

The Evolving Legacy of Malaga Island

Kate McBrien

I first heard of Malaga Island as an intern at the Pejepscot Historical Society in Brunswick, Maine. Like many, I stumbled on the story and immediately wondered why I hadn't heard of it before. What was this community and why did it disappear so easily? Why did no one speak of it today? The story intrigued me, pulled me in, and I have continued to research everything I could about the community who called Malaga Island home since that moment of discovery. Ultimately, I searched to understand this emotionally difficult event more deeply, in order to help heal old wounds. The recent *Re.Past.Malaga* performance on Malaga Island brought that work full circle for me. It embraced the difficult history with a hopeful look to the future.

The story of Malaga Island is one of a small community of multiple races marrying and living together off the coast of Phippsburg. Records indicate they settled on the island in the early 1860s, setting up home on land that no one else seemed to want. The community grew to around 50 people, with families living on the island, relatively undisturbed, for decades.

While life on the island was much like life on the coast of Maine for most fishing families, during the 1800s a community of different races living together and intermarrying was highly unusual. Racism and rising expectations of socially acceptable norms in New England made the community stand out as controversial. After a visit to Malaga Island, the Governor of Maine in 1911 stated, "Certainly the conditions are not creditable to our state, and we ought not to have such things near our front door, and I do not think that a like condition can be found in Maine, although there are some pretty bad localities elsewhere."

The State of Maine evicted the island community in July of 1912. As we approached the centennial of this solemn but important event, I realized it was also an opportunity for the people of Maine to finally recognize this past and the implications of the State's actions. At the time, I held a curatorial position at the

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Maine State Museum and easily convinced the organization that an exhibit about Malaga Island needed to be created and offered in 2012 for the anniversary.

By its nature, an exhibit explores a topic through objects – whether it be artwork, photographs, historical material, or a combination of items that can bring a subject to life. The challenge of the Malaga Island story was that it was about a poor community that the state and local communities tried to erase from memory. Very little in the way of material culture existed to provide tangible proof of the community. Fortunately, as I started the project, Nathan Hamilton and Robert Sanford of the University of Southern Maine were just wrapping up their archaeological work on Malaga Island. With the tens of thousands of archaeological fragments they uncovered, we finally had physical objects that were owned, held, and used by the people who lived on the island. We had a direct tangible connection to lives that were hidden and forgotten for so many years. The archaeological artifacts would bring the people of Malaga to life.



Malaga Island, Fragmented Lives exhibit at the Maine State Museum, 2012.
Photo by Ron Simons.

The many objects showed the breadth and depth of the items held dear by the residents of Malaga Island. In particular, two items stood out to me and helped me to view the people of the island as just that – people with families, chores,

struggles and dreams. One object was a fragment of a cast iron door for a cook stove. This object is very basic and is something that would be found in any Maine home. But most importantly for the Malaga story, it debunked one of several myths about the community. A commonly told and believed narrative was that everyone who lived on Malaga Island lived in shacks with dirt floors, with no light and certainly no heat. The stove fragment was physical proof that the houses did indeed have heat through the winter and a myth could finally be debunked.

The second object that held my interest was a child's ring. It was small costume jewelry, slightly misshaped from years spent in the ground. But it was such a personal item that must have been treasured by a child. I could easily imagine the heartbreak when a child lost the ring, maybe during play, maybe while working on the island. I pictured the family searching for it, looking all through the vegetation to find it, and a sad child who did not get her ring back. That ring made the entire experience for the people on the island somehow more real and definitely more relatable.



Malaga Island, Fragmented Lives exhibit at the Maine State Museum, 2012.
Photo by Ron Simons.



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With objects available for display, the exhibit process could truly begin. The only missing element was the people – the experiences of the people of Malaga Island, the perspectives of those in the Phippsburg community and those who worked for the State of Maine, and the thoughts of the individual who worked on behalf of the island community for aid and support. Some of those impressions came through documents uncovered in archives and government reports. But much did not appear to exist. While not everyone who lived on Malaga Island was illiterate, many were, and few left any written account of life on the island.

It was important to me that the exhibit showed the impact of the State's actions in degrading and evicting the Malaga Island community. Fortunately, I

was able to reach some descendants of Malaga Island through the efforts of documentarians Rob Rosenthal and Kate Philbrick, as well as through social media. While the exhibit was under development, the popularity of genealogy and resources such as Ancestry.com were exploding across America. As descendants of Malaga Island researched their own ancestry, they often stumbled on this place called Malaga Island, which they had not heard of before. Families buried this history, did not talk about it, or denied any connection to the island altogether. Through their own research years later, family members could slowly uncover their hidden personal history. The exhibit included quotes from descendants and photos of some of them today to help visitors connect this difficult history to people who still experience the effects of racism and the lasting legacy of the eviction.

The exhibit *Malaga Island, Fragmented Lives* opened at the Maine State Museum in May 2012. Descendants of Malaga Island were invited for a special, private viewing of the exhibit before it opened to the public. For many, it was not only the first time they saw objects owned by members of their own family, but it was also the first time that many of them met each other. Like life on Malaga, it was white and black people, discovering their connections and learning how to navigate a new relationship. When the exhibit closed in 2013, family members were all invited back to the exhibit. This time, it was more of a family reunion, with a chance for them all to reconnect and grow the bonds forged over a year of discovery.

The exhibit was one part of a healing process for the descendants of Malaga Island, for the community of Phippsburg, and for the State of Maine as they all grew in an understanding of the past dismantling of an entire community and the lasting effects of those actions. It is important to note that after the eviction, no one ever built a structure on Malaga Island. The community's houses were removed, the school building relocated to another island, and the cemetery exhumed, but nothing new was built on that place. Instead, the island remained empty, a ghostly reminder a past wrong that went unacknowledged.

That feeling of emptiness changed in July of 2018 with Myron Beasley's *Re.Past.Malaga*. The *Re.Past* performance was a moment of healing for many of us. It felt like the history of Malaga could turn an important corner with that event. Up until then, the Malaga Island story needed to focus on past events, acknowledging the wrong, and owning the mistakes of the past. The *Re.Past.Malaga* performance took that emotional pain and embraced it, giving it permission to shift into a freeing of hope and possibilities for the future. As an historian who stood on Malaga many times, it was an amazing experience to be surrounded by the many people who were involved and cared about the story, to hear the music and taste the rich food that honored the ancestors, and to celebrate those who came before us onto that island. It made Malaga Island feel more like a home and less like past history.

In the *Reports of the Committee of the Council for the State of Maine* (1911-1912), an entire section is devoted to Malaga Island. The report states: “There has been heretofore, and some are existing at the present time, certain pauper colonies that have been for years a disgrace to the adjacent communities and a blot upon the state. We refer particularly to Malaga Island, Athens, and Frenchboro.” The report described the decision to evict the islanders this way: “After viewing conditions it was decided at a Council meeting shortly after, that the good of the State and the cause of humanity demanded that the colony be broken up and the people segregated....”

The day of the *Re.Past.Malaga* performance on the island changed that narrative for me. Malaga Island’s story did not end with the eviction. The *Re.Past* made the island a home once more, a place to celebrate and remember, a place to honor, and a place that will be an integral part of Maine once again.



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