

# The Use of Material Culture and Recovering Black Maine

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Article abstract

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## The Use of Material Culture and Recovering Black Maine

### Résumé

*L'île de Malaga, dans le Maine, abritait une petite communauté de pêcheurs issue de la mixité raciale entre la fin des années 1860 et 1912. Cette communauté fut expulsée de force par l'État du Maine en 1912 après plus d'une décennie de dénigrement par la presse locale et régionale, qui lui avait attiré les foudres des fonctionnaires de l'État. Après leur expulsion, plusieurs membres de cette communauté furent institutionnalisés à « l'école pour les simples d'esprit » de Pineland, dans le Maine, et l'État s'efforça de faire disparaître de l'île toutes les traces de leur communauté. Des fouilles archéologiques au début des années 2000 aboutirent à une exposition muséale en 2012. Les fouilles et l'exposition ont contribué à resserrer les liens d'une importante communauté de descendants.*

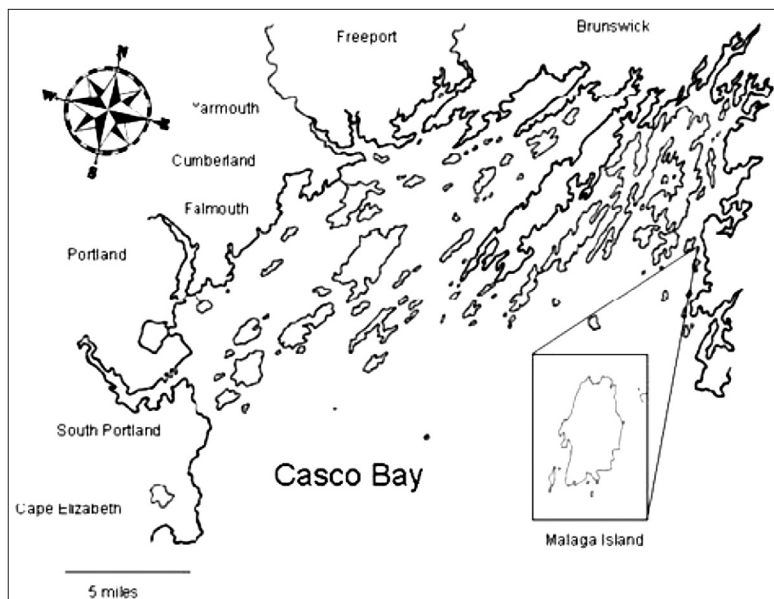
### Abstract

*Malaga Island, Maine, was home to a small mixed-racial fishing community from the late 1860s to 1912. The community was forcibly evicted by the state of Maine in 1912 after more than a decade of negative attention in the local and regional press, which drew the ire of state officials. After their eviction, several residents were institutionalized at the Maine School for the Feeble Minded at Pineland, and the state attempted to erase any evidence of their community from the island. Archaeological excavations in the early 2000s led to a museum exhibit in 2012. The excavation and exhibit have helped solidify a large descendant community.*

Malaga Island is located approximately 65 kilometres northeast of Maine's largest city of Portland. The 1,700-hectare island, currently uninhabited and used as a nature preserve, was once home to a small mixed-racial fishing community of between forty and fifty people. Extremely impoverished, the community survived by fishing and doing odd jobs for townspeople living in the nearby mainland town of Phippsburg. In 1912, the state of Maine forcibly evicted the residents of Malaga Island after a local and regional backlash against their settlement there. Most of the island's inhabitants resettled on the mainland; some, however, were institutionalized at the Maine School for the Feeble Minded [*sic*] at Pineland in Pownal, Maine. Of those who were institutionalized, only one woman survived the experience into adulthood; the rest died while at

Pineland. Local and state authorities attempted to erase any trace of the community. All of the homes on the island were removed, and even the graves were exhumed and reinterred in a series of commingled graves at Pineland.

For more than seventy years, Malaga Island's history was relegated to rumour and speculation, until the late 1980s when scholars from the University of Southern Maine began to take an interest in the archaeology of the island. It was not until the early 2000s that excavations began, marking an important moment in the recovery of the island's history. Two archaeological field schools were conducted in 2006 and 2007 by University of Southern Maine archaeologists, leading to more than 59,000 artifacts collected in an area of 50 square meters. The culmination of archaeological excavations led to an exhibit at



**Fig. 1**  
Plan view of site  
areas on the north  
end of Malaga Island  
(Hamilton and  
Sanford 2012: 40).

the Maine State Museum, entitled *Malaga Island: Fragmented Lives*, which opened on May 19, 2012, and closed May 25, 2013. The collaboration between the museum professionals and archaeologists began almost four years before the exhibition and informed subsequent excavations. The island has become the best known of Maine's African American communities. Though Maine has never had the same type of large non-white populations as more urban or southern areas of the country, the state was once home to many small, rural communities that were multi-racial. Maine is currently the least ethnically diverse state in the nation, at 95.3 per cent white according to the 2010 U.S. Census (U.S. Census Bureau 2010).

Contrary to the current lack of racial diversity in the state, particularly in the rural areas, Maine was once more racially and ethnically varied than it is today. The influx of Irish Americans and French Americans led to increasing racial tensions in the state. In the early 20th century, state laws based on eugenics were passed, which further marginalized minority populations. For example, sterilization was taken from officially unsanctioned practice in the Maine School for the Feeble Minded to a legal option for state officials in 1925. Rep. No. 1925 allowed for forced sterilization of institutionalized men and women, mostly due to the rising costs of maintaining large enough facilities due to the rapid growth of the number institutionalized (Murphy 2011: 107). The "feeble-minded" population was particularly

at risk for sterilization, as legislators and officials at the Maine School for the Feeble Minded thought this was the strongest deterrent for avoiding social crimes and persistent poverty (82).

At the same time that laws based on eugenics were being passed in Maine, groups such as the Ku Klux Klan began to resurge in popularity. Because of economic changes and the renewed popularity of racist groups, mixed-racial communities throughout Maine saw both a decline in population and an increase in hostility from local and state governments. By 1924, there were 50,000 members of the Klan in Maine. Despite this peak a dozen years after the eviction of Malaga Island, the organization was able to get this large foothold in a state with a population of only 768,014 in 1920 because there was significant racial, ethnic and religious intolerance in the first decades of the 20th century (Murphy 2011: 108; U.S. Census Bureau 2000). Despite the state's best efforts at erasure, communities like Malaga Island were not fully forgotten in local memory, and excavations have proved that Maine's archaeological record provides scholars the opportunity to more fully contextualize the history of race in northern New England. The material culture of Malaga Island has been integral in retelling the story of Maine's history with race, and will continue to be an important avenue of study for scholars of African American archaeology and material culture outside of the plantations in the South.

Theresa Singleton, a notable scholar of African diaspora archaeology, has argued that archaeologists and museum professionals in historically white institutions have begun to shift their focus to archaeological and historical sites of contested racial histories since the 1990s. Singleton's work directly addresses the ideological problems within archaeology of African American sites in the U.S., giving a voice to both free and enslaved historic populations. Despite the increased interest in these sites, museum exhibits have "emphasize[d] visual and documentary materials, audio programs, or staged performances rather than objects" (Singleton 1997: 146-47). Malaga Island has provided opportunities for the museum professionals at the Maine State Museum to present the social history of Maine's complicated relationship with race while contextualizing the experience for visitors

and descendants through the objects excavated during the course of several field seasons.

In this article I will argue that the material culture of Malaga Island has provided an opportunity for frank discussions about the history of race in Maine. The use of material culture in presenting African American history to the greater public provides visitors with a deeper connection and understanding of contested histories. Finally, I argue that the descendant community of Malaga Island has come together in part through the public archaeology project at the University of Southern Maine and the 2012 exhibit *Malaga Island: Fragmented Lives* at the Maine State Museum. This series of important milestones has provided scholars with the opportunity for expanding our understanding of black history in Maine, and has provided opportunities for a more thorough look at Maine's racial past.

Maine's complex history of race has been largely ignored by scholars since the late 19th century. Regional and town histories of the 19th century rewrote the history of race in New England by largely excluding people of colour. Cyrus Eaton, for example, recorded the town histories of Warren (1851), Thomaston, Rockland and South Thomaston (1865). Eaton's *Annals of the Town of Warren* does mention the arrival of the first black to Warren, and briefly describes the establishment of the black community of Peterborough, though his description is more of a curiosity, describing one "Africa Peter" as moody and agitated at his memory of being a prince in Africa, and writhing on the ground during a full moon (Eaton 1851: 201). A. J. Coolidge and J. B. Mansfield published *A History and Description of New England, General and Local* in 1859.

Town histories began to rise in number during the antebellum period, when the regional identity of New England began to form in opposition to other regions in the U.S. These histories were the basis on which New England positioned itself in America as Reverend John Winthrop's imagined "city on a hill," a region where the problems of modern, urban society did not exist. Joseph Conforti has argued that authors who wrote town and regional histories during this time period were exhibiting a "Civil War-era triumphalism—a confidence in the superiority and progress of New England social ideals" (Conforti 2001: 149). Town histories

described New England as an idyllic, pastoral utopia that displayed true Yankeeism, which became increasingly desirable as the Industrial Revolution swept America (123–24). The region and its writers saw themselves as both culturally and morally superior to other parts of the U.S., particularly the South.

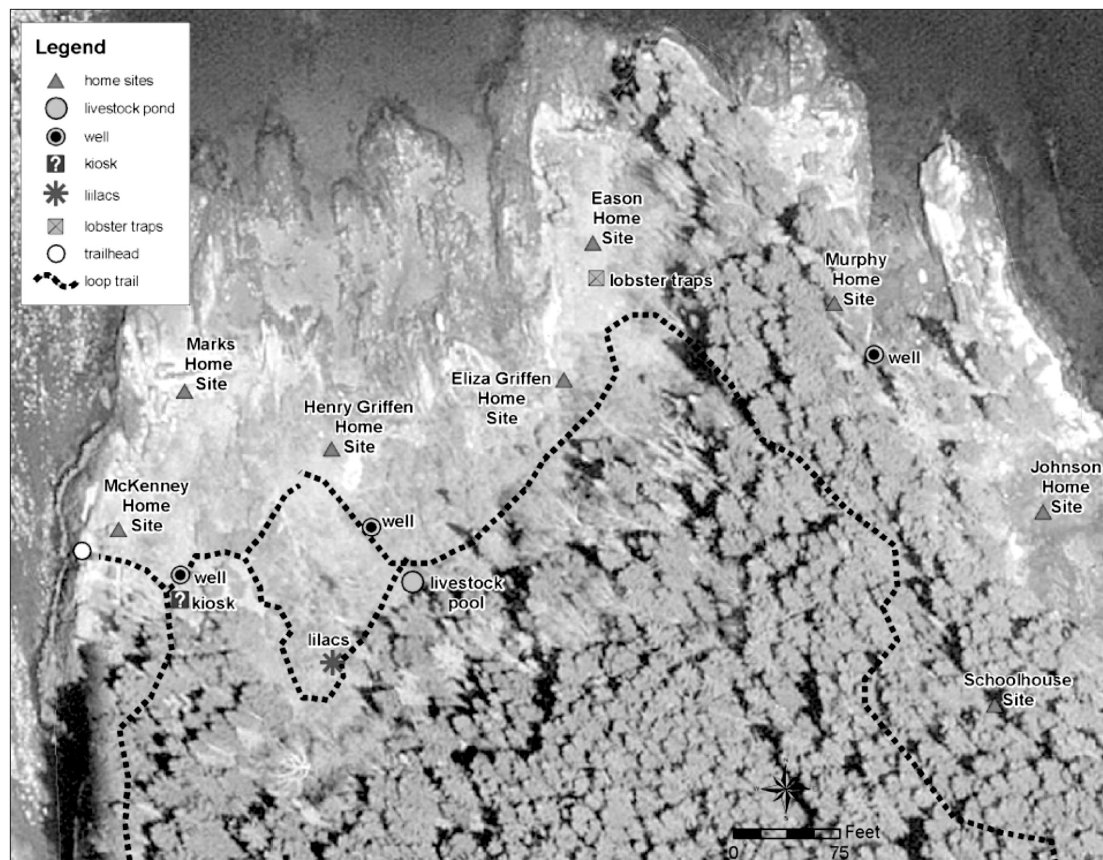
The moral historiography, city-on-a-hill mentality and regional superiority created by 19th-century writers increased in importance as the region headed toward Civil War, particularly since some of the country's most active abolitionists called New England home. William Lloyd Garrison, who was president of the American Anti-Slavery Society and edited the abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator*, was from Massachusetts. Harriet Beecher Stowe, was born in Connecticut and wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin* while living in Brunswick, Maine. Sarah Parker Remond, a black abolitionist, travelled throughout New England delivering speeches against slavery.

People of African descent—both enslaved and free—were living in New England by the mid-17th century. Most enslaved people living in New England only lived with one or two other enslaved people, pointing to the differences in the economics of slavery between New England and the South, where the majority of the enslaved were working on plantations in chattel bondage in agricultural production (Nash 1983: 28). While slavery never took the economic hold that it would in the South, Northerners financially benefitted from slavery and the slave trade in a number of ways, most notably through the fishing and shipping industries, as well as more directly through participation in the transoceanic slave trade. The large cod fishing stations of the Gulf of Maine supported a booming economy centred on the sea. While the most desirable fish was salted and sent to European markets, other types of fish were sent to the Caribbean as food for enslaved people working on sugar plantations.

Slavery was outlawed in Massachusetts in 1783–1784 through the landmark decisions of Mum Bett and Quock Walker. Free people of colour congregated in areas where they could find work in Maine, mainly in towns that had some connection to maritime activities, such as fishing, shipping or shipbuilding. Sizable communities were present in Portland, Bangor,



**Fig. 2**  
*Map of Malaga Island site, showing locations of home sites. (Map courtesy of Drs. Robert S. Sanford and Nathan D. Hamilton.)*



Bath-Brunswick, Warren, Gardiner and a number of other towns. Those communities grew rapidly in the antebellum period, reaching their peak population densities between 1850 and 1870 (Stakeman 1989: 18). Yet between 1870 and 1890, Maine lost 25 per cent of its black population (22). While there are many economic reasons for this decline, social conditions changed in Maine during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and many people and communities began to no longer accept the presence of people of colour. Among the Mainers most vulnerable to these social and economic changes were the residents of Malaga Island, who had begun living on the island around the end of the Civil War, and whose eviction in 1912 continued to impact both the descendants of the island's residents and Phippsburg itself into the 21st century.

Malaga Island rests in the middle of the New Meadows River, a tidal river in northern Casco Bay, and is less than two hundred metres from the mainland town of Phippsburg, a community that is and has historically been largely employed in the fishing and lobstering industries.

The nearest large towns to Malaga Island are the sister cities of Bath and Brunswick, which supported fairly large African American populations in the 19th century and were also home to such notable figures as Civil War hero Joshua Chamberlain. By 1850, the combined black and mixed-race population of Bath and Brunswick was approximately 220 out of 12,996 residents living in both municipalities, meaning African Americans composed approximately 1.7 per cent of the population of both towns. Phippsburg had just eleven African American residents, less than 1 per cent of the town's population.

One of the first African Americans to come to the area was Benjamin Darling. Darling lived on Horse Island and settled there sometime in the mid- to late 18th century. How he came to the area is somewhat hazy. Various genealogies and histories of the area and his family have pointed to a number of stories, most commonly that Darling was enslaved as a child in the South, and either escaped to the North or was brought to Maine by his parents (Mosher 1991: 32). Benjamin and his wife, probably a white woman named Sarah

Proverbs, had two surviving children, Benjamin Jr. and Isaac, both of whom married women from the area and had large families. Isaac married Patience Wallace and Benjamin Jr. married his first wife Margaret Freeman in 1805, then Sarah Griffin of Georgetown in 1812, and finally Priscilla Emmons in 1822 (33-34). This second generation never lived on Malaga Island, but they did live on nearby Horse and Bear Islands, and several of their children and grandchildren would live on Malaga Island. While Phippsburg had only a very small African American presence, all of the black residents in 1850 were related to the Darling family. In 1850, William Darling lived in the household of mariner James Drummond; Patience Darling and her three children lived next door to white Levi Wallace and his mixed-race wife Rachel, who had three small children in 1850. Clarissa Darling lived in the household of farmer Alfred Sprague.

The Griffin family originally lived in Brunswick. Nathaniel Griffin was born sometime between 1765 and 1770. By 1810, Nathaniel and his wife were living in Brunswick; by 1820, they had settled in Phippsburg. Nathaniel and his wife had at least two children: Rebecca Griffin, who married Jacob Peters, the son of the founders of the mixed-race Peterborough community in Warren, Maine; and Harry Griffin. Henry Griffin, one of Harry Griffin's sons, married Fatima Darling and was one of the first settlers of Malaga Island. Harry, his family, and a large extended family totalling twelve people lived under one roof on the Phippsburg mainland in 1860. Harry did not own this property; whether they were renting or squatting is uncertain. Henry and the other Griffins living in Phippsburg were all listed as being employed as cod fishermen on the 1870 census. While an exact date for the occupation of Malaga Island has proved difficult to nail down, it is certain that no one was living on the island prior to the Civil War, and by the mid-1860s, at least some of the Griffins were living on Malaga Island (Mosher 1991: 39). The Griffin family became one of the most notable groups to live on the island, and they lived at times on several nearby islands as well. Eliza Griffin, perhaps the most industrious of the islanders, fished and took in laundry. The loci where Eliza's home and garden were located show archaeological evidence of a kitchen garden,

which is seen in some photographs from the island, along with evidence of her various jobs.

The McKenney family became another important family that lived on Malaga Island. James McKenney would become known as "the King of Malaga Island" in the slander campaign launched by Portland and Boston newspapers against the islanders in the first decade of the 20th century. James McKenney was the son of Scotch Irish Daniel and Judy McKenney of Phippsburg. He married Salome Griffin, who was the daughter of Rachel and Harry Griffin (Mosher 1991: 40). Together, they had the first children to be born on Malaga Island: James Jr., Harold and Estella. James Sr. was employed as a fisherman, as were all of those listed in the 1900 census, except for Laura Darling, who was employed as a "washer woman." The McKenney family owned the only true house on the island, a New England cape-style building that sat prominently on the northwestern portion of the island. Their home served as the schoolhouse until a school was built in 1908.

Several other families moved to Malaga Island later. The Eason, Dunning, Tripp, Gomes and Marks families all lived and worked on the island; other families from the mainland also intermarried and lived intermittently with the residents of Malaga Island. The Tripp family, likely the most impoverished of all of the families, on Malaga Island lived in a wheelhouse that was dragged ashore; after the eviction of the island's residents in 1912, the family of Bob and Laura Tripp and their two children removed their boathouse and lived on a boat that was moored nearby. What happened to the family captivated local media. On November 16, 1912, a large storm thrashed the coast of Phippsburg. Laura Tripp, who had become extremely ill due to malnutrition and exposure, died while her husband attempted to get to town to find a doctor. Their two children had to wait out the storm until their father could return to their boat. The *Lewiston Saturday Journal* recounted the story in full broadside. Recalling the harrowing night of Laura's death, they stated:

A plotting [*sic*] rain drove against the crude little houseboat, and the turbulent waters, lashed to a foam by the wild November gale, threw it time after time with the regularity of a pendulum, against the wicked jutting rocks

of Little Bushey. Inside the rough cabin, dimly lighted by a flickering oil lamp, the waster, [*sic*] worn form of a woman occupied a pile of rags by courtesy called a bed. Beside her sat a youth of barely a dozen years. Tears coursed down his cheeks. The force of the wind grew greater, the waves rallied higher, the little house boat rocked more violently. The woman raised a thin hand, reached out, as to touch the lad's face. Then the mother's strength failed, the hand dropped to the ragged coverlet; the woman coughed, a hemorrhage followed, then the muscles relaxed, the eyes closed—Laura Tripp's sufferings were ended. ("The Death of Laura Tripp" 1914)

The remaining Tripp family left the area after this incident and settled in Connecticut. This excerpt points to the ways in which Malaga Islanders captivated the local media, even after the eviction in 1912.

The importance of local and national media in what happened on Malaga Island cannot be overstated. One early mention of Malaga Island in newsprint came from as far away as Cloverport, Kentucky, where the *Breckenridge News* described the Malaga Islanders:

Upon this island are three huts built of logs and mud, and these huts are crowded with 35 to 40 people.... They were barefooted for the most part and poorly clothed at the best. Some of the women were almost nude, and several children have died from exposure and want of proper food. The huts are said to be in a filthy condition and afford but scant shelter from the bitter cold. ("Suffering off the Maine Coast" 1894)

The same article appeared on February 28, 1894, in the Provo City, Utah, newspaper the *Evening Dispatch*. The article was originally written by the *Boston Herald*, which became one of the most prominent sources of misinformation about Malaga Island at the time. Archaeological research has proven nearly all of these statements to be false. The northern end of the island, where almost all of the homes were due to this end's protection from the elements, was constructed almost entirely by human hands in the late 19th century. The high bedrock meant that there was not enough existing soil on the ground for any kind of mud structure. A large shell midden created the surface for walking and for the placement of structures.

Most newspaper accounts of Malaga Island were similarly negative in nature. This negativity

can be explained as both racism and competition. The sudden collapse of the boat-building industry in the region as well as the increased competition for fish in the Gulf of Maine after the Civil War meant that local fisherman were competing against one another for resources. The Malaga Islanders were easy targets, as their race and poverty put them at the bottom of the social hierarchy in the nearby community. There were, however, exceptions to this, particularly because of the efforts of missionaries Captain George W. Lane and his wife and daughter. The Lanes summered on nearby Horse Island and became aware of Malaga Island in the first few years of the 1900s. By 1906, they were regularly rowing to Malaga Island in order to teach the local children. Initially held in a room at James McKenney's home, the eight to ten students of Malaga were taught the basics of how to read, write and do arithmetic. A remarkable scrapbook kept from 1906 to 1908 by Fred C. Woolley, who was a friend of Captain Lane's from Massachusetts, has survived and provides a large number of photographs of the Malaga Island inhabitants as well as correspondence between the Lanes, Woolley and others from the First Church of Malden, Massachusetts. The majority of the scrapbook describes attempts to raise money for a motorboat, yet valuable information is present that refutes newspaper accounts and testimony by state officials which stated that the children of Malaga Island were all incapable of reading or writing. By 1907, at least several children were capable of writing; Woolley included thank-you notes from John, Harold and Stella McKenney for Woolley's recent gift of a blackboard for their classroom.

One of the few grains of truth that came out of the newspaper accounts of Malaga Island was that the islanders were indeed suffering. A number of economic conditions coalesced after the end of the Civil War that led to disastrous circumstances for Mainers, particularly those who had made their living from maritime activities. First, Maine underwent a fish-stock crisis, the first of its kind, in the late 1860s. Fishing had been widely unregulated by the state prior to 1867, and was left up to local municipalities. Cod fish stocks plummeted, and anadromous fish (fish that are born and spawn in fresh water but spend the majority of their life in salt water) were



particularly affected by over-fishing during the mid-19th century (Bolster 2012: 165-66). The Civil War itself hastened the decline of the fish population, as Mainers came to rely more heavily upon fish as the basis for their diets during those years. The shipbuilding industry in New England began to decline in the postwar years due to the technological shift from wooden to steel ships, and from wind to steam power. Coupled with the decline of the fish stock in the Gulf of Maine and the overall economic condition of the North during and after the war, those who were most at risk suffered the worst.

Malaga Island's residents relied heavily upon fishing, and local competition helped fuel anti-Malaga sentiment in the area. In his 1991 master's thesis, "No Greater Abomination': Ethnicity, Class and Power Relations on Malaga Island, Maine, 1880-1912," John Mosher found a multitude of accounts in local newspapers that stated that Malaga's residents were engaged in illegal activity related to fishing and lobstering, including the cutting of trap lines, stealing lobsters and the taking "short" lobsters (lobsters shorter than the legal catch limit; Mosher 1991: 77). While there is no evidence of the first two accusations, archaeological excavations have shown that there were at least a couple of instances of taking of short lobsters by Malaga Islanders. However, given the economic climate of Phippsburg, it is likely that most fishermen took short lobsters from time to time.

Mosher asserted that there was a direct correlation between the economy of Phippsburg and the way that Malaga Island's residents were treated. Most of Malaga's residents received some kind of aid from the town during the 1890s until their eviction in 1912. Each year the percentage of town aid that went to Malaga's residents varied widely. For example, in 1892 78.2 per cent of town aid went to Malaga Islanders; in 1900, only 4.6 per cent went to them. In 1907 and 1908, the town allocated no money to support Malaga Islanders. This was not because they became financially stable; it was because Phippsburg's residents became increasingly hostile toward the idea of supporting the community (Mosher 1991: 91-92). In 1899 and 1903, the town went so far as to try to claim that Malaga belonged to the nearby town of Harpswell. They were unsuccessful and the matter was settled in 1903

when Malaga Island became officially part of Phippsburg (93). In 1905, while still being part of Phippsburg, Malaga Island became a ward of the state, an action which would have a domino effect on the islanders' standing in town and state politics.

This decline came to a head around 1910. A number of factors led to their eviction. Eugenics began to play a large role in state politics when dealing with the poor. Henry H. Goddard's *The Kallikak Family: A Study in the Heredity of Feeble-Mindedness* was published in 1912. Goddard was from East Vassalboro, Maine, about 96 kilometres inland from Malaga Island. Scientific racism took hold in state politics and would have a profound effect upon the way in which the islanders were dealt with. Another important factor in the islanders' eventual eviction was the rise of tourism in the state of Maine as one of the most important industries in the state. Given the postwar decline and subsequent regulation of the fishing industry during the late 19th century, as well as the decline of the shipbuilding industry, Maine's citizens and government sought to attract new forms of industry to the state. The most important of these new industries was tourism, which would come to dominate Maine's economy into the late 20th and 21st centuries.

Dona Brown has argued that the aesthetic desires of turn-of-the-century wealthy northerners who looked to vacation in New England led them to be drawn to the region not only because of its resorts and beauty, but also in pursuit of what Brown identifies as "colonial values" (Brown 1995: 185-86). Brown asserts that these "colonial values" desired by the upper middle class reflect a desire to revert to the class structure of the colonial period, with an aristocratic class and without the modern factories of industrialized urban centres (Brown 1995: 187). New England became the birthplace of the pilgrims, invented alongside the Yankee figure, and saw the emergence of historical tourism in the late 19th century. Tourists sought out areas such as Old York, one of Maine's oldest towns, with a wealth of historic architecture (Conforti 2001: 178, 238-39). Colonial Revival Architecture became extremely popular in the region as well. Several historic buildings were restored during the first decades of the 20th century, such as the House of Seven Gables in Salem, Massachusetts (211-213;



234). Tourists were seeking the idyllic landscape of yore, free from the blight of immigrants, factories and modern cities. Places like Malaga Island, therefore, represented a threat to the tourism industry, as their seemingly ramshackle homes and the colour of their skin drew the ire of local and state officials. The Malaga Islanders existed “in a society that condemned pauperism, feeble-mindedness, thriftlessness, and idleness, and that reflected increasingly dissonant community values and socio-economic distinctions within the state” (Mosher 1991: 1-2). Their mere presence, in the midst of scientific racism taking hold in state politics, threatened the economic future of Maine’s coastline following several decades of economic struggles after the Civil War.

The rise in the number of sensational newspaper articles about Malaga Island can be seen as a reflection of the rise in tourism in the state. Tourism in Casco Bay began to rise during the first decade of the 20th century. While there are few known newspaper articles prior to 1900 written about Malaga Island, at least thirty were published about the island between 1900 and 1912. On August 24, 1905, the *Casco Bay Breeze* published an article written by Lauris Percy entitled “Strange Scenes on a Strange Island,” with the subtitle “Malago, the Home of Southern Negro Blood—Inhabitants Almost Isolated from Civilization—Incongruous Scenes on a Spot of Natural Beauty in Casco Bay” (1905). The only articles written prior to 1900 were the same story by the *Boston Herald*, reprinted in the *Breckenridge News* (Kentucky) and the *Evening Dispatch* (Utah). As Casco Bay increased as a tourist area, so too did the number of articles written about Malaga Island, despite there being few legal problems for the islands’ inhabitants until 1910. A relatively large mixed-racial community in the middle of the New Meadows River would not fit in to this imagined history of New England, and it drew the ire of businesspeople who wished to profit from the industry of tourism. The proximity to Phippsburg, as seen in Fig. 3, meant that they were literally in the sights of Phippsburg’s less than welcoming residents. The islanders were also looked down upon by state officials who wanted to eliminate “less desirable” citizens from the face of the Maine coast. Malaga Island sits in the New Meadows River, which was a popular steamship route during this time period. Their

existence on the island was in direct conflict with what would have been considered the true, American New England.

Brown’s assertions about “colonial values” further contextualize the reemergence of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) in Maine during the first decades of the 20th century. The Klan, who are anti-immigration, racist and, most importantly for Maine’s immigrant population, anti-Catholic, found a sympathetic Protestant population in rural Maine. Though the organization had disbanded in 1871, it reemerged in 1915 after the popularization of the KKK-sympathetic film *The Birth of a Nation* (Richard 2009: 287). The organization took a strong foothold in the state, with its peak around 1923 and 1924. Owen Brewster, a Republican from Dexter, Maine, became governor of the state in 1925. Brewster was elected largely on the votes of Klan-sympathizers who had supported Brewster’s proposed legislation to eliminate state funding for sectarian schools (Richard 2009: 294-95). The Klan was able to get such a strong foothold in the state due to an increasingly hostile racial climate. The influx of French Canadian Catholics to work in Maine wool factories and fish canneries, as well as Reconstruction-era racial anxieties in the North, contributed to the fertile location for the Klan’s propaganda of a racially pure, Protestant Maine to take hold. The Klan’s strong presence in Maine within a decade of the eviction of Malaga Island’s residents demonstrates the underlying racial tension within the state in the early 20th century. Their ability to drum up strong, politically connected support within such a short timeframe meant that Maine was not untouched by the increasing racial tensions within the U.S.

Malaga Island’s residents represented a direct conflict with a white, Protestant New England coast ready for tourism for rich Americans who held “colonial values.” A map included in George Woolley’s scrapbook of the route of the Harpswell Steamboat Company that took visitors from Portland to the islands of Casco Bay shows that the steamboat would have passed very closely to Malaga Island and stopped in Sebasco, just a mile or so south of Phippsburg. “The Queer Folk of the Maine Coast,” as one author at the time called them, attracted the wrong kind of outsider attention for Phippsburg’s white residents. As the region became increasingly reliant upon the

tourism industry to supplement the decrease in revenue from shipbuilding and the industries related to shipbuilding, communities like Malaga Island became a blight.

In 1911, the state of Maine began proceedings to take total possession of the island and evict Malaga Island's residents. Maine's governor, Frederick Plaisted, visited the island that summer with Payson Smith, the superintendent of Maine schools. Smith sought to reform the state educational system. That summer, Smith attended a meeting of The National Education Association in San Francisco. Smith was in attendance and inducted as a member at that meeting. Also in attendance was none other than Henry H. Goddard, who gave a lecture on his Binet tests, which created a scale for mental deficiencies and classified types of mental health problems, and "exhibited a number of charts showing the dependence of feeble-mindedness upon heredity" (Bell 1911: 298). Both Smith and Plaisted saw only one solution to the Malaga Island "problem": eviction of its residents and the institutionalization of those deemed unfit. The legal disputes over the ownership of the island were still being decided in 1911, with the wealthy Perry family claiming ownership despite lack of a deed to the island. The state, looking to hurry

the eviction process, accepted the Perry family as rightful owners and the sale was eventually finalized on February 9, 1912, several months after the eviction notices were served.

Malaga Island's residents were given until July 1, 1912, to leave the island willingly or they faced forced removal and the razing of their homes. Most of the residents left the island in the early summer of 1912, though eight islanders, most of them members of Jake Marks' family, were committed to the Maine School for the Feeble Minded at Pineland, which would become notorious in the state's history as an institution where patients suffered from conditions including forced sterilization and abuse (Murphy 2011: 84). Of the islanders, the Maine Commission for the Study of the Feeble-minded stated:

One of the largest of the State's degenerate communities, that on Malaga Island, has been ingeniously dispersed by the State's taking over this unorganized and unclaimed island and annexing it to an adjoining town. Three consignments of feeble-minded children were sent to the State School for Feeble-minded [Pineland] and the squatters notified to remove their shacks. In the course of time this was done and little hardship resulted. Before this step was taken, however, dwellers on the nearby main land were often startled at night by the weird shouts, howls, profanity, obscenity, and

**Fig. 3**  
*Facing north while standing on the McKenney locus on Malaga Island. Phippsburg is to the right, while Bear Island is to the left. (Photo by author.)*



reports of firearms from the island. This colony contained many with an admixture of African blood. (1918)

The last sentence suggests that the African ancestry was of utmost importance in the state's decision as to what to do about Malaga Island and its residents. Their eviction from the island was seen as a positive outcome for the residents by state officials, despite what happened to the Tripp and Marks families.

Despite their impending eviction, Malaga Islanders were still being blasted by local and state media. The *Boston Journal* wrote "Malaga Islanders Live Like Savages: Untutored, Unclean, the Natives of Malaga Observed Neither the laws of God Nor Man Until a Few Christians and the State Acted" (1911). A common thread is, again, their mixed-racial heritage. In Holman Day's August 21, 1911 article, when asked whether or not there were "full-blooded colored folks," "King Jim" stated "Sh'd say not: they're all mixed up [*sic*]." Even decades later, the race of Malaga Island's residents made them the subject of both curiosity and disdain in the local media, as a May 19, 1945, article in the *Lewiston Evening Journal* illustrates: "In a way it was a plague spot. Intermarrying had brought the inevitable results. Mentality had been weakened,

disease, tuberculosis, syphilis, and other forms of illness prevailed and was [*sic*] steadily spreading" (Conner 1945). The local media made one thing clear: the Malaga Island problem was primarily about class and race and a disruption of the idyllic New England coast.

Very little occurred on Malaga Island from the years after 1912 until the 1980s. Malaga Island's residents moved to the mainland and made their livings the best they could. The majority stayed living in the area in Phippsburg and the surrounding towns. The McKenney family, for example, still live and work in the town of Phippsburg as fishermen. The state of Maine eventually sold the island into private hands. The island has not had any inhabitants since 1912, and has been primarily used as an area for Phippsburg's lobstermen to store their traps. In fact, McKenney descendants store their traps where James and Salome McKenney's house once sat. Local folklore twisted the story of Malaga Island in a reflection of the journalistic efforts of the newspapers in the years leading up to the eviction. It became known as a colony of escaped or marooned slaves. There were stories of hundreds of people living there, engaged in all manner of nefarious and morally reprehensible activities. The intermarriage of blacks and whites—and their mixed-racial offspring—was a blatant sign

**Fig. 4**  
Sampling of ceramics  
and glass collected  
in 2006–2008  
excavations. (Photo  
courtesy Dr. Nathan D.  
Hamilton.)





of sexual impropriety. Their inability to be “thrift” was also a common theme in many articles, suggesting that their poverty was entirely due to the mismanagement of their own resources, one aspect of the community Holman Day noted in his 1909 article in *Harpers Monthly Magazine*. “Malagaites” became known locally as a pejorative term meant to imply a mixed-racial ancestry. This folklore and misinformation provided some of the basis for archaeological investigations, as they offered a unique view of the intersection of oral history, racism and material culture. Archaeologists wanted to uncover the evidence to support or refute claims made on both sides of the Malaga Island story: the newspapers’ story and the vastly different Malaga described in Woolley’s scrapbook (1908).

The success of the Malaga Island public archaeology project (Site Number ME 348.8) has been largely due to the extraordinary nature of the site itself. There are few other sites in the U.S. that give archaeologists the opportunity to excavate the homes of identified African Americans backed up with extensive documentary evidence for a discrete time period. At least six separate loci have been identified as the middens belonging to individual households on the north end of

the island. During field seasons from 2004 to 2008, more than 59,000 artifacts were collected from approximately 50 square metres that were excavated or tested (Hamilton and Sanford 2012: 38). The field schools conducted on the island provided an opportunity for undergraduate students not only to learn field methodology but also to engage in an African American archaeology.

The most mundane artifacts can provide evidence for historical events that occurred on the island. More than 27,000 pieces of metal were excavated, the majority of which are nails and other types of construction materials that were deposited during the deconstruction of the island’s structures, 1911-1912 (Hamilton 2013). A small ring made of glass and wire was found spilling from the side of the midden, perhaps a handmade token of love from one of the men to his wife. The cemetery’s location is still unknown, despite testing and mapping to determine its location. The composition of the midden itself provides a vast amount of insight into the ways in which this group of people changed their environment to suit their needs. The north end of the island has very high bedrock, like much of the Maine coast. In order to build a suitable walking surface, the inhabitants had to construct



**Fig. 5**  
*Photograph of opening  
 of Malaga Island:  
 Fragmented Lives  
 exhibit opening on May  
 19, 2012. (Photo by  
 author.)*



a strong surface by the deposition of the shells of soft shell clams and marine gastropods. The midden itself comprises more than 1,000 square metres at the northern end of the island. Many of the glass bottles and ceramics suggest that despite claims of their near primeval existence on the island, the majority of household items were average types found in most rural households at the time. Glass bottles, which include a variety of patent medicine bottles and food flavourings, were found with maker's marks pointing to their origins in Bath and Portland (Hamilton and Sanford 2012: 88). Ceramics excavated indicate a preference for white ironstone ceramics common in the late 19th century, as well as crocks, redware milk pans, and some ornately decorated transfer-wares.

These artifacts suggest housewares not dissimilar to what would have been in most homes in the area at the time. While the state and local media consistently attempted to show that the Malaga Islanders were unable to support themselves and lived like sub-humans, the archaeological record proves otherwise. The rather mundane, late-19th-century artifact assemblage belies the importance of the archaeology at Malaga Island. Decades of negative attention from the state, the media and the local town left the history of Malaga Island to be told solely in voice of early 20th-century eugenicists. The archaeological excavations have allowed for a new, more thorough understanding of how the Malaga Islanders actually lived, as their voices were never directly heard. Their daily lives were similar to most on the Maine coast: they fished, planted small gardens and did manual labour. They often eked by, but their experience was not unlike most of the rural poor in Maine. What has become important to archaeologists and museum professionals is the contradictions in the ways newspapers told their story, versus the story the material culture tells, which indicates an average late-19th-century assemblage. The museum exhibit at the Maine State Museum helped provide a higher-profile moment for Malaga Island, and its history and descendants, to rewrite the narrative of Malaga Island.

The Maine State Museum expressed interest in creating an exhibit to mark the centennial of the eviction. Artifacts were selected that represent both the average archaeological nature of the

artifact assemblage as well as the individuals who lived there. For example, the "Eliza Griffin and Eason Homes" section of the exhibit shows pieces of broken ceramics, fishhooks, as well as dozens of buttons. Eliza took in laundry from the mainland and washed them in the ocean. Hundreds of buttons have been recovered in the small tidal zone near Eliza's locus. The area has become known as "Button Bay." Other artifacts, such as a large amount of birdshot and the presence of many species of birds with feathers desirable for ladies' hats, suggest the ability of the island's inhabitants to adapt to the economic climate of midcoast Maine in the late 19th century.

The archaeological excavations that began in the early 2000s have had a number of positive outcomes for Malaga Island and the state itself. In part, the descendant interviews came about as a result of the archaeologists' long-term commitment to their research, which began in the 1980s. Many years were spent getting to know the area and build relations with locals, who were important in opening doors to identifying descendants and relevant information about the local community and its folklore. First, Malaga Island was the entrée into archaeology for dozens of students through an academic field school headed by University of Southern Maine archaeologists Dr. Nathan Hamilton and Dr. Robert Sanford. Second, since the Maine Coast Heritage Trust purchased the island in 2001, it has become an ecological preserve that will never be developed, and so the majority of the site has been left undisturbed for possible future archaeologists with less invasive techniques. The archaeological excavations have also provided insights into a protracted ecological history in the Gulf of Maine. Third, archaeological excavations led to a series of documentaries, a photographic exhibit and radio documentary in 2009 through the Salt Institute in Portland, Maine, entitled "A Story Best Left Untold," which helped stir interest in the state about Maine's racial history. Finally, the archaeological excavations have provided the descendant community with a tangible history. The excavations led to the state's official apology to the inhabitants of Malaga Island and their descendants on April 7, 2010, in a joint resolution, "recognizing the tragic expulsion of the residents of Malaga Island, Maine in 1912 and rededicating ourselves to the Maine ideals

of tolerance, independence and equality for all peoples" (Huang 2010).

The archaeology done on Malaga Island has also helped reconnect the large descendant community. As Mark Leone, Janifer LaRoche and Jennifer J. Babiarez argue in their 2005 article in the *Annual Review of Anthropology*, "Archaeology is a vehicle through which the origin, evolution, and material components of diasporic communal formations can be understood" (2005: 578). The archaeological excavations of sites of contested histories can be a powerful conduit through which descendants can reclaim their histories. The archaeologists from the University of Southern Maine, Drs. Hamilton and Sanford, began to offer tours of the island to descendants and others interested in Maine's black history, particularly members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). These tours were largely successful because of the interest of a growing group of descendants who showed a vested interest in promotion and preservation of the island.

The opening of the exhibit *Malaga Island: Fragmented Lives* saw a significant amount of local and national attention. Local television station WCSH6, an NBC affiliate, filmed a segment on the exhibit on the magazine news show *207*. Local newspapers also covered the event extensively. In conjunction with the exhibit, the Maine Coast Heritage Trust offered tours of the island throughout the summer of 2012. Led by the author of this article, each tour was sold out weeks in advance. The tours were very well received by participants. Approximately 25 per cent of those who participated in the tour were descendants, with the remainder being a history-minded group who had heard about Malaga Island in the local media. Natural erosion provided routes to conversations about the importance of material culture in telling the Malaga Island story. Due to the loose nature of the shell midden matrix, and to the rise of sea level and winter storms, artifacts continually spill out of the sides of the midden. Participants often picked up artifacts in this context, which provided opportunities to talk about the daily activities of Malaga Island's inhabitants. Participants were also given a unique opportunity at cultivating a landscape awareness that is not easily appreciated unless time is spent

on the island (see Fig. 3). The close-knit nature of the island and its relationship to the mainland are better understood when experienced.

Since the archaeological excavations on Malaga Island began, the descendant community has banded together in a much more organized fashion. A Facebook group ([www.facebook.com/groups/malagahistory/](http://www.facebook.com/groups/malagahistory/)) has been formed that provides the Malaga Island descendants a chance to continue contact with a largely dispersed community. Family events are held regularly, and a small group of descendants, notably unofficial spokeswoman Marnie Darling Voter Childress, are actively involved in promoting the history of the island. Childress was interviewed on C-SPAN (Cable-Satellite Public Affairs Network) in 2013 when the exhibit closed. The material culture of Malaga Island has given descendants an opportunity to feel more closely connected to their ancestors as well as an opportunity to heal from several generations of poor treatment. During the habitation of Malaga Island, the residents had a home that allowed for mutual support and an enclave from some of the racism that came to define the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The descendant community has a deep, spiritual connection to their ancestors' home. Most were moved to tears during a September 12, 2010, visit to the island, when then governor John Baldacci and Herb Adams, along with members of the NAACP and archaeologists from the University of Southern Maine, read the formal declaration of apology and erected a small memorial on the island. About fifty descendants were present at this event, and it proved to be a very healing moment for Malaga Island's descendants and the local community. Further memorials are planned for the future. For now, the archaeological excavations are complete.

The archaeological excavation at Malaga Island has given the state of Maine an opportunity to confront its contested racial history. Despite a 19th-century desire to extol the independent American virtues of New England and at the same time whitewash its coast, the Malaga Island project has proved successful as a large-scale public archaeology project. Archaeologists and social historians have a unique opportunity to create a path to confronting difficult histories by providing tangible material culture through which to make connections. The relationship

between museum professionals at the Maine State Museum and archaeologists from the University of Southern Maine produced a museum exhibit heavily informed by archaeology, and archaeological methodologies that were guided by museum professionals. The public interest in archaeological excavations on Malaga Island has given way to an opportunity to include

in student curriculum histories that challenge preconceptions, as many teachers in the area are now using the story of Malaga Island in teaching Maine history. Malaga Island is a unique site for African American archaeology in New England in the 19th century, and can be used as an example of interdisciplinary research.

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