

# BARNSTABLE COUNTY THEN & NOW

A visual timeline of how local government on Cape Cod has evolved since 1685

## THEN: THE COLONIAL ERA (1685-1800)

**1685 BARNSTABLE COUNTY IS ESTABLISHED**  
Plymouth Colony forms Barnstable County to bring courts and records closer to Cape Cod towns.



**1685 MASHPEE WAMPANOAG LAND DEED CONFIRMED**  
Plymouth Colony recognizes a 25-square-mile deed reserved by the Tribe in 1665.  
• an early act of Wampanoag sovereignty amid colonization.



**1690 OLD JAIL CONSTRUCTED IN BARNSTABLE**  
The original county jail  
• Now the oldest wooden jail in the U.S.  
• Served until the 1820s.



**1780 MASSACHUSETTS CONSTITUTION ADOPTED**  
Barnstable County continues operating under the new Commonwealth framework, managing courts, jails, & land records.



**1774 CITIZENS SHUT DOWN BRITISH COURTS IN BARNSTABLE**  
Cape residents block the courthouse, ending royal authority months before the Revolution begins.



**1691 PLYMOUTH COLONY IS ABSORBED INTO THE PROVINCE OF MASSACHUSETTS BAY**  
Barnstable County continues under the new royal government.



## GROWTH & MODERNIZATION (1800-1897)

**1821 SECOND BARNSTABLE JAIL CONSTRUCTED**  
A new jail replaces the original wooden structure, used into the early 20th century.

**1827 FIRE DESTROYS EARLY LAND RECORDS AT REGISTRY OF DEEDS**  
Many original 17th- and early 18th-century documents are lost in a fire at the county courthouse.



**1828 THE MASSACHUSETTS LEGISLATURE ABOLISHED THE COURT OF SESSIONS AND THE COMMISSIONERS OF HIGHWAYS**  
Replacing them with an appointed Board of County Commissioners.

**1918 BARNSTABLE COUNTY HOSPITAL OPENS IN BOURNE**  
Established as a tuberculosis sanatorium, the hospital evolves to serve various public health needs over the decades before closing in 1995.

**1914 CAPE COD CANAL OPENS**  
Redefines Cape Cod's geography and economy; increases need for regional coordination, infrastructure, and emergency planning.

**1899 CAPE COD COOPERATIVE EXTENSION FOUNDED**  
Launches community education programs in agriculture, youth development (4-H), nutrition, marine science, and sustainability.



**1831 BARNSTABLE SUPERIOR COURTHOUSE IS CONSTRUCTED**  
Designed by renowned architect Alexander Parris, who also designed Boston's Quincy Market, the Greek Revival granite courthouse remains in use today & is one of the oldest continuously operating courthouses in the United States.



**1926 DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & ENVIRONMENT CREATED**  
One of the first regional public health departments in the state, supporting water safety, sanitation, and disease prevention.

**1935 BARNSTABLE COUNTY JAIL AND HOUSE OF CORRECTION CONSTRUCTED**  
Located in Barnstable Village, this facility becomes the operational base of the Sheriff's Office, which is part of county government at the time.

**1935 SAGAMORE AND BOURNE BRIDGES COMPLETED**  
Major access points to Cape Cod, increasing mobility & regional service needs.



**1960 ADDITION BUILT ONTO THE 1935 COUNTY JAIL**  
Constructed to ease overcrowding and improve inmate housing conditions.

**1988 HOME RULE CHARTER APPROVED**  
Transforms Barnstable County into a modern regional government with a legislative Assembly of Delegates and an executive Board of Regional Commissioners—one of the few counties in Massachusetts to survive state reforms in the 1980s and '90s.



**1978 COURT OPERATIONS TRANSFERRED TO THE STATE**  
As part of a judicial reorganization in Massachusetts, Barnstable County no longer oversees court administration. The state assumes full responsibility for operating the courts, while the county continues to maintain the courthouse facilities.



## NOW: REGIONAL LEADERSHIP & RESILIENCE (1988-PRESENT)

**1990 CAPE COD COMMISSION CREATED**  
A regional planning and regulatory agency guiding land use, water protection, and smart growth across the Cape.

**1996 COUNTY DREDGE PROGRAM LAUNCHED**  
Offers cost-effective dredging services for towns, improving navigation & flood mitigation.



**1997 CHILDREN'S COVE OPENS**  
A trauma-informed child advocacy center serving victims of abuse across Cape Cod, Martha's Vineyard, and Nantucket.

**2002 COUNTY WATER QUALITY LAB EXPANDS**  
Provides analytical support for beach safety, drinking water testing, & environmental protection for all 15 towns.



**1999 MASSTC OPENS IN SANDWICH**  
The Massachusetts Alternative Septic System Test Center is launched by **George Heufelder**, who began as an Environmental Specialist and later served as Director of the Department of Health and Environment from 2002 to 2016.

**1999 AMERICORPS CAPE COD FOUNDED**  
A public service program focused on environmental stewardship, disaster response, and community service across the region.



**2004 BARNSTABLE COUNTY CORRECTIONAL FACILITY OPENS IN BOURNE**  
A modern facility near Joint Base Cape Cod replaces the outdated jail in Barnstable Village.

**2004 BARNSTABLE COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE RELOCATES TO NEW CORRECTIONAL FACILITY**  
The Sheriff, historically part of county government, transitions operations to the new location.



**2004 OLD COUNTY JAIL REPURPOSED FOR COUNTY OFFICES**  
The former jail becomes office space for regional programs, including the Department of Health & Environment.

**2009 SHERIFF BECOMES A STATE OFFICE**  
Following statewide restructuring, all sheriffs in Massachusetts become state employees. The Barnstable County Sheriff's Office is no longer part of county government.

**ONGOING MASHPEE WAMPANOAG TRIBE REMAINS A SOVEREIGN NATION**  
One of only three surviving tribes from the original Wampanoag Nation, the Mashpee Wampanoag continue to live, lead, and protect their heritage within Barnstable County.

**TODAY BARNSTABLE COUNTY SUPPORTS 15 TOWNS THROUGH SHARED SERVICES**  
Providing leadership in public health, emergency planning, environmental protection, regional governance, and civic engagement.



**2020s COUNTY LEADS EFFORTS IN COASTAL RESILIENCE AND WASTEWATER REFORM**  
With climate change and population pressures mounting, Barnstable County plays a central role in preserving Cape Cod's future.

**2020-2022 COUNTY LEADS COVID-19 RESPONSE**  
Coordinates vaccinations, testing, PPE distribution, and regional public health planning in collaboration with all towns.

