

Mount Desert Island's Diverse Working Waterfront

By Natalie Springuel

Mount Desert Island's working waterfront is a cultural borderland, where the working class and social elite have long rubbed shoulders, literally, on the docks. A broad view of the island's working waterfront reveals how industries as varied as fishing, shipping and coastal trade, ship building, timber, granite, ice, farming, and recreation and tourism (during both the rusticator-era and the modern period) have all played important roles along Mount Desert Island's shores.

This article presents a short history of Mount Desert Island's working waterfront. It explores how working waterfronts are influenced by historical developments, and how these developments were shaped by the opportunities and obstacles offered by working waterfronts.

Waterfronts Contested

The first users of Mount Desert Island's shores were the Wabanaki. They called the region "Manesayd'ik," or "clam gathering place," emphasizing the significance of the shoreline resources for native tribes. Archaeological research of shell middens reveals that the paleo-Indians, the ancestors of the Wabanaki people, relied heavily on the sea for sustenance. Findings include remains of shellfish such as clams, and harpoons, fishhooks, and bone tools.¹ Much later, in 1604, when French cartographer Samuel Champlain explored the region, he was often guided by Wabanaki tribesmen, in some of the earliest Euro-Indian commercial dealings conducted on the shoreline.

For the next 150 years, very little European settlement occurred on Mount Desert Island, as the French and English battled for territory. During that time, the island's mountains were used as navigation aids by passing vessels, its lands were hunted by fur

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trappers, and its shorelines were used by the Wabanaki. Various accounts tell of military encounters with the Wabanaki. In 1723, Colonel Westbrook, commander of the fort recently constructed on the St. George River, ranged up the Maine coast to identify and destroy Indian encampments. Anchored at Swans Island, he noted “numbers of wigwams on allmost every island, & the mainland.”² The Wabanaki also sometimes served as guides, especially for the French, with whom they had a strategic relationship.



Wabanaki winter encampment at Somes Sound, Fernald Point. Painting by Judith Cooper. *Courtesy of the Abbe Museum*

By 1759, the British troops triumphed over the French at Québec. Along with the French defeat, the Wabanaki became outnumbered and overpowered, and British settlement of the Down East region could begin in earnest. As historian George Street explained, “The new free lands were irresistible bait, the harbors were unequaled, the great woods promised inexhaustible supplies of timber, the waters teemed with fish, and the rushing streams gave power for grist and lumber mills.”³ The waterfront beckoned.

By the mid-eighteenth century, numerous fishermen from other ports were familiar with Mount Desert Island waters, including Abraham Somes, the first English settler of the island. According to Street, Somes “came in 1761 from Gloucester in his Chebacco boat and cut a load of barrel staves for the Gloucester fishermen.”⁴ The barrels were used to cure and transport fish to Gloucester, already a well-established fishing port. Settlers may not have coined the term

“working waterfront,” but commercial uses of the shores were firmly established as the first settlers laid claim to the island.

When the king’s governor in Massachusetts, Sir Francis Bernard, travelled to Mount Desert Island to survey his new land grant, his team found four families already settled on Cranberry Isles and two “at the head of the river,” one of which was Somes and his family. There, according to Bernard’s log, “We went into Somes’ log house. ... Near it were many fish drying there.”⁵ Those fish were likely cod, but herring and alewives were also traded and consumed locally.

Shortly after American independence, the island’s land and the coast all the way to Machias Bay were considered “settled and taxable” even if its population was still low.⁶ The era of land speculation, especially for valuable and resource-rich waterfronts, was soon underway, regardless of the remaining Wabanaki or squatters like Somes.

Land Speculation, Settlement, and the Launch of the Working Waterfront

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts gave the western half of Mount Desert Island to the son of the former Governor Bernard, while Maria Teresa de Gregoire, the granddaughter of Antoine de la Mothe, Sieur de Cadillac, claimed all of the island as rightfully hers. In 1786, Massachusetts granted de Gregoire the eastern half of the island, including the Cranberry Isles. Those early grants were eventually sold and resold, divided and re-divided until waterfront plots bore little resemblance to their original grants. Speculative land purchase and resale set into motion settlement patterns that influenced Maine’s peak of resource extraction, spanning the late 1700s to the late 1800s. Such land transactions fueled the eastward migration of people from southern Maine and Massachusetts, as well as from Europe, to the Down East region. All of that movement occurred by water, which triggered waterfront infrastructure development. Soon, piers, wharves, and boat landings of all sizes lined coves and shores throughout the region.

In 1791 Mme. Bacler de Leval, a contemporary of de Gregoire and promoter of French settlement in the area, noted how the shorelines around Frenchman Bay were already inhabited. It was rare, she noted, to find more than two-mile stretches of shoreline between habitations, and nearly all islands were occupied as well.

Settlers conducted small scale farming, while the bays and rivers around the Mount Desert region were teeming with fish, including salmon. De Leval observed on the shores of Mount Desert Island the bones of nine whales that had been “fished” the previous year.

Wood was cut on the island for home heating or cooking. Timber was transported to local waterfront sawmills for manufacture into goods shipped in locally constructed sloops to Boston markets, which could be reached in thirty-six hours in favorable wind conditions.⁷ From subsistence to commerce, everything about the settlers’ life depended on waterfront access.



Cod drying on flakes on Cranberry Isles, date unknown. *Courtesy of the National Park Service, Acadia National Park, William Otis Sawtelle Collection*

Settlement intensified use of the waterfront. There were few roads, so the sea provided the highways to move goods and people, and to access natural resources. The waterfront served as the interface between all those needs, with infrastructure like wharves, piers, merchant stores, flakes for drying fish, smoke houses, and boat launches.

Even before statehood in 1820, a great array of goods crossed this infrastructure daily: fur (in the early days), timber, cordwood and locally manufactured wood products, salted and smoked fish, granite, and farm goods such as hay, wool, potatoes, and cheese, and later pond ice. Vessels transporting goods were built locally. The town of Tremont had a population of 1,800 in 1871 and, Samuel

Eliot Morison wrote, “Among them were six ship contractors, five boat builders, three masters and thirteen plain ship carpenters, four ship joiners, eight caulkers and gravers, one sailmaker, and one rigger. These were the professionals; but it is safe to say that almost every man could lend a hand at hewing out ship timber.”⁸

Outside of established harbors, fish houses were ubiquitous in most protected coves. Both sides of Otter Cove, for example, were lined with fish houses supporting as many as twenty-five households. They were used as staging areas for prepping bait, constructing traps, repairing nets, hooking lines, and other outfitting as was necessary for fishing multiple species.⁹

The Heyday of Fisheries

For the young nation’s growth, shipping and trade necessitated government investment in everything from fishery subsidies to safe navigation infrastructure (such as the Bar Harbor breakwater and lighthouses at Baker and Bear Islands, Bass Harbor, and Egg Rock). The US Customs Service was established in 1789 to manage imports, exports and waterborne trade, including fish.¹⁰ Shortly thereafter, Congress passed the first bounty law, providing cod-fishing vessel owners with a payment based on the tonnage of their vessels.¹¹ By 1860, Maine had the second most valuable fishery of any state in the nation and possessed twice as many fishing establishments, large and small, as any other state. Ninety percent of the cod landed by fishing vessels from towns in the Frenchman Bay Custom’s district (including all around Mount Desert Island) were caught within 25 miles of shore, near enough to supply local demand, plentiful enough to contribute to regional and national markets as well.¹²

Fishermen on these vessels handlined for cod over the rail or from dories on lucrative nearshore grounds in Frenchman Bay, including Bald Rock, Calf Island, Egg Rock, Hadley Point, and Cod Ledges on the east side of Ironbound. In 1861, the logbooks of vessels fishing from Penobscot Bay to Machias Bay tallied “220 wooden sailing vessels averaging 48.7 tonnes. ... This does not include subsistence fishing from boats <5 tonnes, for which no Customs records exist.”¹³ At the time, most of the cod was salted and dried, and flakes (wooden drying racks) were visible all around the island.

The immensity of the cod fishery had an impact on other local fisheries as well because hook fishing for cod depended on bait. Bait was most often herring caught locally in weirs, but clams from Maine's extensive mud flats were also used. Ships like *Mermaid*, captained by Edmund Grover of Gouldsboro from 1861 to 1865, entered Frenchman Bay to purchase bait from the herring weir at Stave Island, or perhaps to dig clams.¹⁴ Waterfront commerce such as this supported centralized wharves, substantial weirs, and business conducted directly on the water, one vessel to another, as well as vessels engaging in direct resource harvest.

A number of trends triggered a gradual decline in the salt cod fishery after the turn of the twentieth century, including an end to the bounty in 1866, the centralization of an increasingly industrialized industry further south, and the growing preference for fresh fish aided by the advent of refrigeration.¹⁵ The impact of this decline had a ripple effect on most waterfront communities. Otter Creek provides an example.

US Census data show that between 1900 and 1930, the percentage of Otter Creek residents who relied on fishing as their primary occupation decreased from 36 to 4 percent.¹⁶ These fishermen had targeted numerous species (in addition to cod), sometimes selling directly to rusticators and their staff, but the decline in cod fishing combined with the advent of the national park would change Otter Creek's way of life for good. By 1939, the Otter Cove causeway was built for motoring visitors in search of good views. Thirty years later, only ten fish houses remained at Otter Cove, each with special use permits for fishing rights.¹⁷ Today, only one is left, and it is entirely surrounded by Acadia National Park.

In response to these changes, some families worked for the rusticators, others ventured into parallel industries such as granite quarrying, while others grew their family's farming efforts, but most natural resource-based industries continued to rely on waterfront access to get their products to market. At the same time, fishing for other species such as mackerel and menhaden continued to increase, and the waters around Mount Desert Island also provided swordfish, groundfish such as halibut, haddock, and flounder, shellfish such as scallops and clams, and diadromous species such as alewives, shad,

and smelt. But lobster and herring played especially important roles in the continued development of the working waterfront.

Lobsters, Canned and Live

By the end of the nineteenth century, the lobster industry was still quite young, but already among the most valuable fisheries in local waters, a growth fueled in part by emerging canning technology and in part by lobster's connection to tourism. As early as the 1840s and more frequently after the Civil War, lobster smacks (vessels with live wells built into the hull) were transporting lobster to Boston and beyond in response to "increased demand from resorts, restaurants, canning factories, and wholesale dealers who shipped lobster packed in ice and seaweed as far as the West Coast by rail."¹⁸

William Underwood, the "father of the American canning industry," had started canning meat in Massachusetts under the brand name "Red Devil" before expanding his canning business into seafood. By 1860, he had opened a lobster canning factory in Southwest Harbor, which eventually also packed clams and other products in response to the demand for canned military rations during the Civil War.¹⁹ The Underwood wharf at Southwest Harbor was a continual hub of activity with lobster smacks landing product day and night. Men, women, and children all worked. Lobsters were shoveled into huge copper kettles where they went through multiple boiling cycles before canning and re-boiling. The vessels then took can-filled pine boxes back aboard to deliver to market.²⁰

The growth of the canning industry triggered increased harvest of all sized lobster, triggering concerns about the lobster population. A number of laws regulating the lobster canning industry were passed starting in 1879, and the lobster canning industry declined as a result.²¹

By then, the rusticators had discovered Mount Desert Island, and the working waterfront in Southwest Harbor seemed quaint to one visitor who observed that lobster canneries "cannot be called intrinsically inviting, owing to their very utilitarian character, although they are apt to have redeeming features in an occasional touch of the picturesque."²² In time, the townspeople had to decide if they wanted an industrial or picturesque waterfront, and they chose the latter. According to a canning industry historian, "In

1886 tourism interests in Southwest Harbor forced The Underwood Company to close its lobster cannery. The town council felt it was better for the town to rely on the tourist trade, rather than on the ‘smelly’ canning industry.”²³ Underwood moved out of Southwest Harbor and built a new factory in Bass Harbor. By 1895, lobster canning in Maine had come to an end.²⁴ The demand for live lobster thrived, however, particularly among the summer visitors. The



Taking herring from the weir, undated photograph, *Mount Desert Island Historical Society*

Rockefeller family, it was said, “greatly helped spread the fame of Maine’s king of crustaceans. If the Rockefellers dined on lobsters, everyone else wanted to follow suit.”²⁵ This connection between tourism and lobster would continue to this day.

The Herring Industry and Sardine Packing

Historically, Maine packed many more herring—juveniles of which were known in Maine as sardines—than lobsters. Herring had been a staple food and trade fishery for residents who either fried



The Underwood sardine factory in McKinley, now Bass Harbor, was one of the most modern sardine factories in the industry. Photograph circa 1930-1950. *Courtesy of the Penobscot Marine Museum*

the small fatty fish in their own oil or smoked them. Smokehouses were a common sight on the waterfront. A visitor in 1885 described Manchester Point, at the mouth of Somes Sound, as “an important establishment where herring was smoked. A myriad of the small fish hung like bronze pendants, slowly turning to gold in an atmosphere of white smoke from a smoldering fire of logs, which, when a door was opened up on it, looked like imprisoned fog.”²⁶ Smokehouses processed mostly the larger herring; smaller sardines went to the canneries.

Modeling their herring weirs on fish traps used by native people, Mount Desert Island fishermen erected a net- or brush-covered fence out from shore towards open water to direct herring into a circular enclosure where they were easily dipped out with a net. As demand grew, so did the herring weirs dotting the shore. Stop seines, also used extensively, offered more flexibility and mobility because fishermen could shut off a cove with a stop seine whenever the fish run occurred, rather than wait for the herring to come to their fixed weir. Fishermen then started using purse seiners, which encircled schooling fish in a large net in open waters rather than near shore.

By the 1850s, demand for herring increased to feed the growing number of canneries in the state, as well as to supply bait for the hook fishery. The sardine canning industry quickly exploded with entrepreneurs from Portland to Eastport trying their hand at packing. Around the island, at various times, there were canneries packing sardines (and other seafood) at Southwest Harbor, Bass Harbor, North Tremont, Prospect Harbor, Sedgwick, Lamoine, and Blue Hill. By the end of the century, the business was in such a frenzy that out-of-state corporate investors got involved. Soon there were seventy-five canneries in Maine.

The 1940s are considered the peak of the canning industry, but boom and bust cycles, both economic and biological, are evident in the rate of opening and closing of plants up and down the coast. Even Bar Harbor, better known as a tourism destination than a working waterfront, had a cannery that opened in 1946 packing flaked fish, crab, seafood chowder and mussels. Staffing problems and conflicts with the tourism promoters caused it to close in 1953.²⁷ By 2010, the last sardine factory in Maine closed at Prospect Harbor.

The demise of the canneries did not just put the packers out of work, but affected a much larger sector of the waterfront workforce. Many factories owned the sardine carriers and other fishing boats that delivered products to their wharves. Some owned the herring weirs and stop seine operations as well. The ripple effect extended to boat builders, can, box and packing crate makers, and locals who worked in shipping and trade. Some old-timers on Mount Desert Island still remember the sound of the cannery whistle calling workers to come pack local fish for sale around the world.

Rusticators, Steamships, and Guides

While goods such as cod, lobster, and herring were processed and shipped via local flakes, canneries, and wharves, each summer season brought new waves of rusticators, and the methods of making a living in waterfront communities changed dramatically.

Rusticators opened new markets for industry products. In addition to boosting demand for live lobster, the influx of visitors to Mount Desert Island created a growing market for other fish products. One commentator in 1903 noted, “John L. Stanley and Sons have a large fish business in Manset, buying and curing fish, in

summer supplying the hotels with all kinds of fish. They also have an interest in the weir fishing at Sorrento.”²⁸ The economic impact of high society dining in Bar Harbor’s large hotels reached many local fish wharves and markets, as well as the fishermen and weir operators who supplied them.

The East Coast’s travelling elite also triggered the need for a transportation industry. Rusticators were still arriving mostly by water, and waterfront infrastructure, such as steamboat landings and tour boat wharves, was needed to support their travels. By the 1860s, passengers could take a steamboat from Boston to Mount



Indian encampment at the foot of Bridge Street, Bar Harbor. Stereograph circa 1881.
Courtesy of the Abbe Museum

Desert Island. By 1884, railroads reached Hancock at the head of Frenchman Bay, where visitors could catch a ferry directly to Bar Harbor. People of comfortable means coming in droves triggered not only increased demand for fish products, but opportunities for traditional waterfront entrepreneurs to diversify their businesses. Some repurposed their fishing and boatbuilding wharves. “Captain W.R. Keene,” the *Bar Harbor Record* reported in 1903, “is one of our most enterprising young men.”²⁹

Fishermen, residents, and Wabanaki people increasingly hired out as tour guides, fishing guides, sailing instructors, and local hosts for summer visitors. The Wabanaki were highly sought after as

canoe and fishing guides. Starting in the 1860s, they set up summer camps on the shores of Bar Harbor, which served as a seasonal working waterfront on the edges of industry wharves and steamboat landings. Visitors and residents visited the camps to buy Wabanaki crafts and hire canoeing and hunting services. But in the vexing trend that had been established when the summer elite found lobster canneries distasteful (while enjoying a feast on the live crustaceans), Bar Harbor authorities, at the behest of the Village Improvement Association, attempted to ban the encampment that so many visitors found so appealing.³⁰ Whether waterfronts should be picturesque spaces or working spaces remains a question that is asked today.

Finally, national developments in transportation triggered yet more changes in the working waterfront on Mount Desert Island. In the twentieth century, paved roads and motor cars brought new waves of middle class tourists seeking auto-based vacations in Acadia National Park. Roads also released waterfront industries from their total reliance on the sea. No longer was the ocean itself the thoroughfare for getting goods to and from market. Trucks became the principal mover of goods, and today, Mount Desert Island's seafood still goes to market by truck.

The Future of the Working Waterfront

The working waterfront has changed dramatically. When the Underwood cannery closed at Bass Harbor, for example, it was subsequently used to pack blueberries, then to make mouse feed for Bar Harbor's Jackson Lab, and then it sat idle for years.³¹ Recently, and not without resistance from the fishing industry,³² it was transformed into luxury condominiums. Waterfront access is still critical for commercial fishing, but it is no longer critical for getting fish to market. Likewise, waterfront access may still be critical for tourism, but tourists rarely come to the island by boat, unless they are on a cruise ship.

Despite all this change, residents and visitors alike still value the working waterfront. In the last dozen years, Maine residents have repeatedly voted in favor of protecting working waterfronts through allocations of Land for Maine's Future funds, establishment of working waterfront current use taxation, development of working

waterfront covenants held by the Department of Marine Resources, and through local town ordinances and comprehensive plans that highlight working waterfront heritage.

The legal definition of “working waterfront” in Maine narrowly refers to a place where “traditional” use occurs, e.g., fishing and aquaculture. The lobster industry, with its small wharves, owner-operated business model, and management successes, has come to symbolize the working waterfront that Mainers want to preserve and that tourists want to experience. But the escalating cost of shorefront property and affiliated taxes make it difficult for small businesses to maintain ownership; and once a working waterfront is converted to a different use, it will likely never again be a working waterfront in the traditional sense of the term.

Challenges to the working waterfront are constantly evolving. While fisheries and tourism interests have uneasily cohabitated on Mount Desert shores for well over 150 years, newer uses of the waterfront are on the rise: research institutions, cruise ships, aquaculture, energy interests, and newer fisheries such as for elvers and rockweed all demand a piece of the waterfront. Demands like these will grow in the years to come. But residents, towns, industries, and the National Park Service can more successfully protect and manage these shores in the future if they understand that diversity has long characterized working waterfront identity.

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Natalie Springuel is a marine extension associate with University of Maine Sea Grant at College of the Atlantic, where she works in the areas of fisheries heritage, working waterfronts, and sustainable tourism.

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² *Ibid.*, 206.

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⁴ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁵ Ibid., 111.

⁶ Stephen J. Hornsby and Richard W. Judd, eds., *Historical Atlas of Maine* (Orono, ME: University of Maine Press, 2015), plate 26.

⁷ Frances Sergeant Childs, *Fontaine Leval, a French Settlement on the Maine Coast, 1791* (Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Society, n.d.), accessed November 24, 2015, <http://www.americanantiquarian.org/proceedings/44807039.pdf>. Childs wrote this article in English, but the de Leval diary is transcribed within the Childs article in French, which Springuel has translated to paraphrase here.

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¹⁴ Ibid., 438.

¹⁵ For more details on the history of the cod fishery and its decline on Mount Desert Island, see Springuel, “Wealth to Poverty,” 66–91.

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¹⁹ John Gilman, *Canned, A History of the Sardine Industry, Part 1* (St. Stephen, NB: printed by author, 2001), 19–20.

²⁰ William Henry Bishop, “Fish and Men in the Maine Islands,” Harper’s Handy Series 15 (New York: Harper & Brothers, July 24, 1885), 71.

²¹ Acheson, 2.

²² Bishop, 71.

²³ Gilman, 238.

²⁴ Acheson, 2.

²⁵ Cathy Billings, *The Maine Lobster Industry, A History of Culture, Conservation & Commerce* (Charleston, SC: History Press, 2014), 48.

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²⁷ Gilman, 256.

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³⁰ Prins, 325–334.

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³² Multiple articles in the *Bar Harbor Times*, *Bangor Daily News*, and other Maine papers from the late 1980s through early 2000s document this transition.