In September, the Rhode Island Soil Conservation Service (SCS) soil survey party had the pleasure of spending a week in one of Block Island's seaside hotels while mapping the island.

Party leader Dean Rector and our five-man crew reported to work at the office on Monday morning, 20 Sept. 1976. Three of the members brought their wives. We loaded two government cars and Dean's private car with augers, spades, description kits, fishing poles, suitcases, bicycles, and cameras. Everett Stuart, the least seaworthy member of our crew, popped a couple of Dramamine pills as he and the rest of our crew drove on board the ferry boat, and we were on our way.


We checked into the Surf Hotel around noon; after a quick tour of the building and its Victorian decor, we knew that it wouldn't be like staying at a Holiday Inn. The "His" and "Her" baths  were down the hall and the one television was downstairs in the family room, where checkers, chess, and puzzles were also provided. We decided that the second-floor balcony, with its rickety rocking chairs overlooking the beach, the north end of the island, and the mainland on the horizon, would be our rendezvous point each morning before breakfast and after coming in from the field before dinner.

After signing the hotel guest register, we headed over to the Towne House Restaurant for lunch. It was owned by party member Bruce Laskey's sister-in-law and was one of the two restaurants still open after Labor Day.

The wives, Cathy, Ann, and Jo-Ann, went out for some sight-seeing while we crew members hit the field for an afternoon of soil mapping. Upon our return to the hotel balcony, we all agreed that the soils on the island were not quite like the ones we were accustomed to on the mainland. Dean decided that a mini-field review would be in order to look at the kinds of soils we were finding and to adjust our legend a bit to accommodate them. 

On Tuesday morning we looked at some of the problem areas and pooled our thoughts on how to handle them. After much discussion we decided to add a few more test units to the legend to recognize steeper slopes for some of the soil series already in the legend and to combine some of our soils to make complexes. That afternoon the mapping went much better because we each had the collective thoughts of the group and an adjusted legend to use. 


Everyone put in a good day's work and dinner time came a long before we knew it. When we

returned to the hotel we learned that the women had gotten some tips on good island fishing spots from the proprietor of a little bait shop. They had bought some hotdogs, potato chips, and soda for supper, so we all headed out to the beach for a cookout and some good fishing and fun. Everett and party member Bob Saratelli kept the fire going into the evening and Dean cooked up a bunch of scup and a couple of eels. Dale Sprankle, another member of our crew, and Jo-Ann couldn't bring themselves to eat any of these delicacies, however. The rest of us agreed they tasted good and ate our fill before heading back to the hotel for a good night's sleep. 

The next morning as the sun rose, Dean and I went for an early morning swim. The others were glad they had stayed in bed, however, when we reported at breakfast that the water was a bit too cold for comfort.

As the day went along, we all managed to cover a lot of ground, and we found ourselves making good progress toward our goal of mapping the entire island. That evening we made our way back to the beach for another cookout and more fishing.

Dean and I couldn't resist getting up with the sun again the next morning — this time for some early morning fishing. We saw some big ones, but couldn't catch any. After a breakfast of coffee, juice, doughnuts and cereal on the balcony, we all got into the field for some more soil mapping and a meeting with Dr. Bill Wright from the University of Rhode Island. We filled him in on the soils and provided him with some samples for testing. By the end of the fourth day, we had nearly completed the mapping and had some representative sites lined up for writing descriptions and sampling.

After eating dinner at Ballard's Restaurant, the other restaurant operating after Labor Day, we went out for some more fishing before turning in for the night. 

Friday seemed to have come along before we realized it. We finished up the mapping and took a last tour around the island before getting on the ferry for the trip home. The week had been a good one for all of us. It was a true working vacation.

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Some of the people mentioned in this article: L-R Craig Ditzler (USDA-NRCS retired), Dr. William Wright (URI Professor of Pedology retired), Dean Rector (USDA-NRCS), Everett Stuart (USDA-NRCS retired).