

Merchant's Row Archipelago

Stonington and Isle Au Haut, Maine

Overview

More than 50 islands lie in an impressive archipelago between Deer Isle and Isle au Haut that *A Cruising Guide to the Maine Coast* describes as “unsurpassed for beauty anywhere in Maine.” A collaborative effort between landowners and numerous conservation organizations has succeeded, over the span of five decades, in protecting roughly two-thirds of these striking, granite-rimmed islands. Their permanent protection helps sustain the region’s exceptional beauty, its active lobster fishery, and its abundant recreational offerings.



Many of the islands have an interesting history tracing back thousands of years. This overview focuses primarily on the island preserves of Maine Coast Heritage Trust, a statewide land-conservation organization that works to protect the natural integrity of many whole places along Maine’s 4,000-mile shoreline. Those who seek further historical information on other nearby islands or the Deer Isle region may want to consider visiting the Deer Isle Granite Museum in Stonington (deerislegranitemuseum.wordpress.com) and the Deer Isle-Stonington Historical Society in Sunset (dis-historicalsociety.org). Charles McLane’s book *Islands of the Mid-Maine Coast* offers in-depth histories of many islands in the region.

Maine Coast Heritage Trust owns and manages the ten island preserves in the Merchant’s Row archipelago whose histories are outlined below. Except for Eastern Mark Island (a restricted bird-nesting area), visitors are welcome to enjoy daytime explorations of all MCHT’s islands in the area. The Trust continues to seek additional historical information on its island preserves, and welcomes contact from those who have records or images of these islands.

“Granite has been the making of Stonington.”

-- Ellsworth American
December 7, 1904

Geology and Quarrying

The granite evident throughout Merchant's Row archipelago formed during the Devonian Period 365-405 million years ago. Some islands, like Saddleback, are still marked by granitic domes while others (such as Green) have had extensive granite removed through quarrying operations.

The quarrying boom on Deer Isle began around 1870, nearly half a century after the first island quarrying operation in Maine started on Vinalhaven. Its rapid expansion transformed the quiet fishing village of Green's Landing (now Stonington) into a bustling port with up to 4,000 residents (more than double the number it has today). The influx of workers led to a boomtown culture with boarding houses, music halls, gambling, prostitution and larceny. The islands were not exempt from this influence, particularly those closest to town (such as Moose, Crotch, Green and Russ).

“...Such men as control these granite quarries are the cream of experience, from the hand drill to the catering for business in the hot-beds of the world—New York and other American markets. The... workmen are good citizens and the wages paid are up to the standard always. The result of all this will no doubt be another boom period in our history.”

-- R. F. Gerrish
“Quarrying Notes” in Deer Isle's
The Island Press, 1901

Quarrying work was taxing and dangerous, with stonecutters (many of them recent immigrants) using pneumatic drills (powered by steam-driven air compressors) to drive holes along the hard edge of the granite, followed by wedges with iron “feathers” to break off slabs. Black powder was employed as an explosive, resulting occasionally in bad accidents. Hand winches or derricks (and later steam hoists) helped lift blocks from the quarry onto wagons (drawn by horses or oxen) or carts (on tracks). There was high demand for the Deer Isle granite in markets like Boston and New York—for building, paving and bridge construction. At the height of the granite boom around 1900, Stonington's future seemed assured.

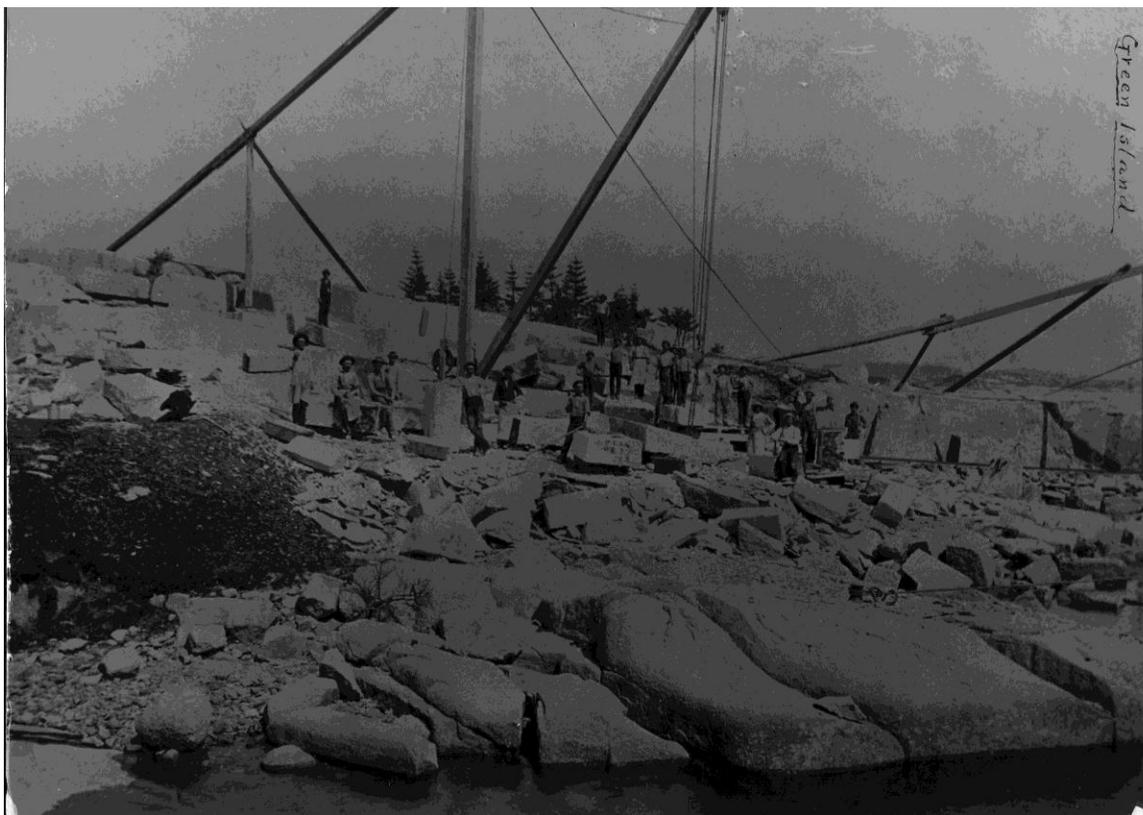
Yet within a few years, local companies struggled to finance needed advances and found that former customers were opting instead for the latest building innovation—reinforced concrete. Quarrymen still outnumbered fishermen in Stonington in the 1910 census, but the heyday was over.

Most of the quarrying islands in Merchant Row stopped operations by 1920: only Crotch Island continued to supply stone until 1966. New England Stone, LLC, founded by Tony Ramos, revived operations there in 1979 and today Crotch Island is Maine's last active island quarry. In place of drilling and dynamite blasts, stone is cut with high-temperature gas torches, a process that produces a jet-like sound audible for miles.

Green Island

MCHT's Green Island Preserve offers visitors glimpses of the 19th-century quarrying industry that defined Stonington, softened by a century of natural regrowth. Identified as "Island Poor" on early surveys and deeds and later as Worthy's Island, this 47-acre island now carries the name of an owner who purchased it around 1840, Sullivan Green.

Several families resided on Green during the 1830s and 1840s (including Charles Gross, William Harvey and Joseph Robbins). Some accounts refer to the island's primary inlet as "Charlie Cove," presumably after Charles Gross. Members of the David Robbins family appear in census data from the 1860s through the 1870s, and members of the Elijah Robbins family resided on the island during the 1880s in a homestead at the north end.



Green Island Quarry in the late 1800s
Courtesy of Deer Isle-Stonington Historical Society

Quarrying apparently began on the island by the 1870s: an 1881 map shows Russ Stone Quarry operating on the island's southern end. An 1889 edition of the *Maine Mining and Industrial Journal* reports two active quarries: one producing cellar stone, run by Sullivan Green, Jr., on the island's western side; and one on the island's eastern side producing cellar and paving stones (run by Goss & Small, a local company that also managed a quarry on Crotch Island). A 1907 government survey identifies a quarry on the southeast side of Green as Latty Brothers Quarry, reflecting either a second quarry site or an ownership change. A tax valuation in 1896 reveals 5 owners with varying acreage on Green Island, several of whom owned quarry equipment.

The 1907 government survey notes that Green Island produced a coarse-textured, even-grained biotite granite in a pink-buff color (similar to the upper quarry on Crotch Island) which was shipped to New York and Boston for bridges and buildings. There were three derricks, 2 engines, 1 steam drill and a 100-foot track reaching down to a granite wharf (constructed sometime in the 1800s). The quarry was active by 1905 but had been abandoned by the time a subsequent survey was completed in 1923. According to local lore, the last granite quarried from the island became curbstones along New York's Fifth Avenue.

Records at the Deer Isle-Stonington Historical Society indicate that the wharf evident today may be only a fraction of the original structure, as a subsequent landowner, Stonington Fuel & Lumber, Co., relocated many of the original blocks to augment its coal docks on Deer Isle.

Wanting to enhance his reputation with a holding in the quarrying hub of Stonington, Jeremiah J. McCarthy, Jr., a general contractor from Massachusetts, purchased a 3-acre quarry on Green Island in 1895 with his brother Michael (according to family papers generous provided to MCHT by his great-niece Lorrie Posobiec). Making the purchase at the height of the area's land boom, they paid a high price for the time (\$500 per acre). By 1931, his son Jeremiah McCarthy III had bought out his brother's children (by paying their back taxes) and in 1934 he purchased the remaining acreage on Green for \$500. In a memoir, written decades later for family, he noted, "I paid their price quickly, feeling I should own the entire island to prevent undesirable development... [and to have] a complete entity to offer a prospective purchaser."

McCarthy actively sought a buyer for the island (claiming later that he tried everyone from the President to Bing Crosby!), but for more than two decades no one offered what he considered a fair price. Over that span, he recalled later, "nature took hold, and spruce trees began to grow in abundance, screening the scars of one-time granite operations so that by 1957, there was a certain scenic beauty and attractiveness to the island." One of the smaller quarries on the island had become a popular swimming hole and picnicking spot for area residents. That year, he finally succeeded in selling the island.

The family of Van and Mary Clark acquired the island from McCarthy, using it as a base for cruising in the area and—in Mrs. Clark's words—"a place where I could sit on a rock in the middle of the woods... it was heaven." The Clarks never planned to build on the island and "always did intend to protect it one way or another."

The quarry, always popular among Stonington locals as a swimming hole, became more intensively used around 1990 after a cruising guide publicized its availability. The number of visitors began creating management concerns for the family in terms of water quality and liability. In doing estate planning, Mrs. Clark sought to secure the island's future. She ultimately decided that Green Island was best-suited to conservation ownership and donated it to MCHT in 1993 (making it the Trust's first holding in Merchant Row).

Saddleback Island

While this 76-acre island at the far eastern end of Merchant Row has seen far less human use than islands near Stonington, it may have had year-round settlers as early as the 1760s (though more reliable accounts attest to a residence there in the late 1830s). Several individuals reportedly came from North Haven (one of whom, James Cooper, purchased the island in 1837 from Anthony Merchant for \$200). His family may have farmed and grazed sheep, in addition to fishing, and at least three family members died there. Two cellar holes and a dug well in the island's saddle may date from this era.



During the late 1800s when feathers were gathered for fashionable hats, Saddleback was a popular site for plume hunting funded by gun-manufacturing companies (according to historian Charles McLane). There is no record of year-round residents after the mid-1800s, but there may have been seasonal use by those coming to fish, graze sheep or cut timber.

An 1899 newspaper clipping refers to “highly civilized and cultivated” Indians from Pleasant Point (near Eastport) returning annually in the 1890s to make rustic furniture from the island’s ash trees and sell these and curios to summer visitors in Stonington. While there are only a few mountain ash on Saddleback today, these trees may have been more dominant once as the island is named “Ash” on several early charts.

In 1925, the island was purchased by A. Cressy Morrison, a chemist and President of the New York Academy of Sciences who wrote the books *Man Does Not Stand Alone* and *Seven Reasons Why a Scientist Believes in God*. The next recorded owner, Frederick Way, a pilot with Eastern Airlines, sold Saddleback in 1956 (for the cost of back taxes due) to John Blum. Shortly before seeing a classified ad for the island, Blum and his wife had passed Saddleback while cruising and picnicked on what was then the open saddle between the two coves.

Blum and his large family subsequently enjoyed decades of summer adventures on the island, camping initially and eventually staying in a modest cabin built during the 1960s. A wharf constructed in the 1980s of steel girders and granite blocks washed out twice in major storms and was not rebuilt the second time. Later, the family donated an easement to Acadia National Park preventing development on two-thirds of the island (save for signs, bog bridging and tent platforms).

When the Blum family decided to sell the island in 2004, they listed it on the open market and offers came in from across the country. Fortunately, their family valued the unspoiled character of

Saddleback and wanted to see that preserved. John Blum had known the founders of MCHT for decades and the family ultimately selected MCHT over competing bidders.

MCHT has improved the trail system on Saddleback and offers the cabin to its members for a modest rental fee.

Nathan Island and Little Nathan Island

These two small islands (less than 5 acres and 1 acre, respectively), which lie along a popular cruising passage, are likely named after Nathaniel Merchant (1785-1830), an early landowner who grew up on Merchant Island. A shell midden on the southeast end attests to native use dating back to the Ceramic Period (500-3,000 years ago). Later settlers may have used the islands for sheep-grazing. In 2001, Maine Coast Heritage Trust purchased these islands (for significantly less than their appraised value) from conservation-minded owners who sought to keep the islands natural and accessible to the local community.

Bill's Island

Named after William Barter, an early settler of Isle au Haut, this 5-acre island was likely used for sheep-grazing from the early 19th century until 1965 (when the last sheep were removed). A small camp constructed in the 1960s on the island was removed in 2010 and was reused on Isle au Haut (with the unwanted portion burned). Bill's Island came to Maine Coast Heritage Trust in 2005 through a gift from the estate of Mary M.B. (Polly) Wakefield (whose family had strong ties to Isle au Haut) who had wanted the island remain a natural haven.

The Fort

The unusual name of this striking 3-acre island (formerly named Sheep and used for grazing sometime early in the 20th century) is due to the sound of gunfire from duck hunting practiced there years ago. Fort has never had human habitation, but a weir located off the island's north side supplied bait herring for many years (as late as the 1970s). Ken and Marnie Crowell gave their interest in the island to MCHT in 2001, and the title was reassembled in 2005 following a gift from the other owner.



Sand Island

This 10-acre island, formerly known as Kimball's and John's, was inhabited for a few years by a single large family in the late 1850s and 1860s, according to historian Charles McLane. Though it lies within 1,000 feet of the active Crotch Island quarry, the sand beach on the island's western side is enjoyed by occasional boaters and picnickers. MCHT acquired the island in 2004 from its

previous owners, Steve Ives and Junius Hoffman, who had generously shared it with the public for decades and sold it for a small fraction of its appraised value.

Eastern Mark Island

Long known locally as the Dumpling, this high, rounded 10-acre island has shoals off it that have caused many vessels to founder en route to Southeast Harbor. It is heavily forested around the perimeter, with some birch and fern meadows in the interior. Eastern Mark supports the only known offshore great blue heron rookery around Penobscot Bay (with more than 40 nests). *(To minimize disruption to the herons, the island is closed to public use between March 1 and September 1.)*

Maine Coast Heritage Trust acquired the island in 2003 when the previous owners prepared to list it for sale (with two soil-tested house sites). With help from a conservation-minded landowner nearby, MCHT was able to negotiate a purchase of the island near its appraised value.



Gooseberry Island

The former owners, Stan and Peg Myers, of this scenic, 5-acre island first protected it with a “forever wild” conservation easement granted to Acadia National Park. After six decades of careful stewardship of the island (and broader work to conserve the integrity of the Merchant’s Row archipelago), they offered the island to Maine Coast Heritage Trust at a steeply discounted price to ensure that community members could continue enjoying its varied shoreline, swimming cove, and vistas out to Isle au Haut.

Little Camp Island

Lying near the well-traveled inlet to MCHT’s Green Island Preserve, this 5-acre island was generously donated to Maine Coast Heritage Trust in 2011 by a family dedicated to the region’s conservation. Like many of the smaller islands in the Thorofare, there is no known history of human residences, but it may have been used for grazing sheep when surrounding islands were actively farmed.

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Maine Coast Heritage Trust acknowledges the contributions of John Blum, Mary Clark, Ken Crowell, Michael Moore, Stan Myers, Lorrie Posobiec, Joan Robbins, Bud and Sonia Spaulding and Connie Wiberg (at the Deer Isle-Stonington Historical Society) who helped provide background for this historical overview.