1) *Port aux Huitres*: Port of Oysters. So named by Samuel de Champlain

2) Billingsgate Bay: The original name of Wellfleet Harbor.

3) Billingsgate Island: Now only a shoal, this island, established as a fishing village in the early 1800s and lived in until about 1910, illustrates the dynamic nature of Wellfleet Harbor. Deforestation helped the winds and tides to carry it away.

4) Duck Harbor: Wellfleet's original harbor before it silted in.

5) Herring River: Once a place for oystering, a dike was built across the river in the 1920s in an effort to control mosquitoes. There is now a major effort underway to restore the tidal flow.

6) Indian Neck: So named because of its Wampanoag residents, it is the only area open to recreational (non-commercial) shellfishing on Wednesdays and Sundays during the summer season. The Town regularly stocks the Indian Neck flats with quahogs. Small populations of soft shell clams and oysters may also be found here.

7) Lieutenant Island Oyster Reef: A project of Mass Audubon, the Town of Wellfleet and The Nature Conservancy, this is the first effort in Massachusetts to restore a natural oyster reef. Three different types of material – spat blocks, reef balls and loose cultch (shell) – are being deployed to collect ‘spat’.

8) Shellfish Grants: Shellfish grants are marked by yellow poly balls and can only be harvested by the grant holder.

**CENTER OF TOWN**

9) Main Street: As parts of Wellfleet silted in or eroded, people moved their homes to be closer to the new center of fishing and commerce. 205 and 313 Main Street were moved from Billinggate Island. “Meadowbrook,” opposite the Wellfleet Library, was moved from Bound Brook Island.

10) Commercial Street: This street, a vital link between Main Street and the Harbor, was once lined with piers and other businesses serving fishermen.

11) Train Depot: Oysters can survive for several weeks out of the water if packed properly. When the train came to Wellfleet in 1871 it meant faster shipping for oysters and quahogs.

12) Railroad Bridge Oyster Shacks: These shacks lined the bridge (see cover photo). Some were moved to other locations in town. The last of them disintegrated in the mid-1960s.

13) Duck Creek: Wharves and shipyards used to be located all along this deep and safe anchorage. Puddle Creek was an early name for the mouth of Duck Creek. The Town of Wellfleet is creating an oyster sanctuary here with the goal of improving water quality in the creek.

14) Wharves: Wellfleet’s first wharf was built before 1720 at Griffin Island, followed by wharves on the Herring River and a store (River Wharf Company) on Bound Brook. When areas to the north silted in, shipping shifted to Duck Creek where John Harding built the first wharf in 1830. As the fishing and shellfishing industry grew, Commercial Wharf was built at the end of Commercial Street (1835) and South Wharf on Blackfish Creek (1840). Wharves spread along Mayo Beach with the construction of Central Wharf in 1863 and the Mercantile Wharf in 1870. Another was built in 1856 at Old Wharf Point in South Wellfleet. The wharves disappeared as Wellfleet’s economy turned increasingly toward tourism.

15) Baker Avenue: This street is named after Lorenzo Dow Baker, a Wellfleet fisherman and fruit importer whose business was a precursor to the United Fruit Company, built and ran the Cape Codder. The first gasoline-powered oyster boat on Cape Cod.

16) Beach Permit Office: Located at the marina, this is the place to apply for a recreational shellfishing license, to become familiar with regulations and learn when and where shellfishing is permitted. Off-season, permits are issued in Town Hall.

17) Spit'n Chatter Club: A gathering of locals which took place in the Everett Higgins Shellfish Shop where the town marina is now located. It was described by Doug Roberts in a 1984 article in the Cape Codder: “Before the days of television, all the local news, politics, social happenings and the hilarious doings of the ‘foreigners’ emanated from the Spit and Chatter Club. The membership, of course, was closed. One had to be a lifelong resident of Wellfleet. wear hip boots folded down, carry a quahug rake, play checkers, be fluent in local profanity and clam up when customers came to buy shellfish.” The building was moved and is now part of the Pearl Restaurant.

18) Shellfish Shack: Wellfleet’s Shellfish Constable gives shellfish and aquaculture talks here during Wellfleet’s annual OysterFest.

19) Oyster Shack: Located on a new deck at Mayo Beach, this was one of the shacks used to shore gear and process oysters for shipping. A SPAT grant from proceeds of the Wellfleet OysterFest helped restore it.

20) Sealshipt Oyster Company: Built on the site of the former Central Wharf, the Sealshipt buildings were located near the Lighthouse Keepers House on Mayo Beach. Jacob Ockers, owner of Sealshipt, was the largest individual oyster grower and shipper in the United States with operations from the Chesapeake north.

21) Chequesett Inn and Doctor David Belding’s Aquaculture Laboratory: The pilings visible here are the remains of a large inn built by Lorenzo Dow Baker on top of the former Mercantile Wharf. As fishing declined, Baker recognized the potential for tourism in Wellfleet. Beginning in 1905, the wharf also housed the lab of David Belding, a pioneer in aquaculture and author of publications which Wellfleet growers still use.

**TO LEARN MORE**

22) Wellfleet Historical Society: Located at 266 Main Street, WHS has an exhibit on oystering in Wellfleet. David Wright, author of *The Famous Beds of Wellfleet: a shellfishing history and an invaluable source of information on shellfishing, is a staff member.*
History of Shellfishing in Wellfleet

Shellfish and Wellfleet have been intertwined throughout history. In his book, *A Geography of Oysters: The Connoisseur's Guide To Oyster Eating In North America*, Rowan Jacobsen observes “Wellfleets were big before the United States was.” The Pononakatten Indians, part of the Wampanoag Nation, made ample use of local shellfish as evidenced by the middens they left behind. In 1606, Samuel de Champlain christened Wellfleet Harbor “Port aux Huitres” for its most obvious resource. The first European settlers called the area, then part of Eastham, “Billingsgate” after London’s famous fish market. The origin of “Wellfleet” may be a similarly named place in England known for its oysters or a reference to the whaling that used to be an important part of the local economy.

Harvesting and commercial sale of local shellfish began soon after European settlement. By 1665, oysters were being shipped by water to Boston and Salem. However by the time of the American Revolution, overharvesting, the use of oyster shells for fertilizer and plaster, and blowing sand from de forested hills had severely reduced the catch. The Massachusetts legislature was moved to regulate the oystering in Billingsgate Bay and, in 1773, to end all commercial use. By 1775, all of the local oysters were gone.

Yet, while the oysters were gone, Wellfleet Harbor remained a perfect environment for their nurturing. The demand for oysters was strong, and oysters shipped well, staying fresh for weeks within their shells. By 1793, oysters from Chesapeake Bay and elsewhere were being “laid down” in Wellfleet Harbor. While the waters were too cold for the southern oysters to spawn, they did thrive and, feeding on the nutrient-rich waters, acquired the distinctive taste and texture of Wellfleet oysters.

By 1800, the oyster industry was booming again in Wellfleet. Businesses not only grew oysters, they shipped and marketed them throughout the eastern half of the United States and to parts of Europe. Great wharves were built on Duck Creek, Mayo Beach, Blackfish Creek and in South Wellfleet. Branches of Wellfleet companies were opened in Boston and New York. Beginning in 1860, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts authorized town selectmen to lease acreage to private individuals and companies for aquaculture.

The Civil War slowed business, and Wellfleet began to have competition from elsewhere. Some Wellfleet companies opened plants in Maryland and Virginia where they shucked and packed Chesapeake oysters. In 1876, E.P. Cook made the first attempt to grow oysters from “seed” instead of just fattening larger ones. The train arrived in 1871 in Wellfleet, and, in 1874, oyster dredging began. Harvesting by steam- and diesel-powered boats, towing metal scoops called dredges, greatly increased the catch. In 1907, at its greatest extent, 2,182 acres had been leased for aquaculture.

With faster boats and, most significantly, train transportation, shipping of other varieties of shellfish began. The quahog industry grew quickly and began to challenge the amount of acreage leased to the big oyster companies. But, Prohibition closed oyster bars and the demand for oysters fell. Businesses began to close with the D. Atwood Company, the last, closing in 1936. In 1939, train service to Wellfleet ended.

In the 1930s and 1940s the major harvest was scallops. Regarded as poisonous, they were not eaten until after the 1870s. Razor clams (called “razorfish” locally) were harvested as bait. The late 1960s produced a great harvest of softshell clams. While shellfish culturing, particularly quahogs, continued in Wellfleet, it was declining and, by 1973, there were just 65 acres under cultivation in 15 grants. The big companies were gone.

Then in the 1980s and 1990s a new generation of small business entrepreneurs took over with an instinct for marketing, a goal of sustainable harvesting and an appreciation of *terroir*. Many of these same faces can be seen on the flats today. In 2007, seafood dealers reported to the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries that 4,072,700 pounds of Wellfleet shellfish (wild and cultured) were sold with revenue of $3,401,000 to 174 permit holders. Currently, there are about 60 shellfish grants in Wellfleet, totaling 240 acres, where quahogs and oysters are grown.