

# NEIGHBORHOOD DESCRIPTION

The Jones Island peninsula is currently home to Milwaukee's largest sewage treatment plant, mountains of road salt, boxcars and railroad tracks, lift docks, warehouses, petroleum tanks, and a tiny park that commemorates the days of the Kashubes and their fishing village. See photos below.

## HISTORY

In the history of Milwaukee, Jones Island had several incarnations. Today Jones Island is a peninsula. And why is a peninsula called Jones *Island*? Over a series of habitations, the topography of the peninsula was altered by both human and natural intrusions. The name derives in part from a Captain James Monroe Jones who built an important shipyard on the peninsula in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. With growth in commerce, lake vessels needed better access to Milwaukee's rivers. In 1857, the city completed a "straight cut" across the peninsula, eliminating nearly a mile of tortuous river channel for grateful lake captains. The straight cut severed the peninsula's connection to the mainland—hence came the designation "island."

However, within a decade storm waves filled the Island's old river mouth with sand and the island was once again a peninsula—but the name 'Jones Island' persisted.

### **Early populations**

When Father Zenobius Membre visited the peninsula in 1679, there were villages occupied by North American Indians of the Fox and Mascouten tribes. Later, other Natives would arrive. According to Pierre Vieau, Onautissah, king of the Potawatomi, was born in the mid-1700s. He established a village on what would become Jones Island populated by 200-500 Potawatomi and Ojibwe, with lodges built of bark and matting. The villagers, who were active in the fur trade, lived on wild rice and fish. They left the peninsula during the era of Indian Removal.

Shortly afterwards, Captain Monroe Jones and his shipbuilders arrived. Jones Island now had a name.

The next and last major population to occupy Jones Island were the fisherfolk that would occupy the storied fishing village on Jones Island. These included a large number of Kashubes and a few Pomeranians, Irish and Scandinavians.

### *The Kashubes*

The Kashubes were descendants of a Slavic tribe that settled on the Baltic seacoast between 600 and 900 AD. They once peopled the entire area of eastern Germany as far as the Elbe River. Traditionally a large proportion of Kashubes relied on fishing for their

subsistence. Over hundreds of years their numbers dwindled and many members of the remaining population settled on the Bay of Puck and the Hel peninsula on the Baltic coast of Poland, a region later known as Kashuby. Although they had shared geographic areas with Prussians and--most particularly--Poles, many members of these groups considered the Kashubes to be a separate ethnicity. The Kashubes themselves tended to self-identify as Poles. Most Kashubes lived in small egalitarian villages in their coastal region with limited contact with the wider society.

Between 1775 and 1918, Poland was partitioned by Austria, Russia and Prussia. In the 1870s Prussian leader Bismarck initiated a Germanization policy in the western section of Poland designed to bar speaking of languages other than German, weaken the Catholic Church, and replace Polish landowners with German citizens. This policy (and others related to partition) led to massive emigrations of people from Poland in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, including the Kashubes. Many came to the United States. Some of the new arrivals found a home in today's Riverwest area, where they founded St. Hedwig's Parish. Another of the settlement areas discovered by early Kashubian arrivals was Jones Island. The news of a vacant coastal area spread fast and soon the earliest immigrants were joined by hundreds of other Kashubes.

The Kashubes organized a fishing village on the island, although few residents ever held titles to the land. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the population of the island village was between 1200 and 1600 people--most of them Kashubes from Poland, along with a small population of German-speaking Pomeranians, and a handful of Norwegians and Irish.

The Kashubes carried many of their cooperative practices over from Poland. In Kashuby, as on Jones Island, 12 to 15 villagers would gather at the cottage of temporary leaders and decide how to divide up the workload or the cost of a new net or boat repairs. Each group was usually assigned exclusive rights to fish in certain spots.

The mainly Kashubian population on Jones Island formed the most important commercial fishing settlement in Southeastern Wisconsin. Even well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the villagers had few modern facilities on the island. Most relied on kerosene lamps and outhouses, and drew their water from barrels sunk in the sandy soil. As non-tax-paying squatters, the islanders received few municipal services such as law-enforcement patrols. They generally policed themselves.

Life in the Jones Island fishing village teemed with energy. A typical work day was 12 hours long. But as rigorous as the workload was on the island, leisure time activities involved no less energy. The plethora of bars and dancehalls on the island also drew mainlanders in large numbers. The islanders' work and subsistence strategies were demanding, and life on the Lake could also be dangerous. See resident profile below.

### **Jones Island Random Resident (1920s)**

*Names selected randomly from 1920 census. (Information from U.S. Census and other public records)*

#### **The Budzisz family**

August Bernard Anton Budzisz was born in 1870 in a Kashubian community in Poland and immigrated to Milwaukee in 1888. His wife, Franciszka (nee Czarkowski) was the daughter of Polish—probably Kashubian—immigrants. Her family had originally settled in Georgia and later migrated to Milwaukee and the Riverwest area. The couple married in 1894, built a home on Jones Island, and began a family.

Soon, August became the captain of his own fishing boat, the *Mayflower*. The couple had nine children. As the sons grew into their teens, they helped out on the fishing boat while the daughters cleaned the nets and dried the fish on the shores. One of their sons, Raymond, was Captain Budzisz's main assistant. The pair often faced hard seas, storms, boat malfunction, and below zero temperatures to bring home their daily catch.

However, on June 11, 1925, tragedy struck. The *Mayflower* caught fire 10 miles off of the Milwaukee harbor. With no other options, father and son took their chances jumping into the choppy waters of Lake Michigan, where they perished. The widowed Franciszka Budzisz told *Milwaukee Journal* reporters the following day (June 12, 1925): "They both loved the lake and lived on it most of the time. It seems cruel too that the lake would finally take them but such things could never be foretold."

Father and son were buried at St. Adalbert's Cemetery in Milwaukee.

#### *The last days of the fishing village*

The first threat to the village and its residents began as early as 1889 when the Illinois Steel Company, a huge iron mill just south of the settlement, wanted better docking facilities for its fleet of lake ships. Illinois Steel tried to evict the fisherfolk from the northern half of Jones Island, using controversial claims based on tax deeds and the land title of a shipbuilding colleague of Captain Jones. The islanders held no formal claims to their village. The battle with Illinois Steel raged on for nearly 20 years. Ultimately the courts found irregularities in the Company's claim to the land, and the village and most of its conflict-weary people stayed put . . . for a time.

But threats were to follow from another direction. The demands of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were beginning to encroach on the islanders' lives. They now faced pressures from government. The city condemned the fishing village in 1914. However, the city, unlike the Steel Company, was willing to pay the residents for the land. The islanders, perhaps exhausted by the long court battles or perhaps perceiving a futility in further confrontations, did not contest the city's eventual order to vacate the village. The village's last informal 'mayor,' Felix Struck, was the final islander to leave. He operated

his tavern on the island until 1943. At age 74, Struck and his family were formally evicted.

In 1974 the City of Milwaukee constructed a tiny park (to commemorate the fishing village) on the exact site of Felix Struck's tavern. Today, hundreds of Kashubes return to this spot every first Saturday in August for a day of picnicking, reuniting, genealogy sharing, and general frolic.

### Current populations

No residential neighborhoods exist today on Jones Island. Ten people in five residences are currently on the Island. Most residents are women and claim German ancestry. The median household income is over \$40,000.

## INTERESTING FEATURES

- **Water Reclamation Facility** on the corner of E. Jones St. & Harbor Dr., where the fertilizer Milorganite is produced
- **Kaszube's Park** on Carferry Dr., the smallest park in the United States

## RECURRING OUTINGS

In the following section the website addresses have been eliminated due to technical problems with the various ways different web browser display PDF files. Website information on these events is available through the book *Milwaukee Area Outings on the Cheap*. See below.

TOUR OF JONES ISLAND WATER RECLAMATION FACILITY			
When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
During Doors Open Milwaukee, late Sep., Sat., 10am-5pm	Meet: Jones Island Water Reclamation Facility, corner of E. Jones St. & Harbor Dr., Jones Island	Choice of one hour or 30 minute tour of Water Reclamation Facility to learn how the facility produces a fertilizer as the by-product of the water reclamation process—Milorganite.	Free

KASHUBIAN PICNIC			
When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
First Sat. in August, all day	Kaszub Park on S. Carferry Dr. on Jones Island	Picnic sponsored by descendants of former settlers on Jones Island. Music, food, cultural presentations.	Free, general public welcome; pot luck dish welcome

These outings are provided courtesy of MECAH Publishing. To access the book that provides nearly 600 outings—all priced under \$10—for the entire Greater Milwaukee area, go to <http://mecahmilwaukee.com/NonFiction.html>

## QUOTES FROM RESIDENTS

**In 2001, Urban Anthropology Inc. conducted an oral history of former residents (and their descendants) of the fishing village on Jones Island<sup>1</sup>.**

“We’d get up early and work late. We went by compass everywhere. On the way back we’d clean the nets out of fish so seagulls would not follow us. When we came back we had a reel for nets and let them dry.”

“There were lots of saloons and eating places [on the island]. Felix Struck smoked fish and sold fresh fish. People came to the island for dancing on weekends. There was the Empire Fish Co, Ewigs, and Smith Brothers.”

“We sewed our own shoes and bought heels from the dime store.”

“My great uncles believed they had the power to see the future. One had a crystal ball. There were two witches on the island—Christina D [NAME]and Dorothy were witches. . . There were a lot of people who believed in spirits and ghosts.”

“Nothing came easy. We would help people who asked. We didn’t fraternize with mainland people [because] they didn’t want to be associated with us. We didn’t accept help from outsiders, just our own . . . [We didn’t] want to be obligated to others.”

“You gave respect to those with the biggest boats; if you didn’t own one, you worked for those that did. The largest were 40-plus feet in length and all steel. When we moved to Walker Street, we were still in fishing business. Grandpa used to start at five in the morning, get the heat started in the steam engine. Others come in at 7:30.”

“My parents didn’t allow us to go to the water because too many had drowned. Mostly we played baseball as kids.”

“Every weekend there were dances on the island. People would come to the mainland for fish fries and the dances.”

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<sup>1</sup> Urban Anthropology Inc. complies with human subjects requirements of formal research and asks informants to sign informed consent forms that stipulate anonymity, hence names are not provided with the quotes.

“The kids had a lot of responsibility. Making nets, cleaning nets, selling nets. Until you got married, you gave the money to the family.”

“There would be this cruise kind of boat that would circle the island and gawk at us. You could see the captain pointing us out—‘See, there are people that live there.’”

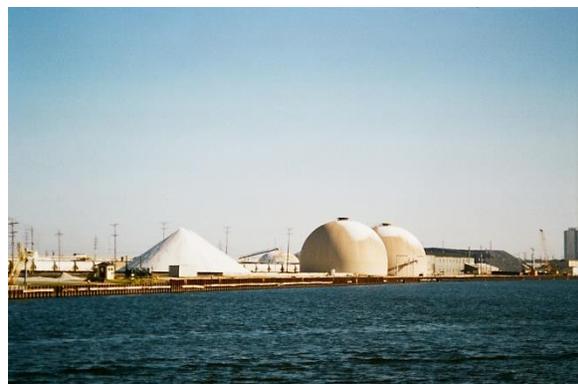
“Later, after we left the island, we would always talk about the island. There were never bad memories.”

“The culture of the island was passed down. My father got into boating very early. My grandfather passed this down, along with stories about sports on the water and swimming across the Milwaukee River.”

## PHOTOS



Port of Milwaukee



Salt stores on Jones Island



Kaszube's Park



Annual picnic at Kaszube's Park

For more information on Milwaukee neighborhoods, refer to John Gurda's *Milwaukee: City of Neighborhoods*.

Do you have great photos of this neighborhood? Are you a resident with an interesting quote about this neighborhood? Do you have recurring outings, additions, corrections, or general comments about this neighborhood? Please email your input to [JFLanthropologist@sbcglobal.net](mailto:JFLanthropologist@sbcglobal.net)