by Bill Caldwell
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ISLANDS of MAINE

Where America really began

By Bill Caldwell

Guy Gannett Publishing Co.

Portland, Maine

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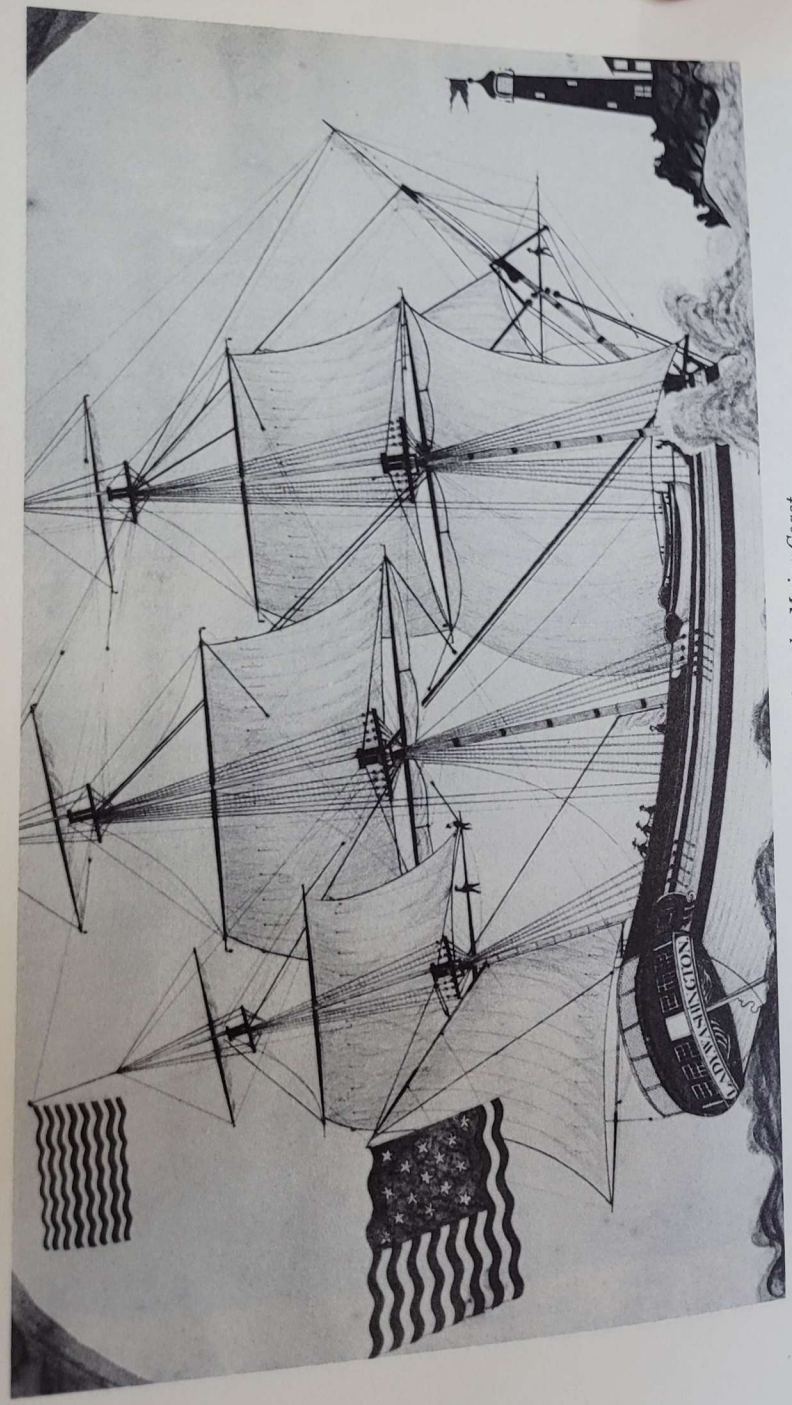
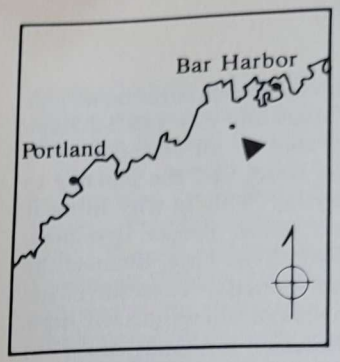


Under sail on the Maine Coast
Shipmaster Francis Rittal drew this beauty in his Navigation book, 1803.
(Courtesy Bath Marine Museum)



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Isle au Haut:
Penobscot Jewel

Italians have always had an eye for beauty and a tongue for compliments. When Giovanni da Verrazano sailed this coast in the early 1520s and first saw Isle au Haut, Mount Desert and Monhegan, he was inspired by their beauty to name them "The Princesses of Navarre." The three teenage daughters of his patron, King Henry of Navarre, were the most beautiful princesses in all Europe. The beauty of Isle au Haut is inspiring still.

One summer morning I moored Steer Clear in Duck Harbor and climbed to the top of the storm-beaten magnificence of Western Head. Climbing the soft moss trail in silence, a man can become intoxicated by ocean air, spiced with bayberry, juniper and spruce. At the peak I stood on a granite ledge and looked out to the Atlantic; and down to the brilliant lobster buoys bouncing below in the green-white surf; and over to Roaring Bull Ledge, where crashing seas foamed.

I was alone, and awestruck. Suddenly I felt the presence of another human nearby and turned. A lady sat motionless, watching the splendor. I walked toward her. She looked up, smiled and said: "This is where I go to church. This is the spot where I am awed by the majesty of Creation."

Isle au Haut, the "High Island," lies six miles to sea from Stonington, Deer Isle. It measures about six miles north to south and two miles east to west, and is thickly wooded, with a long mountainous spine. Its high point thrusts up to a height of 554 feet, and bears the name of the French explorer: Mount Champlain. The island has not, I think, changed very

much since his day. There are no hotels, no restaurants, no gift shops, no movie houses. On a fine sparkling day Isle au Haut can be the most peaceful, heavenly spot in all Maine; but in rage of storm or thick of fog, Isle au Haut, and the journey to or from it, can be hellish and terrifying. This is why in most winters these days only about two dozen people live here. But before boats had engines hundreds lived here, because the island was close to the best of fishing grounds. Then the island was almost bare of trees and a thousand sheep grazed here. But winter hardship and economic isolation gradually drove out most people and sheep. In summer, the cottages at Point Look-Out Club fill, boats from Stonington run often, and close to 300 people are here. However, the island is protected from much growth because two-thirds of it is now part of Acadia National Park, thanks to the large gift of land in 1946 from the Bowditch family of Boston. Only about 250 of the island's 7,000 acres remain in the hands of the island's year-round residents.

Captain John Smith in the log of his 1614 voyage along the Maine coast called this island "Sorico," after the Indians he met here. Huge heaps of ancient clamshells are the memories of the feasts and revels the Indians enjoyed here centuries ago. Duck Harbor was a favorite hunting ground of theirs. The tribes drove sea ducks by the thousands into funnel-shaped Duck Harbor, snared them in nets stretched across the narrow head of the harbor, smoked them and took them inland in the fall to eat during winter. In the 1930s and 1940s a few Indians still came to the island from their mainland reservations to gather sweetgrass for basket-making. But they come no more.

The first known white settler came to Isle au Haut in 1772, the unfortunate Seth Webb. His mother-in-law had been scalped by Indians. Seth got a land grant from the crown to Kimball's Island, just across the Thorofare. He made friends with the Indian chief, Orono, either because of or despite the fact his mother-in-law had been scalped. The Indian chief and the white settler hunted together. On such a hunting trip in 1785 the unfortunate Seth Webb was killed by his own musket

while climbing ashore from his skiff onto Isle au Haut. His widow was unable to cope with life on Kimball's Island and the stronger Kimball family took possession.

By 1792, a man with a wondrous first name, Peletiah Barter, arrived from Boothbay, with his brothers, William and Henry. Peletiah fathered ten children here and died about 1832. The old cellar hole of his log cabin can still be seen in Thorofare Village. Calvin Turner arrived in 1800 and set up a salt works, an indication there must have been a fair sized population of fishing men and boats here to buy his salt. His son, Asa Turner, grazed 400 sheep here. The Robinsons, Kimballs, Sawyers, Smiths, Kemptons and Lelands soon joined the settlement. By 1801, fifty settlers petitioned the court of Massachusetts to sell and deed to them the land they had settled.

The families seemingly prospered, for by 1820, two dozen men were listed as shipmasters. A survey map of 1824 shows 36 deeded lots of land, varying in size from 32 to 182 acres each. If the families averaged five persons, about 180 people were living year-round here then, compared to 24 or so year-rounders now.

But the "get-rich-quick" bug bit a few, according to a remarkable story from the 1840s. News of gold strikes in the Great California Gold Rush reached this remote Maine island with so much force that a group of islanders decided they, too, would strike it rich in California. They built their own boat in the Thorofare, and sailed her around the Horn to San Francisco. There the islanders joined the "forty-niners" in their wild, frenetic hunt for gold. How they fared the records fail to tell.

A more mundane business enterprise came to the Thorofare in 1860, when a lobster canning factory was built by a Boston firm. More than 24 island women and children worked in it, shipping Isle au Haut canned lobster to Crosse and Blackwell in London. The cannery closed in 1880, but live lobsters were shipped regularly in the island's own fleet of "wet smacks." Each one would carry 1,500 lobsters to market in New York City and make the round trip in a week. By 1880 the island population was up to 274.

Then the first of the summer people arrived. Soon they were to form Isle au Haut into a masculine outpost of proper Bos-

tonians — the Point Look-Out Club. Finally club members gave 4,000 acres of land to be preserved as a national park. That gift has made Isle au Haut among the least spoiled, best preserved islands on the entire coast.

The Point Look-Out Club began this way.

In 1879, Ernest Bowditch, a young landscape artist from Boston, was coming back from Bar Harbor across Penobscot Bay on a small steamer. He recalled the day, 37 years later: "I saw to the southward a bigger island, standing up from the sea and asked how to get there. 'Don't know', replied the pilot, 'but suppose you get off at the mainland and charter a small boat.' " It was a Friday afternoon and Bowditch had the weekend free, so he got off at Stonington and chartered a small boat to take him through the network of islands out six miles to Isle au Haut. On the way out, Bowditch asked the skipper about a hotel, and was told there were no hotels or boarding houses. The skipper told him to try Captain William Turner, dropped Bowditch off, and left.

Bowditch, years later, recalled what happened next:

> I reached the old lobster factory and found sitting around a stove three or four old fishermen who looked up at me as I were some strange marine animal. I inquired which might be Captain William Turner, at which one spoke up asking what I wanted. I asked if he could keep me over Sunday, which he answered so abruptly in the negative that my vanity was hurt. Then he added, "What's your name?"
>
> "Bowditch," I replied.
>
> "That's a funny name. Any relation to the fellow who wrote the 'Navigator'?"
>
> "He was my grandfather," I replied.
>
> "Your grandfather? Then you go right on over there to that house and tell the old woman you have come to make a visit."

When Bowditch got home to Boston, he told his bachelor friends about the beauties of Isle au Haut. They joined forces, bought land and formed the Point Look-Out Club.

Bowditch, who was an old man when he dictated the above account, said his personal capital at the time amounted to only $3,500, so the original Point Look-Out members were paupers compared to the tycoons beginning to build summer "cottages" on nearby Mount Desert. But land was cheap. Soon Bowditch and his group owned 3,000 acres. By 1945-46 the Bowditch family owned over half the island, and gave it all away to make a National Park.

The club built eight cottages plus a clubhouse for communal eating, and laid down the three cardinal rules: No women, no dogs, no children. Before long, however, the founding bachelors got married. The women came and threw out rules excluding women, children and dogs. The exclusive club grew. In lean years the club even took in a few carefully selected paying guests. Four times the directors unbent enough to place small advertisements in the Junior League Magazine; even stooped, in the interests of solvency, to running one advertisement in Vogue.

The number of club cottages increased to two dozen. Other summer people bought old homes in the village or out on the promontories. Among them was Chief Justice Harlan Stone, who often took his meals at the Turner boarding house. One evening a lady at his table talked too long about how much she loved clams and how many she could eat at a sitting. Justice Stone leaned over and quietly told her, "That reminds me of the story of the woman who ate so many clams that her bosom rose and fell with the tide."

Isle au Haut seemed tough and masculine, but it was women more than men who ran the island that year when I first put ashore for a few days to do research for some newspaper articles.

Isabel B. MacDonald was town clerk. Dorothea Dodge and Mabelle Chapin were two of the three town selectmen. They were also the tax assessor and overseer of the poor. Dorothy R. Barter was the tax collector. Town treasurer was Isabel MacDonald. On the school board three of the five members were women, Donna Tully, Belvia MacDonald and Virginia MacDonald. A lady, Mabelle Chapin, was civil defense chief and Town Registrar; Edna Alley and Virginia MacDonald were

the two election clerks. The bus driver and school janitor was a woman, Dorothea Dodge; the senior school teacher was Ann Haynes, helped by her husband, Pat.

But there was no question then, or for decades earlier, about who was the ranking Isle au Haut citizen. She was Miss Lizzie: Miss Elizabeth Rich, postmaster, then aged 79, born at Rich's Cove, on Isle au Haut, 1893, delivered by a midwife who charged three dollars.

"I started working in this post office when I was a 16-year-old girl," Miss Rich told me. "I was named postmaster in 1927. When I got to be 70, I had to retire because the rules said no postmaster can be over 70. So I quit being postmaster and instead became supervising clerk in charge, doing the same job for another 10 years. I've been in this post office over 63 years now."

The Post Office consisted of one corner of her front room, three chairs, one for Miss Lizzie and two for her constant visitors, and a parakeet in a cage.

Miss Lizzie Rich broke both hips just after dark on a March afternoon, when she was 78 years old, and alone.

> "They just plumb cracked. I fell to the floor. Inch by inch I crawled and pulled myself across the room till I could reach my walkie-talkie. I called Stanley Dodge. He and some helpers came right over, sat me into my rocker, then lifted me and the rocker into the back of his truck and drove me to the town landing, where a boat was waiting. They carried me in the rocker down the ramp to the boat and strapped me and the rocker tight in the cockpit. Off we went across six miles of open water to Stonington. I'd busted my hips at 5 p.m. By 8 p.m. I was all fixed up in my bed at Blue Hill Hospital. . . . Now that's some service."

Miss Lizzie was soon back at her post office, getting around on two walkers. She managed well on the walkers. Each day she made two trips to the well out back, lugging in a pail of water, sometimes spilling half on the way. Each Sunday she used her walkers to get up the hill in back to the church she had attended over 75 years. "Now I take 15 minutes to get there instead of two minutes. But I get there."

In a storm, Isle au Haut can be a fearsome place. Then the power of the enraged Atlantic bursts upon Boom Beach. The mad ocean foams furiously over the ledges off Eastern Ear, then crashes on Thunder Gulch. Seas of terrifying size smash and fume past Morris' Mistake to pound at the feet of the towering granite Cliffs. Even a mile inland, out of sight and sound of the storming sea, the island ground trembles.

In fog, which can wrap the island for days on end, ghosts of shipwrecked, seablanched sailors drowned centuries before seem to haunt the shore. In hard winters, the ocean freezes over. No boat can move. In the bitter winter of 1935 there were no telephone links to the mainland, and Isle au Haut was cut off from the world for five days.

Coast Guard planes from Boston flew over dropping messages to see if the islanders needed help or rescue. They dropped instructions on how to put a reply on a rope strung between a pole and a rake held aloft by two islanders. On the third flyover the grappling hook from the plane snatched the reply. It read:

"Thank you very much. We have plenty of supplies so far. No one sick. Thank you so much. C. W. Turner."

In the winter of 1857 the bay froze solid for 20 miles out and stayed that way for eight weeks. In 1950 Frank Barton froze to death when he collapsed carrying groceries home. His body lay in the snow, undiscovered for three days.

On the south side, exposed to the Atlantic, lies Head Harbor, once a flourishing fishing community. Recently I found only one herring dory and one blue-hulled sailboat at their moorings. The twelve houses stood empty, their summer occupants gone from September till June. There was a "For Sale" sign on the house by the beach. The owner, Gooden Grant, was giving up and moving to the mainland, grudgingly. He had turned 94 years old. Stone walls which once fenced in cattle on the farms are tumbled down around the unplanted meadows, where only wild flowers bloom, song birds sing and bees gather nectar.

On an island like this everyone is his brother's keeper, especially when fire breaks out, the terror of almost defenseless

islands. In the 1870s a huge fire started in the blueberry barrens and burned the entire island. Gooden Grant saw the fire of 1894 at Duck Harbor. He was a boy then, sailing home at night with his father. At age 94, Gooden Grant could still remember the sight he saw 78 years before — sights of burning trees flying into the night air like torches, setting more fires across his island home.

In 1940, a kerosene stove in the Turners' house exploded. Harold Turner was over at Dennis Eaton's house when he heard the church bell ringing the alarm. His wife, Elthea, had fled from the burning house, driven to town and rung the bell. The house burned to the ground. The whole town pitched in to build the Turners a new home. In 1947, Russ Devereux, who runs the work scow in Penobscot Bay, flew over another forest fire on the island. "Most of Maine was burning that summer. It was the year of the great fire at nearby Mount Desert. When the fire broke out in the forest here, I flew, circling low above it, shouting instructions to firefighters on the ground on where it was spreading. The whole island turned out to fight that blaze and got it under control after only 15 acres had been devastated."

Isle au Haut has dwindled in population in the last 150 years, but the special ways of a special island persist. For example, there is one gas pump on the island, not far from the town landing. Island custom is to drive up, fill your tank, and then leave the money on the honor system in a box nearby. It works.

But how long will such things last?

I asked a long-time islander, and she pointed to a prayer tacked on her kitchen door.

"Lord, we thank thee that thy Grace
Has brought us to this pleasant place,
And most earnestly we pray
That other folks will stay away."