

## The Past is Not Past

Dean Crawford and Darra Goldstein

Pineland Farms looks like an unusually tidy college, a campus with all the students away. Now a privately-owned recreational property and conference center in rural New Gloucester, Maine, it was once a notorious mental hospital. The property features meeting rooms and guesthouses, hiking and cross-country ski trails, an orienteering course, and an equestrian center. Pineland Farms also lives up to its name as a working farm. But its past is problematic. In 1912 eight residents of Malaga Island were committed to the compound's main building, then called the Maine School for the Feeble-Minded, not because they were mentally deficient but because Maine didn't know what else to do with them after evicting them from the island. Two of the islanders died soon after their incarceration; five others died at the hospital over the next sixteen years. Only one of the eight was ever allowed to leave the hospital. We had come to find their graves.

We drove directly to Pineland from Malaga Island, traveling an hour inland from Sebasco Harbor. That afternoon we had heard for the first time the details of Malaga's dark history, thanks to *Re.Past*, the extraordinary feast and performance organized by Myron Beasley to commemorate the lost community of mixed-race Mainers who had settled the island, persisting despite poverty from the Civil War until their expulsion by order of Governor Frederick Plaisted.

Newspapers from Maine to Boston had been beating the drums for the residents' removal from the island and possibly their incarceration — for their own good — with headlines referring to them as a “shiftless population of half-breed blacks and whites.” According to the *Boston Journal* in 1911, “Malaga Islanders Live Like Savages: Untutored, Unclean, the Natives of Malaga Observed Neither the Laws of God Nor Man Until a Few Christians and the State Acted.” The immediate reason for uprooting and evicting the Malaga community was to make Maine more presentable to the tender sensibilities of

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tourists and vacation homeowners of the Gilded Age. A resort hotel was planned for a close-by island, and its ferry would have to travel alongside Malaga, within sight of the island's rustic dwellings. But the second reason was, of course, race. Editorials railed against the mixed-race homesteaders. So it happened that, prior to the expulsion deadline, most of the Malaga islanders slipped away, inadvertently aiding the campaign to forget all about them.

We had been ferried to Malaga Island on a small boat from the mainland. It was one of those postcard-perfect Maine days when the sun shone through high clouds, shimmering across the water. Everyone was smiling, happy to come together. If we hadn't been aware of Malaga's painful history, we would have felt nothing but exuberance at the outing. Once on the island, we made our way single file along a forest path to the site of the *Re.Past* performance. It progressed in stages, with music, poetry, speeches and testimonials punctuating a beautifully prepared meal by chef Leslie Oster that included the kinds of foods the islanders would have enjoyed: salmon and salt-cod chowder, chow chow pickles, local Marfax beans with salt pork belly, Abenaki flint-corn and molasses bread, summer berry pudding, and hopped cider. One of the most moving moments was provided by Craig Hickman, a Winthrop organic farmer and state legislator who had come directly from the hospital, his face, arms, and hands bandaged from the severe burns that he'd suffered only two days before. As Craig explained, "When Myron asks you to do something, you show up." Craig's commitment commanded our own. We became a real community, at least temporarily, bonding with one another. More emotion accompanied our communal reading of the names of those who had been evicted from the island. From person to person, table to table, we shared in the litany of sorrow, the family names repeating, echoing one after the other. Whole families gone: Eason, McKinney, Tripp, Murphy, Marks, Griffin, Gomes.

After the meal, we approached one of the Malaga descendants to tell her how moved we'd been by the story of her progression from childhood shame at being related to the "Malagites," as they were pejoratively called, to pride in her family's history. When she mentioned a cemetery at the edge of Pineland Farms where many of the original inhabitants lay buried, we knew we needed to close the circle, to complete the journey. But first we helped to disassemble the sets and tote the tables, chairs, utensils, and leftovers back to the beach and then from the boats to the vans and cars. The Heritage Trust's terms of use required that nothing, no belongings or debris, be left to mark our presence on the island. The erasure seemed ironic and yet somehow fitting that we leave with just our memories and emotions, a shared meal and a theater performance being the most ephemeral forms of art.

Back on the mainland, we mentioned our desire to see the cemetery. Several other guests at the performance were as eager to direct us to the unmarked road as they were careful to warn us that the graves were "probably purposely hard to

find.” One kind woman insisted on equipping us with her Maine atlas of all the state’s tiny roads, which looked like thin blue veins on the map.

In its upscale, elegant repurposing, Pineland Farms feels like an overlayment, an attempt to forget its original name and efface a shameful set of past events. The sprawling campus is hard to miss, but it wasn’t easy to locate the little unmarked cemetery. We circled twice through the property, then stopped at the gift shop and administrative center, but none of the staff had heard of any graveyard or even of Malaga Island. But we persisted. Only after driving beyond the farm’s ski trails and turning back a couple of times did we finally catch sight of the gated access road that people had described to us. We parked at the head of this unmarked dirt road, then walked through a grove to a peaceful, grassy area. There were no signs until we reached the graves, where a marker erected in 2008 informs visitors of the history: that the fifteen bodies in the Malaga Island cemetery had been exhumed and reburied at Pineland in five large caskets. A stone plaque, also new, lists the names of these reburied Malaga islanders, along with the names of the seven Malaga evictees, five of them from the Marks family, who were never released from the hospital. Individual graves are marked by plain, mainly horizontally laid stones etched with names and sometimes dates. One simply reads “Baby Jordan.”

Before the grief set in, before we truly let ourselves imagine the lives of those who lay buried there, our initial response was one of gratitude that we had found the cemetery. We felt as though we’d come to a promised land. The place was silent and tranquil, with no evidence of the trauma, the emotional violence, that had occurred. We were grateful that the cemetery existed at all, that it hadn’t been bulldozed or fenced off or posted with “No Trespassing” signs. Anyone with a desire to bear witness can visit the cemetery and honor the dead; all it takes is the knowledge and the effort.

Evidence of the past remains hidden on Malaga Island — unless you dig, as archeologists have been busy doing ever since the Maine Coast Heritage Trust bought the island in 2001. They’ve found a trove of essential objects — tools and cooking utensils, ceramics, lots of fishhooks and buttons. Above ground, a nineteenth-century dug well remains, half-concealed by hops that have gone wild. The structures belonging to the forty-five inhabitants were all dismantled and removed, many of them by the islanders themselves before they quietly disappeared into mainland towns. The people of Malaga Island were afraid that they’d lose more than their meager belongings. They were afraid, with some reason, that they’d be ostracized, transported, or worse.

The recent, modest effort to own up to Maine’s history has saved a few lives from oblivion. *Re.Past* rescued even more. We hope and believe that Malaga Island’s past will continue to be revealed. The unexpected moral of this story being that history resists erasure, that the artifacts of past lives — pots and pans,

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fishhooks and buttons — survive, along with the way of life that clings to these objects and to the places where people used them.



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