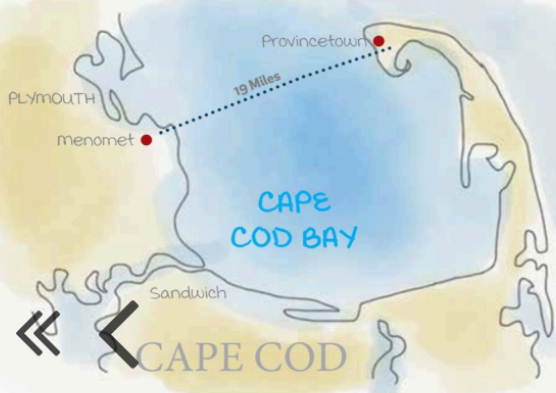


THE AMERICAN CHANNEL

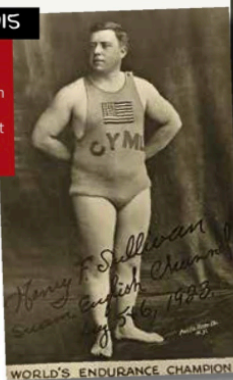
Russell Chaffee and the revival of his reverse Pilgrim swim across Cape Cod Bay. By Elaine K Howley



14-Aug-68
Russell Chaffee
14:40:00 First male

An hour after he left the chilly waters of Seneca Lake about 11 o'clock last night, Russell Chaffee was reunited with his wife, Phyllis, and two of the couple's three children, Alan and Cynthia, at the Glen Motor Court in Watkins Glen. —Photos by Clay Richardson

1915
Henry F. Sullivan
The first person to attempt to swim from west to east. He was unsuccessful.



In September 1620, the Pilgrims, a small cohort of about 100 conservative Puritans, set sail from their native England (by way of Holland) aboard that storied sailing sentinel of American self-determination, The Mayflower. After some two months at sea, these religious refugees finally landed on the shores of Cape Cod, the bent-arm-shaped peninsula that juts into the Atlantic Ocean off mainland Massachusetts. History.com reports that upon their landing on a desolate and no doubt cold beach in what would one day become Provincetown, a scouting party was sent onward. They located the mainland roughly 20 miles away across the bay and, in December 1620, the entire group ultimately arrived in Plymouth Harbor, a safe inlet about 40 miles south of present-day Boston on the east coast of what would eventually become the United States. The story of the founding Pilgrims

is fed to us here in America at an early age; intertwined with stories of the first Thanksgiving, the origin tales of those early settlers and their arduous journey across the sea in search of religious freedom are varied, but virtually every American schoolchild can recite the basic facts of the story beginning at about age six.

But one aspect of the journey that's less widely known is the detail of the round waterway the Pilgrims crossed between their initial landing spot at Provincetown and their eventual arrival at Plymouth. If taken in a straight line from between the two closest points – Herring Cove on the inner tip of Cape Cod and White Horse Beach in Plymouth on the mainland – the journey is 19 miles. A mere hop and skip for an ocean-going ship, but a mighty challenge for a marathon swimmer.

CROSSING CAPE COD BAY THE HARD WAY

Although Cape Cod Bay, as this waterway is known, is a basin of sea that's well protected from the harshest of ocean conditions by the slender spit of land that is Cape Cod, its currents and tidal fluctuations can be complicated. Currents race around the end of the Cape, at a site fittingly called Race Point, and starting from that area to swim to the mainland in a mimic of the Pilgrim's route proved to be a difficult undertaking. However, interest in reaching Cape Cod from the mainland launched the history of cross-Cape Cod Bay swimming. The first person to attempt to swim from west to east was Bostonian Henry Sullivan, the third person and first American to swim the English Channel. His failed attempt came in 1915, eight years before he would finally get across the English

CURRENTS RACE AROUND THE END OF THE CAPE, AT A SITE FITTINGLY CALLED RACE POINT

HERRING COVE TO WHITE HORSE BEACH IS 19 MILES – A MIGHTY CHALLENGE FOR A MARATHON SWIMMER

Channel on his seventh attempt in a staggering 26 hours and 50 minutes. Although Sullivan lasted more than 20 hours in the effort to cross Cape Cod Bay, a swiftly changing tide prevented him from making landfall. Charlie Toth, another Channel conqueror, and Samuel Richards, the first to swim from the Charlestown Bridge to the Boston Lighthouse and back, attempted the swim in 1915 as well, but were unsuccessful.

A 1968 Boston Globe article reports that several swimmers unsuccessfully attempted to cross in the 1950s, leaving from Provincetown and swimming west, perhaps on the suggestion of Harry Kemp, a poet who lived in Provincetown and championed the idea of the crossing as being a symbolic reenactment of the Pilgrims' crossing.

But no swimmer successfully crossed again until 1968, when Russell F. Chaffee, a 41-year-old Sayer, Pennsylvania maths teacher attempted the swim. Chaffee had previously made a name for himself in the press

AMERICAN CHANNEL

← for swimming multi-day staged swims down rivers in the eastern United States. In July 1966, he completed a 440-mile, 28-day swim down the Susquehanna River from its origin in Cooperstown, New York to its terminus in the Chesapeake Bay at Havre De Grace, Maryland. He had averaged more than 15 miles per day and camped along the river at night during that swim.

According to the Reading Eagle, a Pennsylvania newspaper, in 1967, Chaffee "churned up the New York Barge Canal from Watkins Glen to Montreal for the opening of Expo; in 1968 he swam across Cape Cod Bay and also paddled down the Schuylkill River from Valley Forge to Philadelphia's Boathouse Row; he wore out three crews of canoe escorts when he swam the Allegheny River in 1971; he says he set a 1973 record in Australia when he swam 30 miles in 24 hours in an Olympic-size pool...". He also completed a 100-mile trek down the Connecticut River, and swam the Delaware River, the Monongahela River, the Juniata River and 400 miles of the Ohio River from Pittsburgh to Louisville. His lengthy swim resume also included swimming the length of all 11 of the Finger Lakes in central New York State, which range from 4 to 38 miles long.

In addition to a history of swimming long ways, Russell Chaffee also tinkered with new computing technology, and with the Cape Cod Bay swim, he married the two interests. Computerworld magazine reported that Chaffee used "a computer to plot the tide flows of Cape Cod Bay," in advance



"THE BEST COURSE WOULD BE AN 'S' SHAPED ONE THAT TOOK ADVANTAGE OF HIS TIDAL DRIFT"

of the swim, analysing available tidal and current flow data to help him determine the best possible course across the waterway. He opted to swim from west to east (a "reverse Pilgrim") based on what the data showed.

On 14 August 1968, Chaffee's analysis proved correct when he became the first person to swim across Cape Cod Bay, crossing from Manomet (or Whitehorse Beach) in Plymouth to Herring Cove in Provincetown in 14 hours, 40 minutes. Computerworld reported that the modelling software predicted that "the best course would be an 'S' shaped one that took advantage of his tidal drift," not unlike the typical course swum by swimmers in the English Channel. According to the magazine, the modelling program saved Chaffee "five or six miles of swimming," and the Boston Globe reported that he "drank

an eight-pack of soda pop and ate a package of sugar cookies" along the way.

Despite Chaffee's success, few swimmers came calling in Cape Cod Bay until 21 August 2012 when four marathon swimmers – Greg O'Connor of Natick, Massachusetts; David Barra of High Falls, New York; Janet Harris of New York, New York; and the late Eileen Burke, a native Cape Codder who lived in New York – finally made the trek. Swimming solo on the same day, the four had good conditions and a wealth of tidal, weather and GPS data to help them get across in record time. O'Connor – who is also the president and founder of the Massachusetts Open Water Swimming Association (MOWSA), which observes and sanctions Cape Cod Bay crossings and other solo swims in the region and administers the Boston Light Swim – lowered the overall standard to 10 hours, 23 minutes. Burke became the

first woman to cross, which she did in 11 hours, 10 minutes.

O'Connor says he had been researching historic swims in New England when he "came across an article in a computer magazine that said [Chaffee] had taken a sabbatical from teaching and went to Trinity College to work on a computer program – in 1968, which is in itself impressive – to predict the tides in Cape Cod Bay for the express purpose of planning the swim. Then, I came across another article that said he had diverted a part of the Susquehanna River to create a place to train near his home in Pennsylvania," and O'Connor's interest was piqued. Who was this man who could bend technology and the landscape to his swimming whims? When he learned of Chaffee's admirable swimming resume, he resolved to duplicate the Cape Cod Bay crossing. He arrived at this goal at just about the same time as the New York swimmers, and the group decided to swim on the same day. Together, they kicked off a new era of marathon swimming in Cape Cod Bay.

These days, MOWSA observes a Plymouth to Provincetown (P2P) crossing or two per summer, and in August 2016, Eliza Cummings, of Northampton, Massachusetts, lowered the course record to 9:37:14.

In the words of the inimitable John Wayne, "tomorrow hopes we have learned something from yesterday," and here in Massachusetts, we certainly have learned from that aquatic "Pilgrim," Russell Chaffee, at least in terms of how and when to get across Cape Cod Bay the hard way. "Think you can make it, Pilgrim?" Wayne famously asked. Chaffee did, and potentially many more will in the future because of his lasting legacy.

AMERICAN CHANNEL



Kate Owen hands over to Helen Lin

The Poet of the Dunes

According to local lore, Harry Kemp (1883-1960), an American writer known as "The Poet of the Dunes," because he lived in a beachside shack in Provincetown for some 40 years, first developed the idea of swimming point-to-point from Provincetown to Plymouth to create a symbolic link between the first colony and the first landing place in America. A popular literary figure in American culture in the early 20th century, Kemp was a skilled self-promoter. Dubbing his suggested swim "The American Channel" to promote it in contrast to the English Channel (or more likely to capitalise on the popularity of Channel swimming at the time) it has yet to be done in the direction he proposed; all known swims have originated on the mainland and landed in Cape Cod because of the current and tides.

Nevertheless, Kemp's connection to the sea ran deep. The self-anointed "Hobo Poet" spent his youth riding the rails and working on ships as a merchant seaman, and several of his works capture a sentiment of the seafaring life many marathon swimmers may find familiar.

The Endless Lure

*When I was a lad I went to sea
And they made a cabin boy of me.*

Yo ho, haul away, my bullies!

*We'd hardly put out from the bay
When my knees sagged in and my face turned grey;*

*So I went to the captain and I implored
That he'd let the pilot take me aboard,
And fetch me back to the land again
Where the earth was sure for the feet of men...*

*But the Captain, he laughed out strong, and said,
'You'll follow the sea, lad, till you're dead;
For it gets us all - the sky and the foam
And the waves and the wind, - till a ship seems home'*

*When I shipped as an A.B. before the mast
I swore each voyage would be my last...
Was always vowing, and meant it too,
That I'd never sign with another crew...*

*You tell me 'The Castle' is outward bound,
An old sky-sailor, for Puget Sound?
'Too old!'... but I know the sea like a book...
Well, I've heard that your 'Old Man' needs a cook!...*

*Yes, I could rustle for twenty men...
So, God be praised, you can use me, then?...
Oh, there's only a few years left for me,
And I want to die, and be buried at sea!*

MOWSA's P2P Results

Per MOWSA's records, the following nine swimmers and one relay team have successfully crossed Cape Cod Bay, which is also sometimes referred to as "The American Channel":



MISSION ACCOMPLISHED — Russell Chaffee is greeted by his wife after his record swim. It took him 14 hours. (Ed Jenner Photo)

14-Aug-68
Russell Chaffee
14:40:00 First male



21-Aug-12
Greg O'Connor
10:23:13

21-Aug-12
Eileen Burke
11:10:00
First female

21-Aug-12
Janet Harris
11:45:35

21-Aug-12
David Barra
11:45:35

17-Aug-16
Mo Siegel
12:32:31

7-Aug-16
Eliza Cummings
9:37:14 Course record



2-Sep-14
Courtney Paulk
9:43:47



11-Aug-16
Marilyn Korzekwa (Canada)
13:06:55

1-Aug-14
Nate Deam, Kate Owen, Helen Lin, Jonathan Gladstone
8:43:46 First relay, relay course record

