

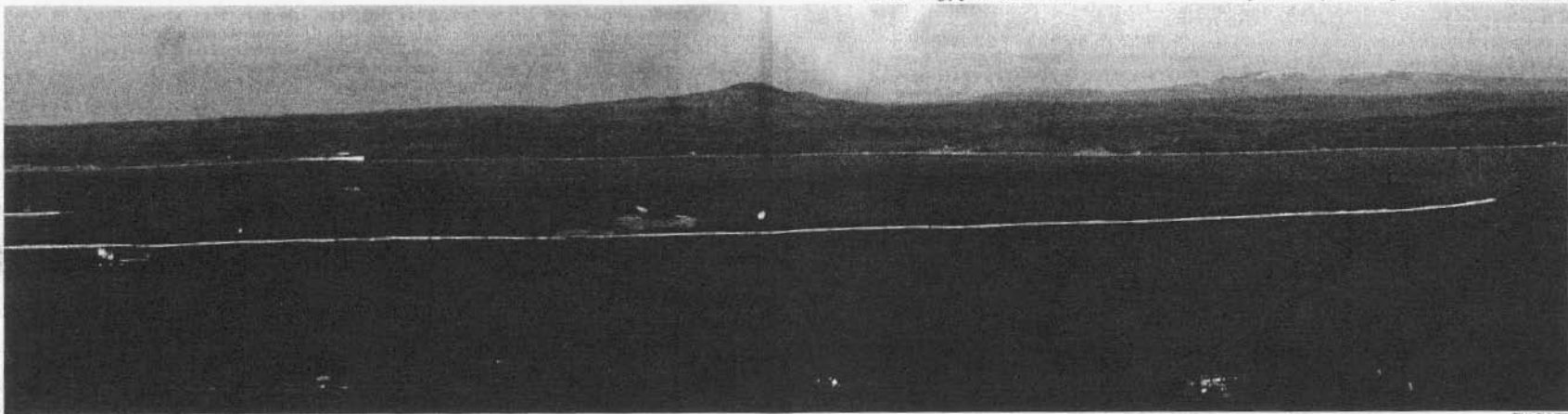
concerns. In exchange for allowing a dock, the state might give the rest of the island over for a park. There's no reason why an LNG dock has to be lit up like Christmas. Come to think of it, neither does the freight terminal at Mack Point, or the Ford dealership in Belfast.

Searsport to see the ships.

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top sailing days in the world. The Office of Tourism recognizes that the midcoast region is the second most popular tourist destination in Maine. Economic logic implores us to build on this overwhelmingly positive situation.

with the Penobscot Bay region's current state and economy. We are also concerned about the safety of an LNG port. And we are concerned about how citizens are represented by our state government, which seems to be



TINA SHUTE

Sears Island, in northern Penobscot Bay, could be the site of a liquid natural gas (LNG) terminal. The State of Maine, which owns the island, has been discussing a lease with an undisclosed developer who want to build a LNG port on the island. There is already a major shipping port on the Searsport mainland (the ship in the foreground is bound there), and a causeway, just to the left of this view, connecting the island with the mainland. Some people want to see the undeveloped island stay that way, while others see it as the perfect site for some tax-generating development. This photo is looking east, Blue Hill is in the background.

An Island Called Wassumkeag, Waiting for Its Future

Essay by Catherine Schmitt

There is nothing spectacular about the island, 940 acres of woods and fields that drops down from the Searsport mainland into Penobscot Bay. Nothing strikingly unique, except that this island is the last of its kind—the largest undeveloped island on the Maine coast, maybe even the entire East Coast.

Born of carving glaciers and flooding seas, the island was first called Wassumkeag for the bright shining beach that served as a landmark along Native American canoe routes more than 3,000 years ago. Later, three-quarters of the island would be field and pasture for a farm and summer estate that occupied the island in the 1800's. The island was ultimately abandoned in 1934, after moonlighting as a landing point for smuggled liquor during prohibition. The landscape began to return to its former self. The island waited.

Skin of fern and birch and pine covers drumlin bones of metamorphic granite. This island has scars, though they have faded: last year's brittle ferns fold themselves over stone walls. Roots overtake cellar holes. The tide beats against the causeway that made a temporary connection to the mainland permanent. Rain has faded the yellow letters WASSUMKEAG spray-painted across the island's entrance.

Now this island might be the location for the next proposed liquid natural gas (LNG) terminal, after voters

in Harpswell to the south tore their town apart in rejecting a proposed LNG port there.

"If we let them build this, years down the road we'll ask, 'Why do we let this happen? Why did we let them do this?' and then it's going to be too late," said Jim Verrill, of Searsport. The words sound contemporary, but Verrill spoke to an interviewer in 1974. (The tape is now on file at the Maine Folklife Center). He was talking about proposals by Central Maine Power to build a nuclear power plant on the island, after a failed proposal for an oil refinery in the late '60s. CMP gave up on the nuclear thing and decided to build a 600-megawatt coal-fired power plant instead, but they couldn't justify the need for so much energy, and it was never built. The island waited.

The paved road along the spine of the island turns to gravel and ends at a clearing and the unfinished breakwater. The bay brings in more sediment to fill the dredged ghost of a port. There are several vernal pools that were excavated to replace the forested wetlands that were destroyed by the road and the earth-moving. There are signs next to the pools, announcing the restoration area, but they are graffitied with obscenities.

A marine cargo port, which evolved into a 15-year controversy, was the closest any plan has come to reality. Wood chips and lumber would pour forth from the hinterland, and be carried away from Sears Island to ports

around the world. The modern, efficient facility would make Maine globally competitive. There would be jobs, money, more industry. When the cargo port was in the first stages of planning, the Maine Department of Transportation funded numerous investigations of the island. A video, a paperback history, an archaeological dig. So we would know what we had lost.

"Once we add industry to the island, there goes Penobscot Bay," Jim Verrill's voice echoes off the passing traffic on Route 1 in the old recording from 1974.

Work began on the causeway, access road, and dredging in 1984, only to be stopped by court order the following year. More delays followed litigation by the Sierra Club and the EPA over wetlands and eelgrass beds, which the DOT did not document in its list of what we would lose (environmental assessments found there would be "no significant impact" from the port). Finally, after more than 15 years, Maine Governor Angus King terminated the project in February 1996. When he spoke about it, it was with great disdain for the federal regulators who'd found the port would damage the bay's eelgrass. Again, the island waited.

Despite the road, the causeway, the power line leading up to an electrical tower, I feel enveloped by land and water on Sears Island, as if a green curtain has closed behind me. Walking this teardrop in the bay, I am drawn to the sound of water falling on stone. Red maple and cedar

swamps shed rivulets of water to the beach, the freshets flow unimpeded to the bay. I sift through the rocks, pick them up, turn them over, looking for fossils, in search of a history. But the island keeps quiet, letting the abandoned pier and the tankers tugging toward Mack Point in the distance tell the story.

This island has been waiting for its fate to be determined for 50 years. Each decade, another new development scheme arises. Each time, there are protests, lawsuits. Old ideas are resuscitated. A power plant, an LNG terminal, a cargo port, an industrial park. As if leaving Sears Island unbuilt is somehow a waste of a space, like this landscape has no value left alone. Yet each plan is narrowly defeated.

Sears Island has become larger than itself. As in 1974 and 1994, Sears Island symbolizes, to some, a wasted opportunity for economic development. For others, Sears Island represents coastal open space: something once common, now rare, and worthy of preservation solely because it exists.

Zigzagging from the cliff on the eastern side to deer trails through the spruce forest and around the edges of wetland seeps, I see no one until I get back to the causeway. The shores of this island have not changed much. Sears Island is just a shining beach of rocks on the way from the river to the bay, an island waiting.