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...
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 horrible crimes on Malaga while preparing to write a national series of features about deserted 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 old tradition that Beal Island [off Phippsburg, Maine] was named after Benjamin Darling, who successfully fought off a bear there. We 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 money to buy nearby Horse Island, which..."
settled originally," Breed says. Records corroborate this, showing Captain Darling wrecked in 1773 and 1774, with Benjamin Darling purchasing Horse Island in 1818. One of Captain Darling's wrecks was laden with timber from Malaga, Spain. My theory is that the island is actually named for that wreck and Malaga, Spain," says, "rather than for the Abenaki for cedar."

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

In some ways, Malaga was no different than other island communities. Seagulls led the true heirs to the place, with itinerant 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 surrounding 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-