

Shudder Island

Just offshore from where posh Sebasco Estates in Phippsburg sits today, 41-acre Malaga Island was home to a black man and his descendants for generations. Then, in 1912, rich tourists on the mainland determined the oasis was too good for what they called the island's "maroon society." They decided to get it back any way they could. One dark night, local officials stole up on the island's cabins, captured the families who didn't manage to elude them, and illegally committed them to the Maine School for the Feeble-Minded [Pineland] as wards of the state. They never made it out. No one defended them. Their graves have just been discovered...

BY JAN GRIECO
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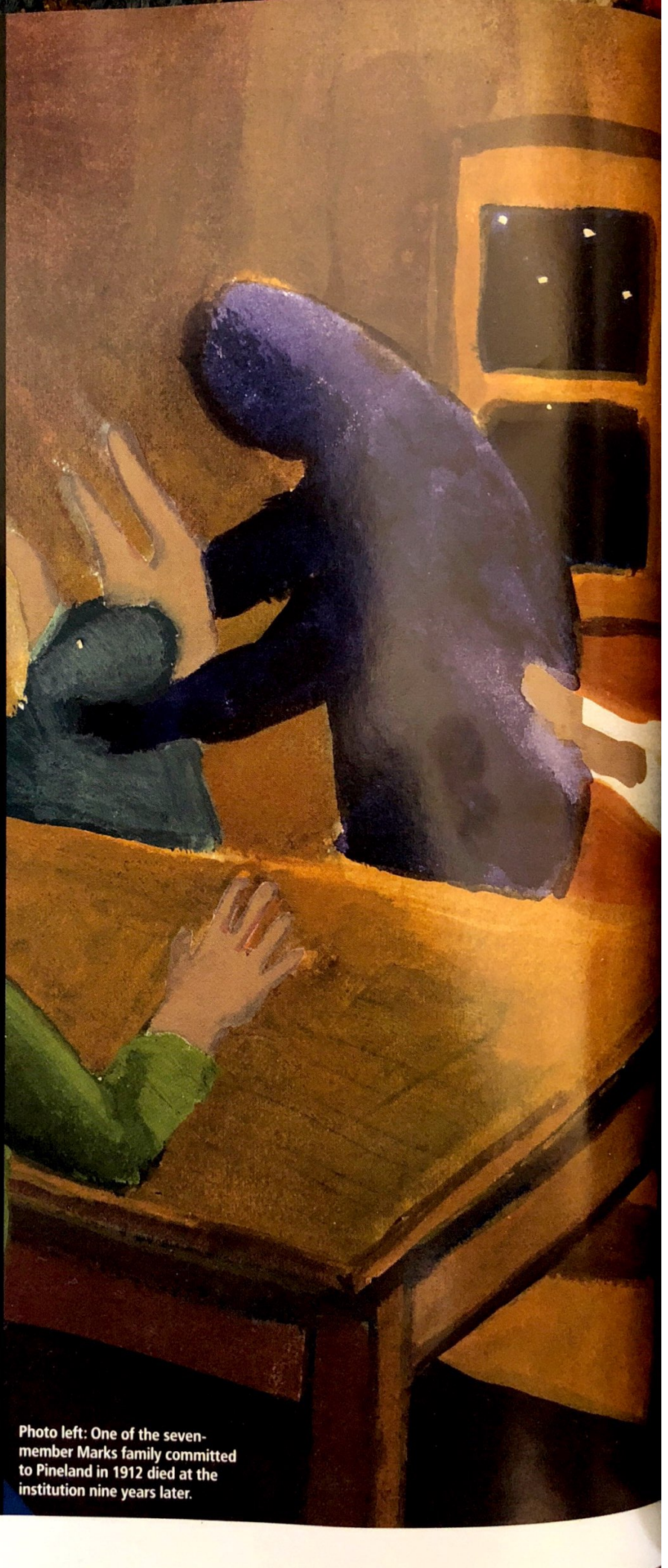


Photo left: One of the seven-member Marks family committed to Pineland in 1912 died at the institution nine years later.



and originally," Breed says. Records show this, showing Captain Darling wrecked in 1773 and 1774, with Benjamin Darling purchasing Horse Island in 1774. One of Captain Darling's wrecks was a schooner loaded with timber from Malaga, Spain. The theory is that the island is actually named for that wreck and Malaga, Spain," Breed says, "rather than for the Abenaki word for cedar."

Benjamin Darling appears to have returned to Malaga Island in 1847, but there is no record of his ever living there. "Back then the only paper trail for a black man was connected to crimes, and nothing indicated that Benjamin Darling was anything other than a productive and law-abiding citizen. Darling's presence in the immediate area leads me to believe that his descendants, called them 'Malagaites,' were third- and fourth-generation Mainers, not runaway slaves from the South," Breed says.

In some ways, Malaga was no different from other island communities. Seagulls and the true heirs to the place, with itin-

The Casco Bay Breeze dubbed the island "Malaga, the Home of Southern Negro Blood ... Incongruous Scenes on a Spot of Natural Beauty in Casco Bay."

erant fishermen, including Darling, storing gear in crude shacks, their families occasionally finding a home here as well, as unchallenged "squatters." Malaga's isolated populace had little contact with the mainland, were not counted in the census, seldom paid taxes, and rarely voted. Illness and even death were taken care of in the privacy of wind and sky, as was education.

Other drifters, including Irish, Scottish, and Portuguese adventurers, settled on Malaga, but life was never easy. Eking out a living from exhausted topsoil and the sur-

rounding sea was all but impossible.

In the early 1900s, in dire straits, Malagaites sought aid and succor from the town of Phippsburg, which had by then become a desirable vacation destination. Even from the island's shores, the mainland residents' parasols and conspicuous wealth were compelling.

Confronted with poverty and diversity in their midst, the mainland residents were horrified and argued that the island belonged instead to the town of Harpswell, to the south.

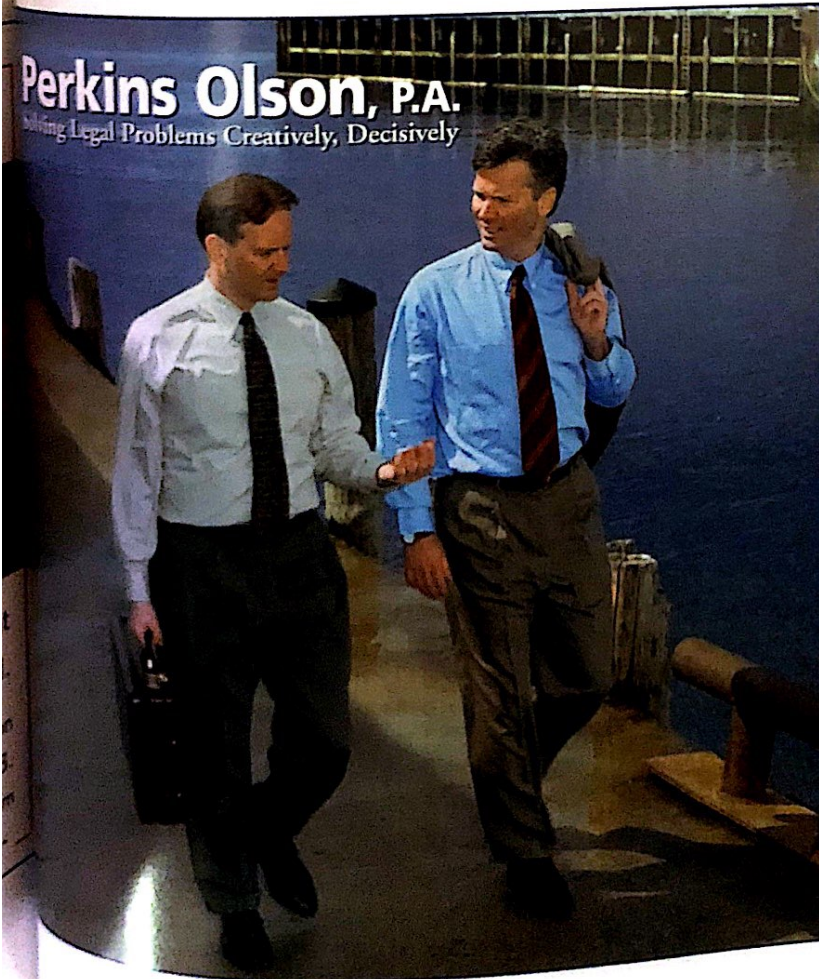
When state legislators clarified the issue by granting Malaga to Phippsburg, the summer people were up in arms.

The state reversed its decision, effectively leaving the Malagaites both wards of the state and in limbo. They weren't from here and they weren't from away. Suspended thus, these were people without a country.

The dispute dramatized the islanders' plight, but not to the islanders' benefit. Locals called the island No Man's Land and pushed for removal of Darling's descendants, who had become an embarrass-

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The boats came at night, hidden in darkness. The rattle of the tide on the shingle beach muffled the luffing of the sails, the groans of the masts and the scrape of keels against the cobbles. With shuttered lanterns, they crept over rockweed, up beyond the waterline, then spread through the village like sharks, and no forked tail nailed against a fish house would keep them away. When at last three men stood before each house, they lit great torches and threw open the cottage doors, shouting and dragging our men and women, and children, too, until at last all the houses down near the cove were empty and we were left standing in the cold wind that came across the island.

We had no warning.

Although time and tide prevent us from knowing exactly how the residents of Malaga Island were forcibly removed from their homes one night nearly 100 years ago,

their eviction is very real and considered one of the state's darkest episodes.

Malaga Island sparkles off the Phippsburg coast at the mouth of the New Meadows River. Today, no buildings survive on its rocky expanse, which is mostly covered with sumac, evergreens, and ghost traps. Lobstermen bring their boats close to the steep, rocky shores to fish from some of the most productive waters in Casco Bay, and gulls and osprey wheel overhead. Like most uninhabited islands dotting the coast, there is an unearthly beauty here.

Dubbed a "maroon society" because of the racial mix of its residents, Malaga appears to have been established as a community in 1847, and, like many island societies, it struggled to survive.

Allen Breed, working closely with William David Barry of Maine Historical Society, says that all indications are that Benjamin Darling, a slave probably from the West Indies, was brought up here in the late eighteenth century by a Captain Darling, sailing out of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, to help

establish a salt works in Phippsburg.

Breed, an Associated Press reporter based in North Carolina, stumbled on the hate crimes on Malaga while preparing to write a national series of features about disposed communities.

Determining exactly who Benjamin Darling was and where he came from is difficult, Breed says, because few records about black men were kept in the 1700s.

But there's conjecture that Darling may have been the illegitimate son of the captain and a slave he kept near what is now Halifax, North Carolina. Beyond this, there's an oral tradition that Bear Island [off Phippsburg, Maine] was named after Benjamin Darling successfully fought off a bear there. We do know from extant records that Darling settled near the mouth of the New Meadows River, married, and began a family that was the foundation of the Malaga community.

"It appears that after saving his [father/captain's] life during a shipwreck, Benjamin Darling was given his freedom and the money to buy nearby Horse Island, where



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THE PAST

ing "eyesore" to "respectable" members of the mainland Phippsburg community, according to the *Casco Bay Breeze*.

In the August 24, 1905, edition, the paper dubbed the island "Malaga, the Home of Southern Negro Blood...Incongruous Scenes on a Spot of Natural Beauty in Casco Bay."

"People found it convenient that the blacks came from the South," Breed says. "But most were third- or fourth-generation Mainers."

In 1911, Governor Fredrick Plaisted visited Malaga and suggested burning the shacks down, drilling a well, and rebuilding modest dwellings for the inhabitants.

Still Sensitive

"One woman attacked me at a presentation at Bowdoin," USM anthropology professor **Nathan Hamilton** says. "She believed I shouldn't be discussing the island."

Hamilton's interest in Malaga Island is both professional and personal—a branch of his family tree flowered here on Malaga several generations ago. Because of the hate crimes and the island's unusual story, he and his associates are hoping to have Malaga Island recognized and listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

With the island's ethnic archaeological sites relatively undisturbed—an appealing aspect to the historic register—the focus now is on tracing residents after their eviction or asylum commitment to determine their survival rate which, Hamilton stresses, provides an important perspective on Maine culture.

"The people who lived there had their own culture and lifestyle because the land had no value," says Hamilton's colleague **Robert Sanford**, a USM professor of environmental science and policy. "I'm interested in what happened when the land became valuable... This [island] was a fairly successful if marginalized community for some time. It tells us a lot about ourselves and how Maine developed."

The research has been coordinated with the Maine Coast Heritage Trust, which owns Malaga and limits access to it. "They know what we're doing," Hamilton says of his five-year study, "and they approve of it."

Malaga is exceptional in the asylum commitment alone. At least eight more Maine islands are associated with generations of black families dating back centuries, including Bailey Island, Horse Island (now Harbor Island), Bear Island, Negro Island (now known as Curtis Island in Camden), and four more islands in the Bar Harbor region.

Local fishermen still use the shores of Malaga Island to store traps and gear.



But by then, public pressure had become so great. Fifty-six Malagaites, injuriously portrayed as an incompetent, lazy, and menial lot, were served eviction notices.

Some residents dismantled their homes and floated them on rafts or scows to less desirable island and mainland locations.

Specifically and most horribly, seven members of the Marks family and an elderly woman, Annie Parker, were sent to Ireland, then known as the Maine School for the Feeble-Minded.

Others were simply dropped in mainland communities, but the stigma of Malaga followed them. The new communities refused to recognize them and denied them higher status, barring them from receiving any assistance.

Remaining buildings, including a once-prideable school, were destroyed by the state, and the graves of residents buried on the island were exhumed and reinterred in unmarked graves on the grounds of the Maine School for the Feeble-Minded.

A monument, paid for by an employee of the school, was finally erected on the burialsite by local historical societies, but the memory survived in the mind of any Mainer with even the suggestion of a conscience.

The Malaga families lost their own history, Breed says. There are no known Darling descendants today [though some original names and surnames persist in the surrounding area, most notably McKinney, Griffin, and Kenzie], and, for almost a hundred years, Malaga has been uninhabited. The island remains a popular spot for coastal travelers and will be protected forever from development by the Maine Coast Heritage Trust.

"It's awesome out here," a visiting kayaker says, looking across the fennel grass to one of the island's deserted beaches, but whispering of the state's dark deeds of the past continue to cloud Malaga's pristine beauty. ■