

Global Slavery and Its Afterlives on Malaga Island, Maine

Kate McMahan



Fig. 1: Standing on the site of Henry Griffin's home looking toward the mainland on Malaga Island on September 12, 2010, the day of the official apology to the island's residents by the State of Maine. Photo by the author.

I stepped onto Malaga Island, Maine for the first time on June 5, 2008. I had gotten there aboard a small aluminum skiff with a temperamental motor that belonged to the University of Southern Maine Department of Geography-Anthropology. It was piloted by my professor, Dr. Nathan Hamilton, an archaeologist who is part Indiana Jones and part unofficial

governor of Maine.¹ We motored across the narrow channel of water that separates Malaga from the mainland town of Phippsburg. It was chilly that morning, and the cool air had left a foggy haze hanging over the rocky island, which is covered in a deep thicket of pine trees with a midden beach at one end. We had filled the skiff with the gear we needed to do our work excavating a few meter-square units of midden, wrapping up what had been several years of field seasons for the excavation. It was the first time I was really doing archaeology. It was a new passion, one that I had come to after taking an introductory class the previous fall with Nate. We pattered around the island in the fog to the channel between Malaga and Bear; I slipped on the seaweed covered rocks and got my shoes wet (which we later remedied with some \$20 wellies from Target). We set up a unit in what would have been Rosilla Eason's kitchen garden. The first time my shovel entered the ground, I was hooked.

The island—and its history, people, and material culture—would draw me to a career studying the complexities of the history of slavery, race, and memory in northern New England. Malaga Island pushed me to look for other sites of African American history in Maine. There was—and still is—very little research about Maine's African American communities and their history. After all, Maine is the whitest state in the country, according to the United States Census. It made me ask: why? My first fieldwork on Malaga Island made me passionate about posing that question to public audiences, while trying to answer it within the archives and collections of repositories across the globe. As a white person from rural southern Maine, I am a seemingly unlikely scholar of this history. Malaga Island changed my entire worldview as a young person, and stirred a passion for using the humanities—and in particular, history and material culture—to affect *real* social change. The island and its people tell the story of both racial slavery and hatred, and resistance by people of African descent. This history echoes and connects to the history of people of African descent globally. The residents of Brazilian quilombo communities know the pain of being marginalized and

Kate McMahon is a museum specialist at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History and Culture. She was born and raised in Maine and attended the University of Southern Maine for both her bachelor's and master's degrees. She completed her Ph.D. in History at Howard University in May 2017. Her past research interests include African American communities in northern New England from the colonial period through 1865. Her MA thesis examined the historic African American community of Peterborough in Warren, Maine. She has also been involved in the Malaga Island archaeology project. Her 2013 article in *Material Culture Review*, "The Use of Material Culture and Recovering Black Maine," focuses on how the archaeological project has been a bridge between academics and the descendant community.

¹ Nate knows everyone, and is an endless supply of knowledge about Maine and New England history. If you're from Maine, Nate probably knows your parents, or your cousin, or his father or grandfather knew them from their antique shop in Greenville.

dispossessed from their ancestral homes due to the racial and financial motivations of individuals, authorities, and governments. What happened on Malaga Island is part of the broader, global story of the history and legacies of slavery.

The history of Malaga Island is one that tells not only an overlooked portion of Maine history, but also complicates the dominant narrative of the abolitionist, tolerant, and progressive state. The archaeological project and associated genealogy, public history, and art that has come out of this research is also indicative of the ways in which public history and archaeology can act as an amendatory practice, shining light on the legacies of social wrongs in order to make positive changes in the present. Recent paradigm shifts within the fields of archaeology, anthropology, ethnography, and history have been pushing practitioners towards recognition of “the unethical way in which [they] had behaved in relation to the colonized and their descendants.”² Thus, archaeological work undertaken by Dr. Hamilton and his colleague at USM and project co-director, Dr. Robert Sanford, was approached via a decolonized methodology that focused first on the descendants and the memory of the island’s residents, then on the scientific and historical work necessary to undertake a project of this size.



Fig. 2: Dr. Nathan Hamilton (center) and Dr. Robert Sanford (left). 2011.
Photo by the author.

² Alfredo Gonzalez-Ruibal, “Ethics of Archaeology,” *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 47 (2018): 347.

The work on Malaga Island has been restorative to both the memory of the islanders and the descendant community. The descendants, scattered all over the United States, have come back together, holding nearly yearly family reunions since the mid-2000s that have brought people back to the home of their ancestors for the first time in one hundred years. The State of Maine finally recognized the its role in the eviction and institutionalization of the residents in 2010, with a visit by then-governor John Baldacci along with several dozen descendants, scholars, artists, reporters, and local politicians and activists. In short, the work of archaeologists, historians, scholars, and—most importantly—the lobbying, promoting, and advocating for the residents of Malaga Island by their descendants, have led to positive changes and recognition of Maine’s complicated racial past.

Dr. Hamilton is passionate about Maine’s history and archaeology, and had been working toward getting archaeological studies started on Malaga Island since the 1980s. As a new professor at USM surveying shell middens in Casco Bay, he had heard about the midden beach on Malaga and the mixed-race people that used to live there. Rumors and speculation about the island’s history and residents drew him to the island, to sort out what was true and what was not. One of Nate’s students, John Mosher, took the history of the island on in his 1991 Master’s Thesis in the now-defunct American and New England Studies Program at USM, titled *No Greater Abomination: Ethnicity, Class and Power Relations on Malaga Island, Maine, 1880-1912*.³ Mosher explored the history of the residents of the island and the dark history of how the residents were evicted from their island home. This thesis provided the basis for the work of many others, from scholars to descendants, who used this study as an entry point into nearly three decades of subsequent research. It was the first scholarly work to undertake the story of Malaga Island. In 2013, during my tenure as a doctoral student at Howard University in the Department of History, my article “The Use of Material Culture and Recovering Black Maine” was published in *Material Culture Review*. It was, until this new body of work, the first scholarly article published in a peer-reviewed journal. This work explored the story of material culture and how the project on Malaga Island has helped grow the interest in Maine’s black history. This collection of essays in *Liminalities* marks an important step toward the publication of more scholarly works about the island’s history to counterbalance the decades of misinformation that has been routinely spread.

Newspaper articles and works by journalists about the island had long been inaccurate at best, and downright racist at their worst. Figure 3 shows an article from Washington, D.C. newspaper *The Washington Times* from August 25, 1907. They featured a story about Malaga Island, titled “King of the Lawless: Strange

³ John Mosher, *No Greater Abomination: Ethnicity, Class and Power Relations on Malaga Island, Maine, 1880-1912*, Master’s Thesis (Portland, Maine: University of Southern Maine, 1991).

Colony in Maine, Where Ignorance and Degeneracy Prevail and the Will of One Man is Supreme.” In it, they describe an uninvited visit to the island where they were confronted by James McKenney, the “king” of Malaga Island. They note his apparent lack of attempts at a conversation with these strangers, answering just “yes” or “no” to their questions. Throughout the article, the poverty of the islanders is repeated, as is the presence of people of African descent. The article ends by suggesting “It is safe to say that it is the most lawless colony in Maine, although there is not much opportunity for drinking and stealing, on account of its very isolation, and some steps to bring about a reformation will, in all probability, soon be taken.” Five years later, the residents were evicted.



Fig. 3: “King of the Lawless: Strange Colony in Maine, Where Ignorance and Degeneracy Prevail and the Will of One Man is Supreme,” *The Washington Times*, August 25, 1907.

Other articles were even more incendiary. The *Lewiston Evening Journal* published an article on August 21, 1911 titled “Malaga: The Homeless Island of

Beautiful Casco Bay—Its Shiftless Population of Blacks and Whites and His Royal Highness, King McKenney.” The face of one child stares back through the pages, echoing the sad reality that had just come crashing down on the islanders: they were about to be evicted from their home. To the islanders, 1911 marked the end of a several-years long battle to retain their rights to stay on Malaga. Through the absence of a formal deed (either because one did not exist, or because it was conveniently “lost” by the county courthouse), the islanders were evicted. The influence of the eugenics movement on state politics played a heavy role in what happened on Malaga Island, and the subsequent treatment of the islanders after their eviction. Throughout this tragedy, newspapers painted the islanders primarily as a lawless, criminal community who were an affront to the picturesque (white) Maine coast the state was trying to sell as Maine became a vacation destination in the early twentieth century. In many ways, we see the same afterlives of slavery and colonialism in 2019.



Fig. 4: “Lennie Trip, ‘Bout 8 Years Old,” *Lewiston Evening Journal*, August 21, 1911.

Globally, people of African descent have suffered the effects of racism as it relates to their land rights. Black Brazilians were granted rights to the land their ancestors had occupied as enslaved people one hundred years after the abolition of slavery in Brazil, 1988. The law, Article 68, Act of Transitory Provisions, stated “Survivors of kilombo communities occupying their lands are recognized as definitive owners, and the State shall issue them relevant title deeds.”⁴ This law was limited in its scope, recognizing only those who had occupied the land as self-

⁴ Luiz Fernando Do Rosário Linhares, “Kilombos of Brazil: Identity and Land Entitlement,” *Journal of Black Studies*, 34 No. 6, (July 2004): 818.

emancipators or those engaged in active rebellion. Quilombos have been under attack, particularly since the 2018 election of far-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro as president, who visited a quilombo in 2017. He stated, “I visited a quilombo and the least heavy afro-descendant weighed seven arrobas (approximately 230 pounds). They do nothing! They are not even good for procreation.”⁵ On January 2, 2019, Bolsonaro transferred the regulation of indigenous reserves and quilombos from Funai to a new ministry that oversees “women, family and human rights,” but is controlled by an evangelical pastor who believes in the conversion of the indigenous peoples of Brazil, which would ultimately lead to the abandonment of many of the Amazonian homes of indigenous and quilombo communities, and the continued deforestation of the Amazon.⁶ These attacks on quilombo communities—most often because the land in which they occupy is desirable to development or businesses such as forestry or mining—follow the history of systematic racism against people of African descent globally.

Despite the struggles that people of African descent have faced globally, they have resisted. Some of Malaga Island’s residents were interviewed for an article published in the *New-York Daily Tribune* on June 3, 1906.

Said one of the oldest inhabitants, who wore one shoe and one boot, and who looked as if he had never had a bath:

“Haven’t we always been peaceable? Have we ever hurt anybody? Just because we do not live like some other people over there on the mainland is that any reason why people should come here bothering us?”

They think we don’t know anything. One day somebody came over here and said that we didn’t know anything about the Bible. We read the papers like other people, and so long as we are contented and happy, I don’t see why other people have any right to complain...Just because we don’t live in fine houses and drive fancy teams, people look down upon us, and I’d like to know what right they have to care.”

Malaga Island’s residents fought hard to keep their home. Despite losing the island in 1912, the residents of Malaga survived, many of them moving to the nearby mainland. James McKenney’s descendant—James McKenney—still uses the area that was once the site of his ancestor’s home to store his lobster traps

⁵ Sam Meredith, “Who is the ‘Trump of the Tropics?’ Brazil’s divisive new president, Jair Bolsonaro—in his own words,” *CNBC*, October 29, 2018 (<https://www.cnbc.com/2018/10/29/brazil-election-jair-bolsonaros-most-controversial-quotes.html>).

⁶ Dom Phillips, “Jair Bolsonaro launches assault on Amazon rainforest protections,” *The Guardian*, January 2, 2019, (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/02/brazil-jair-bolsonaro-amazon-rainforest-protections>).

[Figure 5]. Some descendants have only found out about their relationship to the island recently, with the advent of Ancestry.com and familial DNA testing. These descendants have heavily advocated for the memory of their ancestors and for the true story of the island to be told. Without the leadership of descendants such as Marnie Darling-Voter, who acted as unofficial spokeswoman of the community for many years, and the genealogical research by many other descendants, recent acts of formal recognition by both the state government and general population would not have occurred. In 2012, the Maine State Museum launched an exhibition about Malaga Island, titled “Malaga Island: Fragmented Lives.” This exhibition garnered a lot of interest in the state. The exhibition showed the connections to living people in the past through tangible objects, and is an important example of how museums can act as spaces that can challenge prejudices through history. The archaeological objects, along with the faces and voices of the people who lived on Malaga Island and their descendants, provided an important counterpoint to the state’s otherwise overwhelmingly whitewashed history.



Fig. 5: James McKenney’s lobster traps. 2012. Photograph by the author.

Recent artworks by artist Daniel Minter, who has been involved in numerous public art projects about Maine’s black history inclusive of Malaga Island, have helped provide a tangible link from the past to the present, and have

brought recognition and awareness of the ways in which history still affects the present day. These works of art powerfully confront the viewer with the themes of both horror and beauty; of craniometers for measuring skulls suspended above the sublime rocky coast of Maine. *Re.Past.Malaga*, a commemorative dinner hosted by Dr. Myron Beasley on Malaga Island on July 12, 2018 referenced the tangible ways in which history and the memory of trauma still inform the present, and the ways in which memory can act as a powerful force for healing. The interdisciplinary studies of Malaga Island, the works of art being created about the history and the people, and the actively engaged descendant community have all contributed to a much broader and more inclusive understanding of the island and the impacts this history has on the present. This type of project can—and should—be used as a model for other projects within the global diaspora that are reckoning with the afterlives of slavery.



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