

How I, an archaeologist, found myself at Myron's Malaga Repast

Robert M. Sanford

I remember going up to my friend and colleague Dr. Nathan Hamilton's archaeology lab on the third floor of Bailey Hall, (Gorham campus, University of Southern Maine) clutching the *Portland Press Herald* to my breast. "They've bought the island" I said; "Maine Coast Heritage Trust." He looked at me instantly knowing what it meant. Long-term stewardship for Malaga. It was early 2001. We already had a strong connection with Malaga; me for only the past few years but him for decades. And we were eager to work with Maine Coast Heritage Trust. Let me summarize some of the archaeological aspects of what we did so I can demonstrate the connection to the *Re.Past.Malaga* project, and how this embodies the meaning of "public archaeology."

I am an environmental science professor with an archaeological background. In the summers I often partner with Nathan doing field archaeology. We both were accredited in the Register of Professional Archaeologists, which meant we have field experience, laboratory experience, and personal orientation of archaeology as a public service. We were both interested in the environmental aspects and in the management of archaeological (read "cultural") resources. Our summers consisted of taking university undergraduates out into the field to do archaeological assessments and develop field expertise. Nathan was nationally known for turning out capable and ethical archaeologists for the environmental consulting world and I valued being a part of that.

Robert M. Sanford is Professor of Environmental Science & Policy and Chair of the Department of Environmental Science & Policy at the University of Southern Maine. He has a B.A. in Anthropology from SUNY Collage at Potsdam and an M.S. and Ph.D. in Environmental Science from SUNY College of Environmental Science & Forestry at Syracuse. His fields are environmental planning and environmental impact assessment and he is a Registered Professional Archaeologist and has worked with Professor Nathan Hamilton on the archaeology of Malaga Island.



Nathan (right) and I (left) came to Malaga whenever we could after the field schools ended. We would always go up to this hand-made sign and admire it. Eventually it was replaced with a more “professional” one identifying the site as a “Malaga Island Preserve.”

Our approach to the environmental history of Malaga began with our professional curiosity. We started, as we always do, with background research on the historical record; what could we find in the literature—what were those strange stories? It also included promoting public awareness of the site, which could contribute towards management. All this was done through the lens of education—our students formally through classes, laboratory, and research, and the public through presentations and workshops. We established our “credentials” in the area by coming back year after year, by talking to local people not just to extract information but also to share information, and by being enough of a part of the local community to have people know who we are. The aggregate of all this education, communication, outreach and management is an expanded notion of stewardship as a forward-directed active, inclusive, verb. And it was about building a community as the expanded meaning of public archaeology.



One of our 2007 field school students Seth, was an experienced land surveyor. Here he is at left using an electronic surveying instrument (“total station”). I am at right preparing to deploy the reflector unit. Bear Island is across from us.

Photo by Nathan Hamilton.

Archaeology is a destructive discipline in that we destroy parts of the resource that we excavate. So it needs to be done for a purpose and to give back to the community. This is what the concept of public archaeology means. We view public archaeology as an aspect of stewardship. This arises out of a personal conviction (we are individuals), but it also has a professional connection (we are archaeologists). We see a long-term archaeological commitment and a long-term public involvement. This is different from a notion of archaeology as mere removal of cultural material, examination of it, curation of it, writing about the process, then moving on to the next site. Public archaeology can be seen in terms of four components: public funding for archaeology, public communication, public sites (villages, settlements and other shared spaces), and the overall process of archaeological resource management—so in essence, this is about community—the archaeology has got to be shared.



We had display cases of catalogued artifacts we used in dozens of presentations about Malaga Island, but vastly more resides in boxes. This photo shows nine of the dozens of archival storage boxes. Eventually the artifacts went to the Maine State Museum for proper long term storage. Photo by Nathan Hamilton.

After some exploratory test pits and surface site examinations, our first task was to establish just where we were in the landscape through surveying and establishing a field grid system so that each square we excavated was precisely located. This is especially important on a site where we filled in the pits and restored everything to its original land surface condition upon conclusion of each field school season. Anyway, once the grid is established and we geo-reference features (non-portable or fixed characteristics of the environment) to the grid, including where buildings were, we could decide our excavation strategy. At the same time that we are excavating with students we are undertaking off-site excursions to keep the boat running, met with local residents, bring materials to base camp, give interviews, and myriad other things.

Maintaining our professional connection means we are involved with public aspects of Malaga just as much as with the archaeological aspects. This entails working with community officials, descendants, agency representatives, educators, and anyone one else interested. A long-term community involvement means

we provide input into the development of Malaga curriculum for formal and non-formal education, and we go into schools, public libraries, historical societies and other places to do talks and presentations on Malaga. It means we interact with historians, museum curators, artists, chefs, performing arts people, resource managers and many others beyond what would normally be done to facilitate mere archaeological excavation in the field. Our long-term archaeological commitment continues too, with professional presentations at the Maine Archaeological Society, New England Archaeology Conference, The Society for Historical Archaeology and other venues. We even had the honor to serve on a Malaga scholarship committee with some descendants of Malaga, helping award thousands of dollars to other descendants in pursuit of academic dreams.



We interspersed artist Daniel Minter (at left) and activist/civic leader Rachel Talbot Ross (partially obscured in front of me) and other visitors with our student excavators; everyone had to work for their supper. Well, at least the students did, but the others were happy to volunteer. Photo by Nathan Hamilton.

To me, Malaga is not just about the archaeology. It is about community and connection. For years, Nathan and I would go to the NAACP annual Martin Luther King breakfast in Portland and we would set up an exhibit in the entryway about Malaga Island. We would bring students and we would be available to talk

about Malaga. Reflecting back on all those breakfasts I realize this primed us to be thinking of Malaga from a food-sharing community perspective.



Our view of the public archaeology process

USM planned to have Daniel Minter as an artist in residence at the Gorham campus art gallery. Daniel would prepare an exhibit *OTHERED: Displaced from Malaga* that opened on October 4, 2018 and ran to December 9, 2018. He was one of the people that had toured Malaga with us on multiple occasions and he wanted our input as archaeologists so we began with meetings in early 2018 and continued through the summer and early fall. It was interesting to me to see how an artist does all this background and context work prior to making art. I was intrigued and impressed by how informed he was and by how he captured feelings and nuances in his work. I liked the continuation of connections made more than ten years prior. Further, while he was in residence working on his art he kept an open studio with chairs for visitors.

In early 2018 I got an email from a Professor Myron Beasley. He wanted to meet Nathan Hamilton and me and to talk about Malaga Island. We invited him

to come on campus and see our archaeology laboratory. Myron represents an openness and kindness that I have come to associate with Malaga. He was very much interested in the archaeological background of Malaga and in our approach to conducting research. This is when we first heard of the concept of a meal on Malaga as a sort of performance art and tribute to its heritage. We had more exchanges after that, including trips to the island as he deepened his background knowledge and prepared for his Malaga Repast.

Given my environmental background I was particularly interested in the relationship of the Malaga community to the plants and sea creatures around it. Nathan shared this interest as we collected thousands of artifacts and studied the connection between them and the evolving story of how the inhabitants went about their daily living. Food preparation and consumption was a major part of how the Malaga residents got by and the island contains edible reminders of this legacy—wintergreen, hops, evergreens, and seafood from its amazingly productive waters.



These are hops, still flourishing more than a hundred years after the residents were kicked off Malaga Island. The 2007 archaeology field school crew chief Kevin Clarke (who has gone on to a successful career in professional archaeology) and I harvested hop flowers and we each made a nicely palatable beer out of them. We taste-tested them on Nathan. He approved. We wondered if that was the first instance of the hops being used in this way since the original residents.



Nathan took this close-up of poison ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans*) at the northern beach end of Malaga Island. We think the presence of this invasive toxic plant may have had a lot to do with reducing human interference on some of the formerly inhabited parts of the island. It is native to Maine and tends to spread in disturbed areas. On Malaga it occurs as a tree, a vine, and as ground cover; not many plants display such variety of form. Interestingly, most of the lobstermen we spoke to who used Malaga for trap storage claimed to be impervious to the effects of poison ivy.

I was happy and honored to get an invitation to the Malaga event, scheduled for July 12, 2018. However, I was truly surprised and pleased to discover that the invitation included my wife Robin. It was then that it really hit me what Myron was doing—this was a true community gathering in all its social meanings, in addition to the acknowledgement of the heritage of Malaga. The realization was almost physical. Myron saw the “generative ethos” of Malaga archaeology that fed a sense of place and time with Malaga. He was not just inviting me as an archaeologist who worked on Malaga but also as a community member, a family person.

I am amazed at how our original somewhat obscure, years-ago work on this tiny island seemed to lead to myriad connections, sparking more of them than I

could have imagined. The Facebook group of descendants seems like a continuation of family. The incomparable Marnie and others have become like family. One descendent who lives near posts a picture of a Malaga sunrise or sunset on a more than weekly basis. Nathan, Kate McMahon-Ruddick, Kate McBrien, I, and other non-descendants are honored to be allowed within its ranks. I have appreciated getting to know some of them, their spouses, and their families. I perceive the Malaga meal as both an acknowledgement and culmination of this extended meaning of community and family.



The Malaga Repast was a reconnection with Malaga. This is the sort of thing that meshes with how archaeologists try to understand landscapes by comparing past and present. I am holding a copy of an historic photograph and matching it with the present conditions to help identify the location of the Jake Marks and Griffin houses. Because it illustrates such an important reconstructive approach Nathan and I put this illustration in our interim archaeology report about Malaga Island. Photo by Nathan Hamilton.

Now back to July 12, 2018, the day of the feast. The Malaga Meal as I think of it, but named “repast” as a commemorative “performative dinner.” It engaged all the human senses from the physical ones like sound, vision, touch, and taste, to the esoteric, metaphoric and cultural senses such as justice, history, continuity, community, and spirituality. I experienced each aspect of the feast in bimodal fashion as an archaeologist and as a participant.

Departing from Phippsburg mainland the morning of the feast I avoided the first few transport boats, wanting to give others more time on the island. Coming around the north end of the island towards the landing area I spied what appeared to be a wooden or cardboard life-sized silhouette immediately recognizable as a replica inhabitant from 1912.

When we landed by the Marks home site and walked up the rocks past the McKenney home I stopped at my old friend the hop plant; it was thriving and I could not resist pointing it out to some of the other guests. My wife and I walked up the well-worn trail to Henry Griffen's foundation, approaching it by a round-about way bordered by lilacs, evergreens, and bracken ferns. As we walked I had to watch carefully where I was going because while I was richly taking in the moment a large part of my mind was a hundred years in the past.

We saw table and chairs and settings of 19th century and early 20th century settings—it looked to me to be a varied collection of Staffordshire, transferware, and other stoneware and bone china similar to what we'd excavated on the island. The mismatch of china patterns and styles struck me as representative of many of the ceramics we excavated at Malaga and what we might have used had this meal been served more than a hundred years ago to the original Malaga people, some of whose descendants are at the tables around me. I am sure it occurred to all of us there that the last time this many people gathered on the island in such a manner might well have been for a sort of farewell meal just before the enforced abandonment in 1912. And probably in this same location because it is a large flat area little changed from how it must have been when it was the Griffen front yard. The community connection was powerful.

The meal began with the pouring of cider and lemon tea by servers wearing period-appropriate country attire while two young ladies in white sang *Ain't no grave hold my body down* a cappella. We were told it was a performative dinner and to eat and enjoy while stories, poems, testimonials, and songs continued. We were served a salmon and cod chowder, then the main course of beans, pork belly, vegetable chow chow and Abenaki corn molasses bread; food appropriate to the time and nature of the Malaga community. At one point, people read out a list of the types of artifacts uncovered, "fire-cracked brick, boat nail, jug, milk pan" and so forth. I could remember the specific excavation, cleaning, and labeling of some of the artifacts named. I knew the same was true for Nathan. The reading gave a sense of the deep richness of historic existence on the island reflected in this "material culture."

Each person at the dinner read a name of one of the Malaga community members; a one-to-one correspondence of recitation that rippled down the tables. When it came to me I read the next name in the sequence, Henry Griffen. In that

moment I was a proxy for Henry. But the entire event was so engrossing it seemed to be but a blink of an eye, and I was soon faced with leaving the island. As the duo sang *Rise up*, the performers and servers began slowly dismantling the symbolic Malaga house structure and other pieces of the set. I realized this was a Brigadoon-like appearance of Malaga. Perhaps more archaeology awaits in the telling of its story—an enriched archaeology informed by community. And I had a new anniversary to add to my memory palace.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike International 4.0 License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>; or, (b) send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 2nd Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA