

Malaga Island: An Overview of its Cultural and Natural History

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Malaga Island lies off Phippsburg in eastern Casco Bay, about 20 miles northeast of Portland, Maine. The sheltered, 42-acre island is at the mouth of the New Meadows River. Bear Island lies 100 yards to its west and the small fishing village of Sebasco is about 200 yards to the east.

“Malaga” is the Abanaki Indian word for cedar. Known as “Mitchell’s Island” during the late 18th century, Malaga Island is sometimes called “Malago” by local residents.

Native Americans inhabited Malaga Island within the last 1,000 years based on the findings of a recent archaeological survey by the University of Southern Maine. Although little is known about how these first inhabitants lived, considerably more is known about Malaga’s later residents – a mixed-race community that occupied the island’s north end from the mid 1800s to 1912 when the State forcibly removed them.

Most of the families that lived on Malaga had ancestral roots in Maine dating back 150 years or more, and moved in and out of island fishing communities for almost two centuries before settling on Malaga after the Civil War. Some of Malaga’s residents had previously lived on nearby islands, such as Bear, Yarmouth, and Sheep Islands.

Benjamin Darling, an African man from the West Indies who may or may not have been enslaved, arrived in Maine in the late 18th century with a Captain Darling to help establish a saltworks in the town of Phippsburg. Legend has it that in 1794, he was given his freedom and money to buy Horse Island after saving the Captain’s life during a shipwreck. (Horse Island, known now as Harbor Island, is located about a half mile southeast of Malaga Island.) His descendants later settled on various owned and unowned islands in eastern Casco Bay, and were among the first to reside on Malaga. Some have suggested that Malaga’s name may derive from the wreck of Captain Darling’s brig which was loaded with timber from Malaga, Spain.

In 1818, Eli Perry, one of Phippsburg’s earliest settlers, bought Malaga Island for \$150, but there is no evidence that the family ever paid taxes on the property. Although unconfirmed, Malaga’s first known resident, Henry Griffin, settled on the island’s east side in the early 1860s.

A small community was established on Malaga within several years, with the Darlings and the Griffins, black families whose members were born free in the state of Maine, being the first to settle on the island. By 1880, 27 people lived on the island, with the population increasing to 40 people in 1900.

Malaga family surnames included: Murphy, Griffin, Dunning, Johnson, Eason, Marks, McKenney, and Darling (the Tripp and Parker families arrived on the island later). James McKenney, a Phippsburg native of Scotch-Irish descent, acted as the literate spokesman and leader of the Malaga community. Because of his spokesman role and his reputation as the island’s best fisherman, McKenney was referred to as the “King of Malaga.” John Eason was a master mason and carpenter who served as a preacher when weather prevented island residents from attending services at the mainland’s Nazarene church.

Malaga’s community was racially diverse, consisting of poor African-American, mixed race, and white fishing families from the New Meadows area, as well as others of varied ethnic descent. Malaga was one of the last refuges for poor fishing families as island and coastal real estate elsewhere around Casco Bay was sold off.

Malaga's residents relied almost entirely upon local marine resources to sustain themselves. They caught groundfish using long-lines and nets from dories, and later turned to lobster fishing when groundfish stocks became depleted. They netted baitfish (herring) for income, picked berries in the summer, and dug clams from nearby tidal flats. The island's stony, glacial soils did not support much in the way of agriculture, although islanders grew vegetables such as potatoes, corn, and beans in small garden plots. A few of Malaga's residents worked on the mainland at nearby resorts and farms. The hardscrabble existence of Malaga's residents was akin to those in many other coastal Maine fishing communities. By 1892, Phippsburg's pauper relief fund began helping the islanders survive the winter months when fishing was less productive.

Following the Civil War, racial prejudice, nativism (an ideology that sought to protect American citizens and culture from foreign threats), and the eugenics movement (which held that moral standards, income, and competency were linked to race, and that humans could be "improved" through selective breeding) became more dominant in the mainstream consciousness—affecting communities across the nation.

Rumor mongers and reporters created fictionalized accounts of Malaga's community, depicting residents as escaped southern slaves or the offspring of slaves and describing islanders as immoral, lazy, shiftless, ignorant, and alcoholic. An August 1905 edition of the Casco Bay Breeze newspaper dubbed the island "Malaga, the Home of Southern Negro Blood... Incongruous Scenes on a spot of Natural Beauty in Casco Bay."

The poor condition of many of the islander's homes supposedly offended some mainland residents and spoiled the view of newly arrived, wealthy, summer visitors. Phippsburg residents feared that conditions on Malaga might threaten the town's chances to capitalize on the emerging tourist and summer cottage industry, which offered economic hope amidst declines in shipbuilding and depleted fish stocks.

With social tensions on the rise, some Phippsburg residents argued that the island belonged to Harpswell. After a five-year ownership feud between the two towns, State legislators handed down a decision in 1903 granting Malaga and nearby islands to Sagadahoc County and the town of Phippsburg. The town of Phippsburg was now more motivated than ever to rid itself of Malaga. The State subsequently repealed the decision in 1905, leaving the islanders wards of the State and under the jurisdiction of the Governor's Executive Council.

Tourists and missionaries frequently traveled the Maine coast in this era, dispensing religion and middle-class values wherever they went. George and Lucy Lane, and their daughter Cora, sea-going missionaries who summered on nearby Harbor Island, came to Malaga in 1906 and established its first school in Mr. McKenney's house.

The Lane's supporters formed the Malaga Island Settlement Association, which solicited area businesses, church groups, and civic-minded people for funds to further educate Malaga's youth and instill in them middle-class values. With locally donated materials and funds, a new red schoolhouse was built in 1909. Malaga's students received education in the three Rs, as well as drawing, music, geography, history, and domestic training.

By 1911, Evelyn Woodman and other teachers who worked on Malaga had made significant progress in educating the island's children. A Malaga education was thought by some to be better than that on the mainland, attracting at least one Phippsburg student to pay tuition to attend the school. The Lane's supporters believed that Malaga's future lay with its children and that education would allow them to better assimilate into a changing world.

On July 11, 1911, Governor Frederick Plaisted and a group of state officials, landed on Malaga Island to meet its residents and inspect their homes. The Governor lauded Malaga's new school—whose students serenaded him with a hymn—and later reported to *The Brunswick Record* that "the people cannot be forced to leave their poor homes."

Yet shortly after the Governor and his entourage toured the island, the State announced that the heirs of Eli Perry owned Malaga Island (although later research found no deed confirming their ownership). Within three weeks of the Governor's visit, the Perrys issued eviction orders to the "Malagaites" (a term then thought of as a slur) who had inhabited the island for more than a half-century, demanding they vacate the island by July 1, 1912.

The State's eviction strategy included an assessment of each resident's household and their physical, mental, and financial condition. Eight residents were deemed "feeble minded" (including most of the Marks family), and were dispatched to the recently built Home for the Feeble-Minded in New Gloucester (now Pineland). The State promptly purchased the island for \$471 to prevent people from resettling the island and appropriated a nominal sum to pay off the remaining families, provided they vacated the island by July.

Some Malaga families moved their houses to the mainland or other islands, though others could find no refuge away from Malaga. Any structures not removed by eviction day were razed to discourage residents from returning—except for the new schoolhouse (which was moved in 1912 to Louds Island in Muscongus Bay). In a final act of irreverence, the remains of Malaga's deceased were exhumed in 1912 and reinterred at the Pineland Cemetery in New Gloucester.

In 1913, the State sold Malaga Island to Everard A. Wilson, a friend of Dr. Gustavus Kilgore (who chaired Governor Plaisted's three-member Executive Council committee charged with investigating the conditions on Malaga shortly after the governor took office in 1911). Since then, Malaga Island has changed hands numerous times. Local fishermen have used the island for decades to store fishing gear and traps, but no one has built significant structures there in the last century. All that now remains of Malaga's historic community are the tombstones at Pineland, the schoolhouse at Louds Island, and a few stone-lined wells hidden by overgrown brush and weeds. Lottie Marks Blackwell, one of the last residents of Malaga Island, died in 1997, at the age of 103.

Malaga Island lies along a stretch of mid-coast Maine characterized by elongated bedrock peninsulas separated by relatively deep, but narrow estuaries and inlets. The New Meadows River by Malaga functions more as an embayment than a true estuary, since there is no substantial freshwater input to the river. The average tidal range in Casco Bay is 8.9 feet. At low tide, Bear Island and Malaga Island are linked by an intertidal bar.

The topography of Malaga Island, as well as other islands and coastal lands in and around Casco Bay, is controlled by the underlying metamorphic bedrock of the region.

Bedrock ridges extend north-south along the length of the island, with elevations ranging up to 40-60 feet above mean sea level. Glacial till, an unsorted mixture of sediments deposited by the late Pleistocene ice sheet over 10,000 years ago, forms the parent material of the island's shallow soils.

Bedrock outcrops are common on the island, especially on the ridgetops.

Malaga Island is almost entirely forested by red spruce trees, many 85-90 years old. The spruce forest on the island today has likely originated from a pre-existing spruce forest that was selectively cut by Malaga's former inhabitants. About two acres of mixed shrubs, grasses and wildflowers occurs on the northern end of the island where the historic community was located. Most of Malaga's two miles of shoreline is bedrock ledge, interspersed with patches of salt marsh and a few pocket beaches.

The only known rare plant on Malaga is spotted wintergreen (*Chimaphila maculata*), a plant listed as endangered in Maine. This small, evergreen perennial plant is located at the northern limit of its range, and is found primarily in southern Maine.

Numerous wildlife species use island habitats in Casco Bay, including those on Malaga Island. Mammals such as white-tailed deer, raccoons, red squirrels, and deer mice live on Malaga either as

permanent residents or transients. Malaga's mature conifer forest provides habitat for both resident and migratory birds such as black-throated green warbler, yellow-rumped warbler, blackburnian warbler, golden-crowned kinglet, and common raven. Other species, such as the song sparrow, nest in open shrubby edge habitat on the island.

Bald eagles, recently delisted as a federally threatened species, have nested on nearby Bear Island. Malaga Island falls partly within the Essential Habitat for this bald eagle nest, a state designation that protects habitat within a 1/4-mile radius (1,320 ft.) of the nest.

Sea ducks and other seabirds, including eiders, terns, and common loons, feed in the surrounding waters, with gulls and ducks often gathering on the rock ledges on the southern end of the island. The tidal flats between Malaga and Bear Islands are one of several important shellfish harvesting areas in the New Meadows River system.

In 2001, Maine Coast Heritage Trust (MCHT) purchased Malaga Island at a generous bargain sale price to protect the island from development, foster low-impact recreation, and sustain the long tradition of island use by local fishermen. MCHT's ownership of Malaga includes a 15-foot-wide right-of-way easement on the mainland to provide shore access from Bakers Wharf Road extension. The easement allows vehicle parking for four cars and storage for four dinghies.

Local lobstermen use Malaga Island for storing traps, buoys and gear (with up to several thousand lobster traps during winter and fewer traps during summer). Recreational visitors to the island are almost exclusively local picnickers and small boat owners exploring local waters on day trips.

Archaeological research at Malaga began with a reconnaissance survey in 1989 by University of Southern Maine (USM) researchers. USM's summer archaeology field school has conducted additional research on the island's northern end each year since 2002. Beginning in 2006, teams excavated several test pits to better understand the lives of Malaga's historic inhabitants.

Field research has focused on examining shell midden deposits at the site of the historic community and conducting artifact surveys on the adjacent tidal flats. Researchers have recovered approximately 50,000 artifacts including bone (mostly fish), ceramics, pipestems, leather, nails, fishhooks, coins, etc., dating from roughly 1880 to 1912. The historic footprints of the former house sites and the schoolhouse have been located, as well as stone-lined wells. Shell midden deposits on the island's north end are relatively extensive, and represent not only historic waste dumps but created additional living surfaces for the islanders and foundations for their homes.

Malaga Island is noteworthy in archaeological and environmental history because it contains specific household sites that can be matched to individual African-Americans for a specific time period.

Since 2001, MCHT has managed Malaga Island for traditional uses, low-impact daytime recreation, and wildlife habitat. MCHT sponsors periodic interpretive field trips to the island, and people may visit on their own. The beach on the island's north end is the safest place to land and allows easy access to a new loop trail cleared in Fall 2008.

In 2023, Malaga Island was added to the National Register of Historic Places.

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