The Shameful Story of Malaga Island
By William David Barry ©

SHROUDED in mystery and myth, Malaga is a beautifully wooded, low-lying island located near the mouth of the New Meadows River, not far from Phippsburg. Abandoned for decades now, this small island (a half mile long and a quarter-mile wide) contains no structures except a dilapidated fisherman's lean-to. Stacks of drying lobster traps are scattered here and there along narrow coves, and an Indian clamshell midden heap shows white against the eroding topsoil on the northernmost point. On a tranquil day the island's dark and sorry past is hard to imagine.

Local residents in nearby towns still speak of Malaga's bleak history, fact and remembered hearsay now so inextricably meshed that it is difficult to separate truth from fantasy. Legend holds that the first inhabitants were black slaves who spoke in their ancestral African tongue, that they lived in caves and eventually became a "degenerate colony." Other rumors, current for years, maintain that Benjamin Darling, the first settler on Malaga, was either smuggled out of the South by his mother or, having saved his master during a shipwreck, was given freedom, a name, and some land. In search for historical truth, the real story is frustratingly hard to come by, records are sketchy and existing ones are clouded by contemporary prejudice. But from the evidence one thing is clear: the saga of Malaga Island, which ended with the eviction

Deserted today, a convenient shore on which lobstermen dry their traps, Malaga Island was the site of a racially mixed settlement until it was rooted out by the state in 1912. Above: Deacon John Eason, carpenter and preacher, a survivor of the colony, with two young friends in 1924 at East Harpswell.
of its inhabitants in 1912, remains a disreputable episode in Maine history. Disreputable, however, is hardly the word that would properly describe Benjamin Darling from whom many, though not all, Malagaites could trace their origin. A freed slave and known to townsmen as "sturdy, industrious" and "with many staunch friends," Darling bought Horse (now Harbor) Island, close by Malaga, from the Lithgow family on July 6, 1794, and with his white wife, Sarah Proverbs, and their sons, Isaac and Benjamin, Jr., became that island's first inhabitant. It remained family property until 1847 when one Joseph Perry purchased it from Isaac. It was probably at this time that the Darling family and other fishermen settled on Malaga, an unoccupied island with little but stark beauty to recommend it. In those days, the little coves and islands of eastern Casco Bay, though often used by fishermen to store gear in rudely erected shelters, were seldom occupied by their legal owners, if indeed they had owners. Sometimes the fishermen remained, and subsequent generations would live out their lives as unchallenged squatters. Having little if anything to do with the mainland, they often missed the census, seldom voted, and rarely paid taxes. A death in the family was taken care of at home, as were rudimentary education and doctoring.

In Maine, competent, healthy people were not in great supply in the eighteenth century when Benjamin Darling settled on Horse Island, and any skin color - other than red - was acceptable in those frontier days. In fact, Maine showed little anti-black feeling until the early nineteenth century, and then mostly in Portland. Race prejudice came more slowly further down the bay, as can be deduced from the sterling character of
Now privately owned, Malaga is used primarily for the drying and repair of lobster gear, as above, on the northern end of the island near the spot where "King" Murphy proudly posed against the backdrop of some of the settlement's substantial homes.

black men portrayed in two of Elijah Kellogg's books for boys, Cruise of the Casco and, The Young Deliverers. Island life was for the hardy and independent, and if arguments arose over such things as lobstering rights, they were settled by fists, as they still often are. Only occasionally did people have brushes with the law. In the hardscrabble life between the land and the sea, extended families played a crucial role; not only did they accept their rigorous lot, most of them preferred it. In the mid-1800s, members of the Darling family lived in houses and cabins on Malaga and surrounding islands. Isaac and his wife, Patience Wallace, had nine children; Benjamin, Jr., and his wife, Priscilla Emmons, had five. Other people drifted in and out: Irish, Scots, Yankees, and Portuguese, and these in time comprised a confederation of interrelated families struggling to get on in the best way they could. Some were the descendants of Will Black, the first settler of nearby Bailey Island.

During the 1720s, "Trader" Black, a black man, was perhaps the best known frontiersman in the East. The origin of others, like William Johnson, who married Lucy Marks, the great granddaughter of Benjamin Darling, Sr" remains obscure. About Johnson this at least is known. Out in his dory one November day in 1863, he was hailed and told that men were being hired at Cundys Harbor. Expecting a day's work, the fisherman eagerly hove to and signed up - but for unexpected work. In no time, as Private Johnson, he was marching south with the valorous 54th Massachusetts Colored Regiment. A pensioner in his old age,
Johnson was known as "The Captain." If color prejudice came to exist on the mainland, none was felt in settlements out in the bay. But in the late nineteenth century, Malaga, unchanged, much less prized, back in the 1700s and during most of the 1800s, began to attract public interest as the Maine coast was suddenly seen as highly desirable vacation property. Resort hotels, elegant "cottages," and more modest dwellings were built in great numbers, and to them roads and boat-delivery service were extended. Though some of the Malagaites worked ashore at fine resorts like the New Meadows Inn, their ragtag island neighbors - some white, some black, many of mixed blood - living in make do dwellings became an embarrassing eyesore to both local summer and year round residents. There was a belief, too, made popular by several widely read, even sensational, sociology studies of the time, that poverty, crime, and mental retardation stemmed directly from "retrograde" families, and that removing such "decaying stock" would improve the moral fiber of society. Indeed the establishment at West Pownal in 1908 of the Maine School for Feeble-Minded (later renamed Pineland Center) was largely geared to remove "poor unfortunates" from public view.

Thus in the 1890s when Maine newspapers began carrying accounts of so-called degenerate colonies on the coast, the citizens of Phippsburg (Sagadahoc County) found themselves, with increasing horror, associated in the public mind with offshore Malaga. Where upon the town fathers of that respectable community began to suggest that the island was a part of Harpswell, in adjacent Cumberland County. Noting this, the Bath Enterprise of March 1, 1899, wrote that "few people [of Phippsburg] had faith that the effort to get rid of Malaga with its burden of poor people would be successful." Within three years, Malaga had become a popular topic not only in the Bath press but also in Portland and even Boston. Locals were angered by big-city accounts equating them with the islanders and thereby damaging their reputation. When on February 28, 1903, the legislature placed Malaga firmly in Phippsburg, the people of that town moved quickly to have the act repealed. They succeeded. Two years later, Malaga was placed
under state control, and came to be called No Man's Land.

Typical of news reports was an article by Lauris Percy that appeared in the Casco Bay Breeze on August 24, 1905. Its subtitle read in part: "Malaga, the Home of Southern Negro Blood... Incongruous Scenes on a Spot of Natural Beauty in Casco Bay." Apparently hard pressed to dig up lurid details, the writer had to settle for the following enumeration of the islander's infamous habits: "[They] drank Tea, spelled with a capital if you please, for if reports be true its strength would sink a ship... Tobacco is their ambrosia and it is said they would almost sell their souls for a cut.... A superstitious race are they on Malaga, even the screeching of an owl is an ominous sign to them..." Having compiled this list, the reporter then suggested Malaga as a good place for a "few summer homes," and pointed out that plans were afoot for a new hotel on nearby Bear Island. Here, clearly, hard economic considerations were tangling with offended esthetic sensibilities. The Malagaites were not wholly without friends, however; the first being Captain George W. Lane. With his missionary family he set up an informal school in June, 1903, in the home of James McKenny. For the next five years Miss Cora Lane was the summer teacher there until a schoolhouse was built with private donations from Boston, Portland, and the Elks Club. Legal and financial matters were handled by Major John Mead Gould and the Portland-based Malaga Island Settlement Association. Local companies donated equipment and the school was run directly by the state superintendent of schools.

The first year-round teacher, Miss Evelyn Woodman, was a young woman of high ideals, Christian motives, and a middle-class background. She taught reading, writing, arithmetic, Bible, and, as a kind of finishing-school touch, how to serve tea. She was, of course, bound to experience some culture shock, noting that "None of the island people were allowed in my room, as when I went there they were vermininfested. But in answer to my prayers, [was never troubled in any
John Eason was a skilled mason and carpenter; other men worked at inns on the main, and some, like William Johnson - soon sent to the Soldiers Home at Togus - were too old and, infirm for any productive activity.

According to Holman Day's article, the people lived mostly on the produce of small gardens, on fishing, lobstersing, clam digging, and selling bait to trawlers. He related how a missionary, having urged one improvident family of six onto steady work, was gratified to learn that they had accumulated seventy dollars in one summer. But this, alas, was spent on fancy food and the maintenance of six dogs. Worse, a pile of shingles the missionary had provided for house repair was used instead for fuel. Similar stories about the Malagaites' indifference to the work ethic were common. Wrote Day: "Charity grows a bit discouraged, Donations of money bring more harm to them than otherwise." As church, civic, and state organizations increased their assistance (which the islanders never asked for), the Malagaites found things were done for them which they had always done for themselves. Dependency became their undoing.

Holman Day concluded:
With the exception that their ideas of the social code of morals are primitive, they are blameless so far as their relations with the world go; they are not vicious, they show none of that sullenness that marks similar strata of society, and they extend the rude hospitality of their island with touching warmth and sincerity.

In 1902, the state spent $48 on the care of the islanders; in 1910 the amount reached $1,170, leaving the traditionally lean but functional economy of Malaga in shambles. Slowly the state agent began to place certain children at the state home in West Pownal, an institution whose original purpose was recalled in the Pineland Observer, March, 1968:

Maine was reputedly a wasteland with pockets of social indigents of low intelligence. It was considered advisable for the good of society that these little settlements be broken up, and persons incapable of working moved to a home for them. Clearly the state considered Malaga such a "pocket." In 1911 an entire family together with a single woman was taken to the home. The father of this family and one of his sons were terminally ill; the rest were normal and

way." Staunchly ignoring the vermin, she provided solid education. In 1911 she was succeeded by two young women who continued to teach year round. The Bath Independent on June 3, 1911, praised the school, pointing out that its fine reputation had even brought a tuition-paying student from Phippsburg.

The pupils were called "a bright lot," with no difference noted in the learning skills of black or white children.

At this time, the spokesman for the Malagaites was James McKenny, a man of Scotch-Irish background, who had married Seloma Darling. Because he was considered a man of substance, owning the finest house on the island and a well-kept launch, the press called him the "King of Malaga," a title and role he grew to accept. By 1911, however, the inventive press had passed the crown to John "Jerry" Murphy, his son-in-law, denounced in a 1902 report to the governor of Maine as "an outlaw from Bath," McKenny's dethronement was perhaps true, but McKenny later presented himself as "King" while trying to visit his people incarcerated in the Maine School for the Feeble-Minded.

In the September, 1909, issue of Harper's Monthly, a well-known and reliable journalist, Holman Day, reported conditions in several Maine settlements, including Malaga, whose population was then about fifty. He found, as expected, that much of the work was done in the summer and that the women, hired by mainland farmers, brought in the most money. One Malaga woman, who took in ' laundry, lived in what was once the cabin of a schooner; and, to stand upright while she scrubbed, had to keep her wash tubs on the roof. Though Day considered some of the men folk lazy, many were industrious: Deacon
active. To be consigned to the home took only a doctor's signature, but getting released from it took years. In the same year that the state declared Malaga a part of Phippsburg, in Sagadahoc County, it decided that the Perry family owned the island (apparently the same family that bought Horse Island from the Darlings in 1847). Acting in the name of the "owner," a sheriff served a writ to vacate. But as several sources have since pointed out, this was probably illegal, for the writ was served by a sheriff from the adjacent county of Cumberland.

The Malagaites, obviously baffled by their eviction, offered no resistance. The state paid the alleged "owner" $400 for a clear title and then made token offers for the islanders' homes.

Murphy received $300, McKenny, $250, seven others, $100 each, and two householders were given only $50. A touching report was lodged in the Bath Independent of March 9, 1912, by an islander named Nelson Leighton McKenny:

A few changes have been made on Malaga since I saw you last. Eliza Griffin has moved over to the main, but she visits the old home every day so not to be homesick nor to give up her rights.

Deacon John Eason has given up preaching and prayer-meeting through the troubles on his mind of leaving his old home and seeing all the old folks go too. And William Griffin and George Marks after a long search found nobody would keep them but everyone wanted them to keep out of their way, so these two natives are going to bunk on Hermit Tripp's little island up the New Meadows River where their minds will be easy.

Another dried up native says how he will be the last nigger that leaves his old home after seventy years, the most of it on Malaga. The others of us are having hard times to find homes anywhere; all on account of folks saying we've got the cramp-catch in our fingers and take too many things that are lying around loose. But it's all a lie; we don't steal if we are poor.

Uncle Jim McKenny is taking down his house today and Professor Eason will go next. If you know any place where I can crawl in with my wife and five kids and my old peg-leg please let me know.

In 1912, Maine's governor and executive council
successfully evicted forty-five people from Malaga. Among the many postcards printed and issued at that time one showed "Governor Claiborn and his Democratic colleagues landing on Malaga, Maine's most noted island." Two other postcards were especially odious. One, titled "The Deuce of Spades," showed a black woman seated inside corral fencing and holding a young child on her lap; a second, captioned "The Trey of Spades," was a photograph of the same woman with two children, the latter peering out through the fencing. The final act by the state was to tear down all the buildings on the island; and, in a macabre effort to root out the colony for all time, the bones of the dead were exhumed, placed in "five large caskets," and reburied on the grounds at the state home. With some satisfaction, a newspaper account printed in January, 1913 (under the headline, "Cleaning up Malaga Island - No longer a Reproach to the Good Name of the State"), noted callously, "Not only have the inhabitants of the island been raised to a standard of living they probably never dreamed of before and all done for them that is possible under the conditions, but the state had saved a nice little bundle of coin as well."

That such an observation was wrong on both counts made no difference to the public at large. Except for those sent to the Maine School for Feeble Minded, no provision had been made for the other islanders. And as the press soon discovered, not only was it costly to support people at the state home, but surrounding towns, in refusing "pauper status" to the displaced islanders, denied their right to belong to any community.

"King" McKenny and Jerry Murphy were lucky; they rafted their houses to lots on the mainland at Phippsburg and Meadowbrook. Not so fortunate was Robert Tripp's family who, having rafted their house on a hull, sailed up New Meadows River in search of a lot but were prevented from landing by "prosperous Christian people" and town authorities Caught literally between the well-known rock and a hard place, the family hawsered up to some trees on tiny Bush Island. They were barely able to eke out an existence, and often bordered on starvation. (This was acknowledged in a newspaper story of December, 1914, the first year of World War I, with a headline reading, "Maine Misery as Dark as Belgium's," ) When Laura Tripp, formerly strong and healthy, soon became desperately ill, her husband rowed three miles for help through "the worst gale that has swept the coast in years," but by the time he returned with a doctor his wife had died. She was later buried "in potter's field. For whatever reason, no one has since come to live on Malaga. The arbitrary eviction of its population and the dismantling of their homes make a shameful footnote in Maine history. No one would contend that the island was an Eden, but neither was it the iniquitous place dreamed up in certain press accounts. It was simply a tiny, impoverished offshore settlement where people lived as best they could. Today, the only remaining monument of those former Malagaites is on the grounds of distant Pineland Center. There on the slope of a grassy hill their graves lie in a row of white markers.

By William David Barry ©
Eliza Allen said a ship (from New York) had a great many sheep on board.

Dory fishing

August 11, 1811 Governor's trip

Raysor still has the fish of "beautiful mane."

Blind Sheds TRANSITION Brownstone Trail

Run down by George late September on way

Russell's trip 1807

Hunt Bee

Oyster bed in the fish of "beautiful mane."

Hunt Bee

Spotted White"green

Endangered

Soils since 19009

Pinebush

Rally, 1907

Continued

Community Park

Cooper

1870

200 mm existing

Continued