Abstract: Malaga Island- A Brief History
Compiled by the students of ES 203 Service Learning Project
Adrienne Heflich, Anna Troyansky and Samantha Farrell

Malaga Island is located in Casco Bay, near the mouth of the New Meadows River, and is roughly a half-mile long by a quarter-mile wide in size. It sits approximately one hundred yards from the mainland of Phippsburg. Malaga Island, which means “cedar” in the Abnaki Indian language, is heavily wooded, and has been uninhhabited since 1912. The island is rich in archaeological deposits from its past residents. Remains from the pre-colonial Indian and Malagaites mixed-race settlements are largely unexcavated and are believed to be remarkably intact. Currently local fishermen use the island for lobster-trap storage.

Malaga Island was a very unique community. The black and mixed-race population of individuals and families was an anomaly in a state over 99% white. The concentration of minorities in the Malaga Island community caused fear and uneasiness in neighboring white communities on the mainland. Drifters and outsiders of mainland communities, both black and white, settled there in the mid-1800s. By 1900 the population had peaked at 42 individuals and interracial marriages were common on the island. Save for its racial diversity, Malaga resembled most other poor fishing communities on the Maine coast.

The Malagaites’ main source of income was subsistence fishing and limited farming. Tensions rose over issues of resource use as the Malagaites’ fishing directly competed with the economy on the mainland. More importantly, their dark skin, questionable morals, and apparent idleness (all thoroughly exaggerated in biased local and regional press) aroused suspicion and antipathy. In efforts to address the Malaga “problem”, in 1903 a missionary family established an informal school on Malaga in attempts to “reform” the inhabitants. The school was funded at first by private donations, and subsequently subsidized by state funding.

Tensions between the mainland and the island rose significantly at the turn of the century along with the burgeoning tourism industry on the Maine coast; Malaga was an eyesore for the mainland. Harpswell and Phippsburg disavowed jurisdiction over the community and the island was identified as “No Man’s Land,” becoming a ward of the state. In 1912, Governor Plaisted evicted the community of Malaga from their land and homes. Resettlement was prohibited and many Malagaites lacking the means to move elsewhere, were displaced to the Maine School for the Feeble-Minded in Pineland. Some Malagaites strapped their houses to rafts and drifted up and down the river in search of a safe port. However, they were unwanted and stigmatized by the events of 1912. Private owners eventually bought the island, and possession shifted hands numerous times before it was finally acquired by MCHT.

The diaspora of the Malagaites remains a dark chapter in Maine and local history. Descendents still bear the stigma of their infamous ancestors. An unspoken code of silence still remains, perhaps out of shame, perhaps out of ignorance. Myth still surrounds the factual events. It is hoped that in the near future, the Malagaites and pre-colonial Indian archeological remains will be excavated, undoubtedly unearthing a very fascinating history.
Malaga Island is a half-mile long by quarter-mile wide island in Casco Bay, roughly 100 yards from the mainland of the town of Phippsburg. Though Malaga's last inhabitants were evicted by the state of Maine in 1912, the racially and economically charged social history lingers. Locals on the mainland, the descendents of former Malagaites, and the island itself still bear the stigma of events nearly a century old.

Native Americans initially settled Malaga Island and gave the island its name, "cedar" in Abnaki.\(^1\) A precolonial shell midden (refuse mound) can be found on the northern bank, beneath mounds from the historical, mix-raced Malaga community.\(^2\) Nathan Hamilton, a professor at University of Southern Maine, is currently conducting excavation of both the precolonial and historical remains; the precise date of initial Native American habitation has not yet been determined.

There is far more information (though dubiously accurate) on the first historical inhabitants. Malaga was settled around the mid-19\(^{th}\) century by the descendents of Benjamin Darling, a black man. Some local

---

myths describe the early community as cave-dwelling degenerates that spoke in African tongues, though this lore, along with much else surrounding Malaga, has no provable merit.\textsuperscript{3} It is known that fishing and modest agriculture and livestock, limited by the island's poor soil, supported the community. Other drifting Yankees, blacks, and Scottish, Irish and Portuguese immigrants joined the Darling descendents.\textsuperscript{4}

Malaga was similar to other poor fishing communities along the Maine coast. As was the practice in other villages, the most proficient fisherman was dubbed the "king".\textsuperscript{5} James McKenney, the King of Malaga, represented the island, organized commerce and could read and write. The community survived largely on fishing, lobstering, and clamming; some worked seasonal jobs on mainland farms and resorts. Poverty, however, was still pervasive. Malaga was distinguished from other island communities by its very close distance from shore, and that some couples were not legally married, though all groups functioned as regular family units.\textsuperscript{6} Perhaps this was the origin of the rumors of incest. Most

\textsuperscript{3} Dubrule, 1999.
\textsuperscript{5} Ibid, 83.
\textsuperscript{6} Dubrule, 1999.
notably, Malaga was one of the very few concentrated minority communities in Maine.\(^7\)

Malaga began to arouse mainland interest in the 1880's. The unsightly squatter community did not suit the burgeoning vacation industry, nor the popular notions that associated poverty, immorality and mental retardation with a poor, mixed-race breeding stock.\(^8\) Furthermore, Malagaites were viewed as competition for diminishing fishery resources. Anti-immigrant sentiments contributed also.\(^9\) Sensationalized stories on Malaga derived from local myth and shady journalism became regular newspaper fodder: “Not Fit for Dogs- Poverty, Immorality and Disease...Ignorance, Shiftlessness, Filth and Heathenism...A Shameful Disgrace that Should Be Looked After at Once” read the headlines in the Bath Enterprise,1902.\(^10\) In one picture caption, tarpaper sheds were erroneously referred to as Malagaite homes; nearly identical tarpaper sheds still dot the banks of Casco Bay today.\(^11\)


\(^8\) Barry, 56.


Mainlanders were increasing associated with Malagaites by readers of the sensationalist reports that had reached Portland and Boston newspapers.\textsuperscript{12} The town of Phippsburg attempted to disavow jurisdiction over Malaga and give responsibility to Harpswell in the 1890’s.\textsuperscript{13} Eventually the state ruled in 1903 that Malaga belonged to Phippsburg. The unrest continued, however, and in 1905 Malagaites officially became wards of the state and the island was then popularly referred to as “No Man’s Land”.\textsuperscript{14}

Malaga was “discovered” by George and Lucy Lane in 1906. Though the island had been receiving meager and unsolicited government aid for years, the help was not satisfying mainland standards. The Lanes raised private funds for the construction of a schoolhouse, guided by Christian notions of self-improvement and moral reform.\textsuperscript{15} Evelyn Woodman became the first and only full-time teacher and instilled solid, middle-class values in the Malagaites through basic schooling in the three R’s, etiquette, and Christianity.\textsuperscript{16} Countering the usual negative press, the Bath Independent and Enterprise noted in 1908 that the

\textsuperscript{12} Barry, 56.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid, 56.
\textsuperscript{14} Dubrule, 1999.
\textsuperscript{15} Mosher, 111-2.
\textsuperscript{16} Barry, 56.
“Children on the island are not dull or feeble-minded, and if given the opportunity of securing a fair education they will become self-supporting, useful citizens, and through them the conditions on the island will be improved in every way.”

Malaga’s apparent bright future changed abruptly with a visit to the island by Governor Plaisted in July 1911. With little immediate cause, Plaisted decreed the eviction of all inhabitants from Malaga. Some homes and the school were floated and moved to other areas. The cemetery was removed and the bodies were unceremoniously reburied at the State School for the Feeble Minded, now known as Pineland. The state paid nominal fees for some of the Malagaite homes, though the islanders were largely left to fend for themselves in an unfamiliar middle-class world.

Some continued to drift, some attempted to resettle in other areas with limited success and still others, doubtfully insane, were relocated to the State School for the Feeble Minded as well. A postcard text commented on the occurrence: “All praise to Governor Plaisted and his Democratic colleagues, for they have again ‘made good.’”

The events surrounding the Malaga eviction stigmatized both neighboring towns and former residents of the island. Oral history and

---

17 Mitchell, 21.
18 Mosher, 127.
19 Barry, 84.
20 Ibid, 86.
discussion were suppressed by feelings of guilt, shame and embarassment.\textsuperscript{22} Participants remain silent, still worried about potential misrepresentation the press.\textsuperscript{23} Malaga became a pejorative term in local speech.\textsuperscript{24} In the twentieth century, ownership of the island changed hands between many private parties, though was never settled again.

It is important to note that public opinion and relationships with Malaga changed with shifting economic interests. Blacks settled other islands (such as Bailey) and though illegal, interracial marriages were not initially objectionable.\textsuperscript{25} Maine was a harsh frontier, where survival was the most pressing concern.\textsuperscript{26} However, with the decline of the shipbuilding industry, the rise of tourism and increasing pressures on fisheries, the Malagaites became threats. The poor mixed-race community of outsiders, surviving largely on subsistence fishing and meager agriculture, was an aesthetically unpleasant addition to the image of Maine's pristine vacationland.

The events of Malaga Island illustrate specific economic and racial tensions that pervaded turn of the century Maine. Some advocates in the 1990's have lobbied for a formal apology from the state. Governor

\textsuperscript{22} Dubrule, 1999.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid, 1999.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid, 1999.
\textsuperscript{25} Barry, 54.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid, 54.
Angus King acknowledged government wrong doings though did not offer a formal apology, largely because there is no definite party to address it to.\textsuperscript{27} Malaga remains to this day a racially and culturally charged issue. The history is mired in local myth and sensationalism and likewise, its place in Maine's future is still uncertain.

\textsuperscript{27} Hamilton, 2003.
Works Cited


Hamilton, Nathan. Personal Communication. Bowdoin College. 5 May 2003


Annotated Bibliography
Anna Troyansky, Sam Farrell, Adrienne Heflich
12 May 2003


This article covers the history of the Malaga Island community from its settlement by the descendents of Benjamin Darling to the eviction of the community in 1912 and reintroduced Malaga into the public consciousness after years of silence. Barry briefly describes the lifestyle of the islanders and the community’s inner workings, including brief family histories, descriptions of natural resources and the island school. The article discusses mainlanders’ views of the island’s inhabitants and the popular sentiment that the Malagaites were unwelcome in the area before and during the community’s eviction.


Day profiles “queer folk”, a vanishing breed of poor squatters (both individuals and communities) that avoid the mainstream culture. Their isolation fosters eccentricity, though their freedoms are increasingly threatened by the encroachment of vacationers. Malaga is recounted as a place of mixed races and incest, where the simple and unthrifty residents cannot even plan for the next winter, surviving on charity from missionaries and some state aid. Most attend church every Sunday on the mainland. Day views the situation with a sense of pity and inevitability; the “no man’s land” is unwanted by the mainland and the Malagaites themselves are too far removed from society to learn to help themselves.


Dubrule presents a comprehensive account of the origins of the social stigma and unique conditions surrounding the eviction of the Malagaites. Also included is an interview with James McKenney, grandson of the Malaga’s “king” that thoroughly examines the lasting effects of Malaga in local culture and McKenney’s familial heritage.


There is a book of pictures and a separate publication, "The Story behind the Pictures".

Mitchell profiles many primary documents from 1893 to the present which recount the growth, decay, eviction and land dealings surrounding Malaga. His commentary is not always objective; however, the accumulation of primary documents in this one
piece is very helpful. Many newspaper articles from the early 1900's clearly exhibit sensationalism and exaggerated reporting. Mitchell is very invested in the subject. There is no recorded publisher for the works.


This master’s thesis is based on extensive research on Malaga Island’s history. It begins with the early history of Malaga’s settlement. Mosher discusses the dynamics of the community in terms of food, natural resources, work, population census, etc. He considers “the community’s relationship with the town of Phippsburg, with middle class reformers, and with Maine State Government.” He follows the increasing tensions between the mainland and Malaga and puts the island in context of Maine’s society and dynamics as a whole.


This article is a brief history of the African American community of Maine. Blacks have been in Maine for over 300 years and generally numbers did not exceed 1% of the population. The article discusses how slavery was confined to upper class as it was more of an aristocratic trapping than a necessity. Slavery ended in 1783, economic opportunity grew as well as numbers of blacks. They played an important role in fishing economy. Black Mainers were involved notably in the abolitionist movements. Salzman notes that the black experience in Maine was atypical due to its small and thinly spread population; therefore there was a lack of sense of community.


This article follows the shifting demographics of the Black population in Maine through statistical analysis of census data. The geographic distribution of blacks in Maine changed over time in response to local social and economic conditions. The article discusses how black life in Maine differed from black life in other states due to the decentralized and isolated nature of its communities. Marriage options were limited as interracial marriage was prohibited by law. Maine was attractive to black emigrants due to the economic opportunities in the maritime trade, manufacturing, farming and shipping. As their roles in the economy diversified, more emigrated and worked personal service occupations as opposed to direct production of food products. This mirrored a movement out of the rural communities into larger towns and cities. Portland had the largest and oldest black community.

This article examines the nature of Slavery in Maine. Maine's own period of slavery was short due to its late entrance to the Union. However, the appearance of slavery is peculiar due to the fact that slavery was not necessary for the common modes of domestic production. He determines that the occurrence of slavery was often used as method of emulating the aristocratic lifestyle of wealthy West Indies planters. However this did not make slavery more benign or less arduous as commonly thought. Free blacks faced the social stigma of slavery and faced racism and condescension. The end of slavery caused blacks to move from small isolated communities to boomtowns like Portland. The echo of slavery reverberated into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries leaving a legacy of discrimination on the black community.

Informants:
Nate Hamilton, Professor of Archaeology, USM
Randy Stakeman, Professor of African-American History, Bowdoin
Project: Compiling information about the island for MCHT since they just acquired the island. They are in the process of figuring out how to manage the island, taking into consideration the history, natural resources and importance of the island for today's local fishermen.

What we have done:
- Created an annotated bibliography, including a master's thesis, magazine articles, books, pictures
- Written a short history of the island (about 5 pages), mainly focusing on the social aspects of the Malaga community at the beginning of the 20th century
- A brief abstract of our research which will probably be used as the text for a brochure to be handed out by MCHT for people interested in the island
- Contacted and met with Nate Hamilton, USM archeology professor, and Randy Stakeman, Bowdoin College professor.
- Compiled a list of people who might be contacted for more information on the island, which is included in this report.

Information for people who we have been in contact with
- Jane Arbuckle, partner at Maine Coast Heritage Trust
  Email address: jarbuckle@mcht.org
  Telephone number: (207) 729-7366 729-6863 (fax)
  Address: MCHT Office: Bowdoin Mill, One Main Street, Topsham, ME 04086
- Nate Hamilton, Associate professor of archeology at University of Southern Maine and expert on Malaga Island
  Email address: casco@usm.maine.edu
  Telephone number: (207)780-5049
- Randy Stakeman, Bowdoin College director of Africana Studies department, professor of history, and expert on African Americans in Maine
  Email address: rstakema@bowdoin.edu
  Telephone number: (207)725-6720
  Office address: Russwurm African American Center

Contacts who would be good to interview but whom we have not been in contact with
- John Mosher, student of Nate Hamilton, wrote his Master's Thesis at USM on Malaga
- Deborah Dubrule, wrote an article in the Island Journal on Malaga
- Steve Mitchell, wrote The Shame of Maine and has put together a book of photographs of the Malaga community
- Phil Conkling, at the Island Institute
- Gerald Talbot, founded the Maine chapter of the NAACP
• Rob Sanford, Associate Professor of Environmental Science and Policy at University of Southern Maine, works with Nate Hamilton on Malaga
Email address: rsanford@usm.maine.edu
Telephone number: (207)780-5756
• Jason McKinney, grandson of the “King” of Malaga

Suggestions for further research
• Oral histories. Search for descendents of Malagaites; approach people carefully since Malaga is still a touchy subject; be tactful. For leads, talk to Nate Hamilton or John Mosher. By next year Jane Arbuckle might have some ideas as well.
• Search historical societies for more information.
• Interview fishermen on the coast who use the island to store fishing equipment.
• Visit the island. We are visiting this summer in case you want to know anything.
• Look up Malaga Island on the www.newenglandancestors.org website; Nate Hamilton found interesting photographs of students at the Malaga school; we have searched the website but have not come across the information. There should be a Lane Family Scrapbook with Malaga information.
• We were not able to find any specific, immediate reasons for the eviction. More research should be done on the specific reasons for Governor Plaisted’s actions in 1911-2.
• More research on the history of the island since the eviction in 1912.
• More of a natural history of the island, as well.