

Malaga Island – A Human History

Little is known about Malaga Island's first people. Native Americans visited the island over the past 1,000 years, but left few traces of their activities. Considerably more is known about those who followed in their footsteps more recently.

Sometime during the 1860s, a small, racially mixed community was established on the north end of the island by descendants of Benjamin Darling, an African-American who owned and lived on nearby Harbor (formerly Horse) Island. By 1900, the community numbered about 40 people, and consisted primarily of black, white, and interracial families whose hardscrabble existence was akin to that of many other fishing communities. But even as the community was growing, a variety of pressures were emerging that would ultimately force them from their home.



Economic decline, the growth of tourism, and the islanders' increasing reliance on town aid converged with racism and a burgeoning interest in eugenics. Muckraker journalism exacerbated the situation, portraying islanders as immoral and degenerate. A growing urgency among



town and eventually State officials to rid the island of its residents and their homes culminated with eviction orders, demanding all residents leave the island by July 1, 1912. The island's school was dismantled and

relocated to Muscongus Bay, and burials were exhumed and re-interred at the Maine School for the Feeble-Minded (now Pineland), where eight residents were forcibly institutionalized.

For a brief period, all of New England turned its attention to this tiny island. After the eviction, Malaga and its people were quickly and, some might say, intentionally forgotten.



Although a century has passed since Malaga's residents were evicted, evidence of their tenure on the island remains. Shell deposits, foundation holes, wells, and numerous artifacts of everyday existence are haunting testament to the people whose only desire was to make a living in the place they called home.

Malaga Today

Since the eviction, there has been no permanent habitation on Malaga. Local fishermen have used the island for decades to store fishing gear and traps and continue to do so. In 2001, the island was sold to Maine Coast Heritage Trust at a generous price below market value. The owner wanted to ensure the island's protection from development, its availability to the public, and its continued use for the seasonal storage of lobster traps and fishing gear. After assuming ownership, MCHT opened the island to archeological excavation by researchers from the University of Southern Maine. Their work and the efforts of those seeking justice and truth — including the Maine branch of the NAACP — culminated in an official apology from the State of Maine, delivered by Governor John Baldacci on September 12, 2010.

1. *John and Rosella Eason, with unidentified children, in front of their Malaga home in 1911.*

2. *The north end of the island circa 1909. The Marks family home is in the foreground.*

3. *The north end of the island today.*

Malaga Island Preserve

Guide to Historic Settlement Area

