

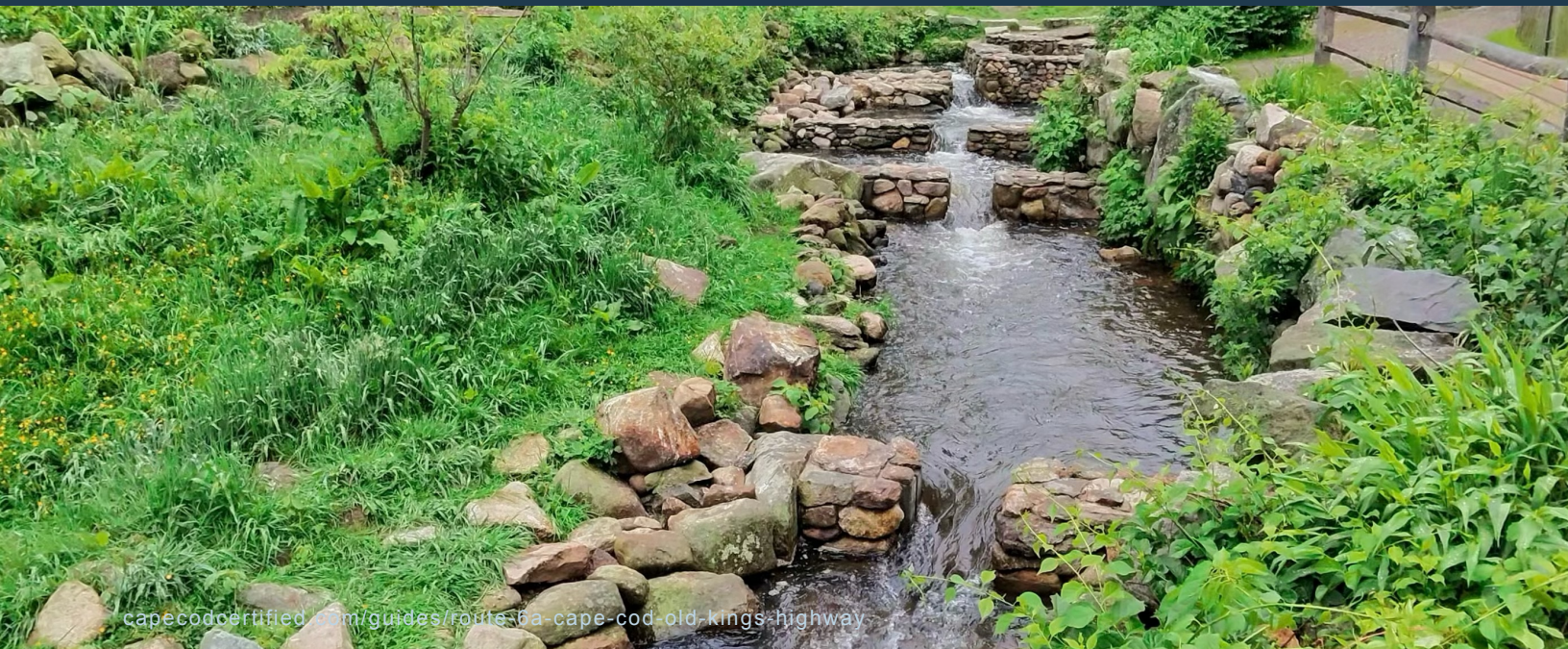


CAPE COD CERTIFIED

VISITING CAPE COD

Route 6A, Cape Cod: The Old King's Highway & Why It's the Most Beautiful Drive on the Cape

A free field guide from the people who actually live here.



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Route 6A Cape Cod — the Old King’s Highway — is the road that predates the Cape Cod most visitors know. While Route 6 carries the traffic and Route 28 carries the commercial sprawl, Route 6A carries history. It runs two narrow lanes from Sagamore in Bourne through Sandwich, Barnstable, Yarmouth Port, Dennis, and Brewster, and if you have never driven it from end to end, you have not fully understood what this peninsula is.

Designated a National Scenic Byway, Route 6A was laid out in the 1600s as a colonial postal route — the Old Colony Road — connecting the early settlements of the Cape. Today it is lined with stone walls, saltbox houses, sea captains’ mansions, church steeples, and centuries-old oaks whose canopies close over the road in summer like a green tunnel. The drive from Sagamore to Brewster Center takes roughly 1.5 to 2 hours without stops. With stops — and there will be stops — plan a full day.

Sandwich: Where Route 6A Begins

Sandwich is the oldest town on Cape Cod, incorporated in 1639, and the natural starting point of any Route 6A drive heading east. The village center sits right on the highway, and it rewards a deliberate walk of 45 to 60 minutes.

The Sandwich Glass Museum on Main Street tells the story of the Boston and Sandwich Glass Company, which operated from 1825 to 1888 and made Sandwich one of the most important industrial towns in New England during the antebellum period. The pressed and blown glass produced here — in colors that still feel contemporary — is now collectible, and the museum’s collection is excellent for a small-town institution. [VERIFY current hours and admission]

A short walk from the museum, Shawme Pond anchors the historic district. The Dexter Grist Mill, a working restoration dating to 1654, sits at the pond’s edge. The First Church of Christ — white clapboard, tall steeple, colonial geometry — has stood near the pond since the 1600s in various forms. Together they create a tableau that feels more Vermont than beach destination, which is exactly the point. Sandwich is the Cape before the Cape became a resort.

The Dan’l Webster Inn, a full-service colonial hotel in the village center with a restaurant and pool, makes Sandwich a viable base if you want to slow-travel the 6A corridor over multiple days [VERIFY current operation and rates].

Barnstable Village: The County Seat Most Visitors Never Find

Continuing east, Route 6A passes through Barnstable Village, the county seat of Barnstable County — a civic designation that gave this stretch of road a weight and formality most of the Cape lacks. The old Barnstable County Courthouse anchors the village, and the Unitarian Church on Route 6A is one of the architectural landmarks of the road.

The Sturgis Library, just off Route 6A in Barnstable Village, claims to be the oldest library building in the United States still in continuous use as a library — the core structure dates to 1644 [VERIFY this claim before citing in print]. Whether or not that specific claim survives scrutiny, the library holds a significant collection of maritime records and Cape Cod genealogical materials, and the building itself is worth seeing.

Barnstable Village is the quieter, institutional Cape Cod that tourists almost never engage with. There are no T-shirt shops on this stretch. There is a courthouse, a library, a church, and a harbor just north of the road where working boats still tie up. Spend thirty minutes here and you will leave with a different understanding of what Barnstable County actually is.

Yarmouth Port: The Captain's Houses

The stretch of Route 6A through Yarmouth Port may be the single most concentrated collection of sea captain's houses in New England. The men who built along this road in the early and mid-1800s made their fortunes in whaling, the China Trade, and the salt industry — the Cape was an industrial economy before it was a recreational one — and they spent those fortunes on Federal and Greek Revival homes with widow's walks, elaborate entryways, and grounds that have been maintained for nearly two centuries.

The Edward Gorey House on West Main Street in Yarmouth Port is a required stop [VERIFY that it sits on Route 6A specifically]. Gorey, the illustrator whose darkly comic pen-and-ink drawings defined a particular strain of literary dread, lived in this house from 1983 until his death in 2000. The museum maintains his library, his collections of toy animals and Japanese woodblock prints, his typewriter, and the atmosphere of benevolent eccentricity he cultivated here. For anyone who grew up with Gorey's work — the PBS Mystery! animated sequences, the Gashlycrumb Tinies, the Victorian-inflected alphabet books — this is a pilgrimage site.

Yarmouth Port is also good for a slow walk on the village green and along the captain's house corridors. Many of these homes are now B&Bs or private residences; all of them are worth examining from the sidewalk. The density of architectural detail per mile here is extraordinary and largely undiscovered by visitors who arrive by Route 6 and never turn north.

Dennis and Brewster: Arts, Antiques, and Open Land

Route 6A continues through Dennis, where the Cape Playhouse on Route 6A has been producing summer theater since 1927 — the oldest professional summer theater in the United States. Bette Davis, Henry Fonda, Humphrey Bogart, and Gregory Peck all performed here early in their careers. The adjacent Cape Cinema, an Art Deco theater with a Rockwell Kent mural on its ceiling, still shows films in summer [VERIFY current season and schedule]. The Cape Museum of Fine Arts occupies the grounds adjacent to the Playhouse [VERIFY exact address and current hours].

Into Brewster, Route 6A reaches its highest density of antique shops — this stretch between Dennis and Brewster Center is the best antiquing on Cape Cod and competitive with anywhere in New England. Multi-dealer shops and single-specialist dealers line both sides of the road for miles. Budget time for this; it is the activity that most consistently extends a planned half-day drive into a full day.

Also in Brewster: the Cape Cod Museum of Natural History on Route 6A has trails through salt marsh and bayside beach habitat that most visitors to the Cape never see [VERIFY current hours and trail access]. The entrance to Nickerson State Park is nearby — 418 campsites among kettle ponds and pitch pine forest, with access to the Cape Cod Rail Trail [VERIFY current reservation platform and campsite availability].

What Route 6A Is Actually Good For

Route 6A Cape Cod rewards a specific kind of traveler: someone who finds pleasure in stopping, who wants to understand a place rather than merely visit it, and who has the time to spend. The road is not efficient. You cannot go 50 miles per hour. There are very few traffic lights and no drive-throughs. There is instead the physical record of four centuries of American life on a peninsula that was consequential long before the ferry to Nantucket existed.

What Route 6A is best for:

- **Antiquing.** The 6A corridor — particularly Dennis and Brewster — has the highest concentration of antique dealers on the Cape. Bring cash and an open trunk.
- **Architectural photography.** Stone walls, saltbox houses, Federal-style mansions, church steeples, and widow's walks appear around nearly every bend. Morning light (driving east, Sandwich to Brewster) and

afternoon light (driving west, Brewster to Sandwich) both work beautifully.

- **Avoiding Route 6 and 28 traffic.** In summer, Route 6 can back up significantly from the Sagamore Bridge through the mid-Cape. Route 6A adds time but removes frustration and replaces the highway median with something worth seeing.
- **Understanding what the Cape was before it became a resort.** The sea captains who built along this road made their money on whaling and salt, not clam chowder and mini golf. Driving 6A is the fastest way to register what Cape Cod was before it became what it is.

If you drive Route 6 one direction and Route 6A the other — or make the full loop going and returning — you will have seen both Cape Cods in a single day. That comparison is worth making.

Practical Notes for Driving the Old King’s Highway

Direction: West to east — Sandwich to Brewster — puts the morning sun at your back if you start early. East to west works better in the afternoon, when the light falls on the south-facing façades of the captain’s houses through Yarmouth Port.

Time: Budget 1.5 to 2 hours for the drive itself without stops. Add 45 to 60 minutes for Sandwich village, 30 minutes for Barnstable Village, an hour for Yarmouth Port, and 2 to 3 hours if you plan to antique through Dennis and Brewster. A full day is not excessive.

Parking: All of the village centers — Sandwich, Barnstable Village, Yarmouth Port — have small free parking areas near the main institutions. Brewster has pull-offs near the antique shops. None of it requires meters or apps.

Season: Route 6A is a year-round drive. Fall foliage along the tree-canopied stretches between Barnstable and Brewster rivals any New England leaf-peeping road. Winter reveals the architecture more clearly without summer foliage. Summer is most alive but most crowded in the antique shops. Shoulder season — May and October — offers the best combination of leaf color or spring bloom, low crowds, and open shops.

FAQ

What is the Old King’s Highway on Cape Cod? The Old King’s Highway is the historic name for Route 6A, a two-lane road that runs along the north side of Cape Cod from Sagamore through Sandwich, Barnstable, Yarmouth Port, Dennis, and Brewster. It was laid out in the 1600s as a colonial postal route and is now a National Scenic Byway, recognized for its concentration of historic architecture, stone walls, captain’s houses, and colonial village centers.

How long does it take to drive Route 6A from Sandwich to Brewster? The drive from Sandwich Center to Brewster Center takes approximately 1.5 to 2 hours without stops. Add time for Sandwich village (45–60 minutes), Barnstable Village (30 minutes), Yarmouth Port (1 hour), and the Dennis-Brewster antique corridor (2–3 hours for serious browsing). A full day is a realistic budget if you plan to stop at the major points.

Is Route 6A the same as the Old King’s Highway? Yes. Route 6A is officially designated the Old King’s Highway and the Old Colony Road in Barnstable County. It runs roughly parallel to Route 6 (the Mid-Cape Highway) but along the north side of the peninsula, closer to Cape Cod Bay. The two roads represent two different eras — and two different ideas — of what the Cape is.

What is the best thing to do on Route 6A in Brewster? Brewster has the densest concentration of antique shops on the 6A corridor — and arguably on the entire Cape. The Cape Cod Museum of Natural History on Route 6A has trails through salt marsh and bayside habitat. Nickerson State Park, nearby, offers kettle pond swimming and access to the Cape Cod Rail Trail. The combination of antiques, natural history, and outdoor access makes Brewster the most layered single stop on the road.

Ready to plan your Route 6A drive? Find locally verified restaurants, shops, lodging, and experiences in every town along the Old King's Highway at capecodcertified.com/directory.

◆ THINGS TO DO

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