

Dream Islands

A **private island** opens a door to Nirvana.

BY COLIN W. SARGENT & WILLIS KUELTHAU

*“Nights and days came and passed
And summer and winter
and the rain.*

And it was good to be a little Island.

*A part of the world
and a world of its own*

All surrounded by the bright blue sea.”

Margaret Wise Brown, The Little Island, Maine, 1947



The view at sundown from Cappy's Lodge. The 375-foot dock is in the foreground, while beyond a cruise ship departs Portland Harbor.

When JOHN MUIR described an “infinite storm of beauty,” he must have had a Maine island in mind.

In particular, House Island deserves that distinction.

HOUSE ISLAND, \$6.9M ACREAGE: 13

LOOKING FOR FRONT-ROW tickets to the show? The northeastern half of House Island, with nearly 4,000 feet of shorefront and sparkling views of Portland’s skyline, tops the summer market.

Like a beckoning finger, the enclave’s new long pier draws you in from Casco Bay.

This is the part of House Island once known as the ‘Ellis Island of the North,’ where hopeful immigrants from Europe and the Mediterranean were processed from 1907 to 1937. Three years ago, when Vincent “Cap” Mona bought this vast parcel, the ghostly imprint of the Immigration Center was still here, despite generations of neglect and the presence of a strangling invasive plant, Black Swallow wort, that was “killing everything in sight.” Lovely in its ruins, the old Doctor’s Cottage still watched

There's something about an island that "draws you in," says Vincent "Cap" Mona, who fell for the 12.8-acre northeast half of wild, historic House Island and bought it on September 30, 2014.

from the top of its hill. Near the water's edge, the weatherbeaten wreck of the former Immigration Intake Station seemed a total loss, exploding with decay.

Who is this Don Quixote who would tackle such a challenge, fully restoring this lost kingdom while never tilting at windmills but instead harnessing solar power? Once triumphant, why would he ever relinquish this dream?

What did this island do to sweep you away?

The very first time I felt it was coming back from a dinner with our friends in his boat. It was a gorgeous fall night. The weather could not have been better. I was on Cloud Nine, breathing in the sweet, crisp air of Casco Bay, and my friend mentioned this island was for sale. The first thing that came to my mind was how gorgeous the surroundings were in close proximity to Portland Harbor. The sun

had already set. In the darkness, I wasn't able to see far into the island. Later on, I'd realize it was so overgrown with invasive vines it would take quite a lot more effort, inspiration, and money to bring it up to the level where it should be.

My next thought was, this isn't Florida; it's not New York or Connecticut. Maybe I could afford this island!

The Mosquito Coast meets Casco Bay. What was it like to explore here?

When the realtor took us to the island, we were in awe of the potential this property could hold in the future. But it was a mess. The ever-growing and deadly invasive Black Swallow wort had killed a vast amount of native vegetation and trees. There were three 1907-era buildings. When we walked into each building, it was almost overwhelming—the degree of neglect, the water damage from roof and wall leakage. But being in the construction industry for many de-



\$6.9M

ades, I knew that while the challenges were obviously numerous, there was reason to be excited here.

When we first went into the lodge, it was reminiscent of the 1960s lobster or crab shacks familiar along Maine waterfronts. The historical significance was not quite obvious until we understood this was the Ellis Island of the North in its day. The realization of the island's former use was beyond amazing, especially when we found a "Quarantine: Keep Out" sign in the old intake station [now remodeled as Cappy's Lodge].

We sensed it further when we walked to the grassy knoll going up to the old doctor's house on top of the hill (which is now Christina's World, named for my former wife and the famous 1948 painting by Andrew Wyeth).

Because House Island is hidden in plain sight in Casco Bay, it's likely only a few lobsterboat crews would have heard the hammers ringing while you were making repairs. Has word gotten out about the improvements?

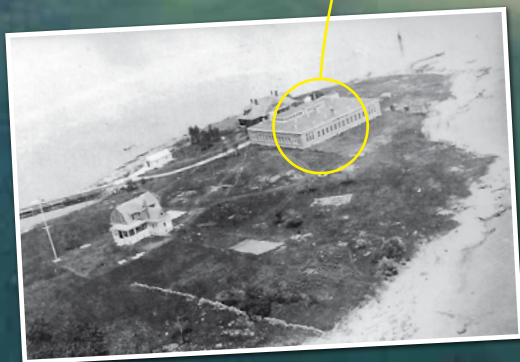
It was an unbelievable experience with fantastic results. I hate even to put it on the market, but I realize I'm a contractor. I did my part. The new owner has got to be a hospitality expert with experience in events for corporate and families as well as continuing [to develop and host] our very upscale weddings. Our first high-end wedding included a massive fireworks display and fabulously catered meals.

Our first high-end corporate event was for Mercedes-Benz International last September, showcasing the new models.

There's some fast company. How did you pull that off?

We were approached by a top New York City marketing firm wanting to rent our island for an international high-end auto manufac-

OBSESSIONS



The 10,000-square-foot foundation of the former immigration center awaits a new future.

turer.' That was quite a phone call!

Has anyone "Yelp-reviewed" House Island, so to speak? A local TV reporter pulled me aside on the island. He said, "I can't believe that [during one of the worst winters] you took three dilapidated old structures from 1907, took them down to the bare bones, and rebuilt these three skeletons into these gorgeous houses."

We'd also built a brand-new caretaker's cottage. All of the properties are solar powered with backup generators, new wells, new septic fields, and all new plumbing lines. Our brand-new dock is 375 feet long. It cost almost \$450,000.

The sales portfolio for your half of House Island suggests that 10,000 square feet of the larger immigration building is grandfathered as a commercial location for a possible island boutique hotel in the future. Did you sense this from the beginning?

No, we really didn't consider the 10,000-square-foot foundation as a footprint for future building originally. Instead, we were busy cleaning up the is-

land. I was personally there for a number of weeks, helping to clean up the mess. [Developer] Mike Scarks, the former owner, had already removed 10 or 15 huge dumpsters full of junk that the previous owner had hoarded and left on the island, including a large fire engine.

In the very beginning, our plan was to renovate just one house per year. But later on, we realized how important that 10,000-square-foot structure is. We, or the owners after us, could have one beautiful bed-and-breakfast or a small, quality boutique hotel, along with [guest residences] in some of the other historically significant structures.

We're negotiating with Central Maine Power to bring power and internet to the island.

Meanwhile, you've ventured bold use of solar power.

What was the inspiration there?

In the beginning, we felt solar would be the best bet because the power company wanted over \$500,000 to bring in power. But

now they need us, and the price is reduced by more than half.

We were very fortunate to have a good solar-power solution contractor, Maine Solar Solutions, owned by Sam Zuckerman.

What's the most telling advice someone else gave you about the island when you bought it?

Some people I knew warned me that the cost of transportation was going to be unbelievable. They were correct! Looking back, we spent almost \$1 million in transporting lumber and products, equipment, tools, concrete, vehicles, sand, gravel, mulch—even the trailers and RVs and the food required to house and feed a small army of workers each day.

During exploration and excavation, what did you find? We found a graveyard where a British sailor is buried. We also found a keg made by Watney Combe Reid & Co. Ltd., of London that dates to the 1800s. [We traced the company records in] the national archives. Some liquid was still in the keg.

SAND ISLAND CASCO BAY

OWN A PRIVATE ISLAND

\$1.9M

MLS # 1238468

MOSHIER ISLAND PROPERTY



MLS #1293972

MOSHIER ISLAND - DEEP WATER FRONTAGE



MLS # 1227576



Jeff England - Associate Broker
jeff.England@nemoves.com
Mobile 207.756.0049
Office 207.253.3147
53 Baxter Blvd.
Portland, Me. 04101

SELLING OR BUYING?
I can get buyer clients there and back on their schedule!
DISCOVER CASCO BAY - NATURES PLAYGROUND!

**COLDWELL
BANKER**
RESIDENTIAL BROKERAGE



Before: The intake station as repairs begin.

After: The old intake station has been newly renovated as "Cappy's Lodge," now a luxury five-bedroom residence.



House Island in the 21st Century

October, 2008: Hilda Cushing Dudley, whose family lorded over the isle since the early 1950s, dies. Known to generations of Portlanders as the owner of House Island Tours. According to Mona, she's buried on the island.

May, 2014: Hilda's son, Harold Cushing Jr., sells House Island in two waves (\$500,000 for the Fort Scammel half, and \$2.5M for the Immigration Center half) to local developer Michael Scarks. Scarks is known for his philanthropy and daring projects like restoring the Nissen Building and the former Maine National Bank building. A longtime helicopter pilot, he flies over the island, starts the cleanup process, and ponders the future.

September, 2014: Scarks sells the north-eastern half of House Island to Vincent "Cap" Mona of Three Palms Design, Naples, Florida, for \$2.2M. The firm specializes in historic restorations.

January, 2015: The City of Portland designates all of House Island as an historic area.

March 5, 2015: Michael Scarks, 61, dies in Maine Medical Center. His heirs still own the Fort Scammel half of House Island.



FROM TOP: WILLIAM RAVES; CAP MONA(3)

What's the most unusual thing you ever saw that floated onto your shore?

A poor dead baby seal.

What does House Island *sound* like?

Sometimes, music floats in across Portland Harbor at night.

Where do you think new buyers might be standing when they fall in love with House Island?

Anywhere. If you get within eyesight [of a dream], anything draws you in.

-By Colin W. Sargent



DESIGNED
& CREATED
FOR WHO
YOU ARE.



Maria Antonietta
COUTURE

NOW SCHEDULING
FOR 2017 & 2018
BRIDES • MOTHERS
BRIDESMAIDS

322 FORE STREET
PORTLAND, MAINE
MARIAANTONIETACOUTURE.COM

207 239 5672



kevin browne
ARCHITECTURE

207.847.3499

KEVINBROWNEARCHITECTURE.COM