

## Following Ben Franklin's Path Down the North Fork

👤 Posted by [Beth Young](#) • 📅 August 24, 2014 • 📄 Top Stories • 1 Comment



Thirty miles to the Suffolk Courthouse.

If you are steeped in Southold lore, you know about the day in 1755 when Benjamin Franklin, then the postmaster for the British colonies, took a trip down the North Fork to measure the distance from the Suffolk County courthouse in Riverhead to the Oysterponds ferry in Orient, with a crew who placed granite mile markers along the path.

The mile markers were used to gauge postal rates, which in those days were determined based on the distance letters traveled.

Many of these headstone-like slabs are still here, in Southold Town (historians have surmised that the mile markers in Riverhead Town were wood, and have't survived the more than 250 years since Franklin's crew had them installed).

If you don't know what to look for, they blend into the landscape, but once you know they're here, it's very easy to pick them out, standing along the south side of the Main Road beginning in Laurel, heading north at Boisseau Avenue in Southold and then on along the North Road to Orient (in the old days, you couldn't get across Mill Creek, and carriages took the North Road instead).

Members of the committee that is preparing for next year's 375th Anniversary of Southold Town are planning a celebration of the mile markers in conjunction with the festivities, and I was lucky to be able to take a recent trip to survey the present conditions of the stones with a member of the committee.

We took with us a small book, "Benjamin Franklin's North Fork Milestones," published by Robert P. Long in 1991, which detailed the condition of the stones at that time. You can get this book at the Southold Historical Society's headquarters.

A lot has changed in the world in the 23 years since Mr. Long's book was published, but surprisingly little has changed for the mile markers. They were spaced every mile using a "weasel," a sort of worm gear that made a cracking noise every tenth of a mile.

It was exactly 30 miles from the courthouse, which then stood at the head of Peconic Avenue in Riverhead, roughly where Ninow's music store and Jerry Steiner's eyeglass shop are now, to the head of the line of cars en route to Connecticut at the Orient ferry.

The mile markers each simply list the distance from their location to the courthouse. The first, on Franklinville Road in Laurel, just east of the Elbow Too restaurant (which was once the Laurel Post Office), reads "7 Miles to Suffolk CH," and the last reads "30 Miles to Suffolk CH."

Benjamin Franklin didn't say that brevity is the soul of wit (that honor goes to Shakespeare). In fact, I don't even know if he was funny in person. But he certainly believed in being an efficient guy, and big headstone-like mile markers seemed to him the most efficient way to keep track of the postal rates, with during colonial days were charged by peoples' distance from post offices.

Today, many of these markers are in peoples' backyards. They're on the edge of farm fields or in the highway right of way. They're a hazard to snowplows and the drunk drivers who speed down Southold's roads after a day at the wineries. But for some reason, nearly all of Southold's stones are still intact.

In Laurel, the first stone, seven miles from the courthouse, is tucked back from a split rail fence, in the lawn of a house that looks like it could have been here in colonial days, but is now as thoroughly modern as everything else on the North Fork.

We set our mile marker truck's odometer and set off in search of the location of the second marker. Mr. Long's book said it was destroyed in an auto accident. The odometer said it should have been in the parking lot of the Mattituck Town & Country Real Estate office.

When you start out on a historical expedition like this, you often begin in the hope you will find something no one has ever found before. This got a lot worse for me after the History Channel started running reality shows about nutty people who try to dig up new information about history. But it got a lot better after I threw out my TV.

We jumped out of the truck and poked around in Town & Country's juniper bushes. We peered in their storm drains and did a quick walk around the office. Anyone watching us would think we were scoping out the real estate office like those guys on The Property Brothers scope out a new house. Either that or we could have been drunken winery slobs looking for a place to pee. But life isn't really anything like reality TV. It appeared to us that the stone had, in fact, been destroyed in an auto accident decades ago, like it says in Mr. Long's book.

The mile marker in Mattituck is also in the middle of a split rail fence. When we visited, its backside was being sprayed by someone's lawn sprinkler, just up the street from the shuttered construction project that should have been of the Hudson City Savings Bank and was once a cluster of houses where a few of my friends lived when I was growing up around the curve at Love Lane. Nothing in Mattituck is the way it was in 1991.

Mr. Long's book says Marker 9 is 30 yards west of the Blue Water Fish Market and the Marine Ships Chandlery. Neither one of those businesses still exists, but the marker is here, well-taken-care of, and it is one of the lucky markers whose lettering was recently painted black, thereby ensuring the proper pricing and delivery of modern-day colonial mail.

The next marker, Marker Number 10, is not so lucky. It's in the weeds just east of Mattituck High School. Mr. McKenna hadn't thought to adopt it. He didn't think about those sorts of things.

The August sun was beating down but we were in the cool thicket of an old-time Mattituck patch of vacant highwyside woods, communing with this neglected mile marker. The woods were thick with a smell that reminds me of deer tick nymphs and poison ivy and all sorts of other fun things about a Long Island summer.

We passed on into Cutchogue, where things seemed in better repair. But things always seem in good repair in a place that keeps winning a prize for being the sunniest place in the state.

The next one was easy to spot, on top of a berm in front of the farmhouse at the top of Manor Hill. You may call Manor Hill Moore's Hill or you may not even think it has a name, but once you drive down Manor Hill, you're also on the final approach to Cutchogue. It's near Pellegriani Vineyards, if you're into the wineries and all that stuff.

Marker 12 is illegible and pockmarked, but still standing next to someone's driveway in front of a picture-praty picture North Fork farm vue just east of King Kullen. Get out and make your family take a picture so that you know you were here. Don't crash your car heading out into traffic, or you'll end up at Ted's Auto Body staring at the next marker while waiting for an estimate on your car.

Marker 15 is by a field that is usually planted in that great North Fork crop of sod, but it had been freshly plowed when we passed by. Greenport Harbor Brewing Company's new brewery is right across the street. We went inside to see if they knew about the piece of Ben Franklin history across the street from them. They were trying to get their brewery up and running and were too busy dealing with the building inspector's office to pay too much attention to the arcane colonial bureaucracy we were chasing.

We hopped back in the car and hightailed it to Marker 16, in the weeds in front of Catapano Dairy. It was in the shade and we were grateful. We sat in the weeds across the street from the triangular memorial park. We were feeling the ancestors, the Youngs who crawled all over the North Fork in those early

days, colonizing and whatnot in the name of their own religious freedom. Or something.

The schoolhouse where Walt Whitman briefly taught in Southold in 1840 once stood on Triangle Park. It was named the Locust Grove School, but after Whitman was kicked out of town for being who he was, Southolders called it the Sodom School.

We sat at our Ben Franklin marker and looked across the Main Road at the Walt Whitman school and wondered about whether it matters that these people were here before us.

Marker 17, in front of the Presbyterian Manse of the founding church of Southold, wasn't much to look at. I sat in the green grass and waited for a sign that the ghost of my ninth great grandfather, Southold founder and Reverend John Youngs, was still here. Across the street was a pizza parlor. Up the road was the Bank of America. My stomach growled. We got back in the truck and carried on.

Now it's believed (according to Mr. Long's book), that Ben Franklin stayed the night near the next marker up on Boisseau Avenue, at a place known at the time as Moore's Tavern, which was moved and eventually demolished in 1936.

Moore's Tavern was later the site of the only battle of the Revolutionary War fought in Southold, where Captain Hart of Cutchogue and his men slew 11 British soldiers in the brush after an evening of libation at the tavern.

On our visit, the stone was just inside the corner marker of someone's private property. Someone had just pruned some trees from a six-foot blue Werner fiberglass ladder and then, perhaps, gone inside for a glass of water.

We rambled on before they caught us taking pictures of their property, and headed up to the North Road and one of the narrowest spots on this long, narrow island.

We were nearly mowed down by fast-moving traffic taking photos of the well-kept Marker 19 on a curve just before Town Beach. Marker 20 was chilling in the sun up the street from the Soundview Inn. Where Marker 21 should have been was now a bunch of stormwater drains. We poked around in the tick woods, looking for a marker stump. This one was missing in the book and it was missing in real life. It all seemed kind of right.

Marker 22 was supposed to be behind a farm stand if you take the book's word, but it's instead buried in the depths of someone's hedge, carefully relettered in black paint by someone with a shaky-but-willing hand.

Whoever lived here had given up on selling vegetables and given in to suburban living, but they hadn't given up on old Ben Franklin and what he means.

The heat was beating down on us when we got out of truck at Marker 24. Old Ben Franklin had been playing some tricks on us. Maybe he wasn't so careful — some of his markers were a weasel-length short or a weasel-length over the one-mile mark. It was only a tenth of a mile off, but it shook our faith in our Founding Fathers.

We tried to shake the nagging feeling off, but here we were, in East Marion, staring down a marker in a weed patch, the smell of freshly mown highway-edge mugwort fresh in our faces, and wondering how much longer it would be 'till we got to the end.

A rakish Lewis & Nichols Real Estate sign, promising beach rights, was plopped at an angle to our mile marker, just up the street, copying the angle of the mile marker, as if in conversation with Franklin's ghost. The sweat was pouring in our eyes.

We drove on to the East Marion chapel and admired the replacement stone and the fine landscaping surrounding Marker 24. It was time to head on to Orient, the land of missing mile markers.

Now, rumor has it Ben Franklin wasn't with his crew as they set these last few stones in Orient, but 259-year-old rumors are difficult to track down and we were tired and cranky and fed up.

Marker 25 should have been on the causeway but the book said it was missing. We stopped the truck when the odometer told us we were at the place, stood on the wall and stared across Orient Harbor, peered into the rip-rap and the weeds of the causeway, wondering if pieces of the old marker were strewn in with the stone.

Then we turned around and there was a marker on the wrong side of the street, in someone's lawn, right behind our backs. A mystery had been solved since Robert Long's book was published. But how? We didn't know.

We drove on to just before Latham's Farm Stand. The book promised the marker was 100 yards west of the farm. We paced it out. We paced back and forth. We asked for directions at the farm stand. No one knew where the marker had been. We were fed up. I was so fed up that I broke the door handle off the truck as I climbed back in.

There is only one man who can fix these kinds of problems, and that's Billy Hands. He was pumping gas into a bunch of gas cans outside of the Orient Service Center. We asked him what was going on with Orient's mile markers and he promised that they were here. He wasn't saying anything more. That's the Orient way.

As to the door handle, he recommended my companion find a less strengthly assistant.

We drove on, past Marker 27, which isn't a marker at but a metal sign on a broken metal signpost stuck in a farmer's deer fence at the edge of the road.

Where Marker 28 should have been seemed like a swamp. An awful lot of the North Fork seems like a swamp when you look closely at it. You shouldn't look closely at it. Just drink your wine.

Marker 29 was buried in roadside mugwort on slightly higher ground, but it had a fresh coat of paint, and then we were at the Orient Ferry terminal, with a freshly unloaded ferry and a bunch of cars en route to Connecticut and a fresh clean view of the final marker and the ferry and the cars.

This is where Ben Franklin got on a boat and left our shores, leaving us with these strange artifacts of his outsized life. We could have stopped for ice cream at the ferry café but the parking lot was too jam packed with tourists and the sun was too hot.

We'd been on a fool's errand but we didn't feel like fools. We felt the modern world was a static field overlaying history, and there was no way to remove the static and peer underneath and see what was really going on.

Heading home, we found the marsh marker. It turns out, that section of the highway hadn't existed in 1755 because it was a marsh. The marsh marker was on the north side of the main road, not far from a street sign that simply read "Old Main Road." Robert Long's book said Orient resident Ralph Williams had the marker in his garage, and was awaiting word on whether to reset it. This summer, it seems, it's in its rightful place.

We found out later from Highway Superintendent Vinnie Orlando that there are three more missing markers that are actually sitting in the highway barn in Peconic. Sometime soon, they may be back out on the street, a subtle, weasel-click reminder of what our country has been.