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*-Clare Durst 2001*

## SOMETHING ABOUT MONHEGAN<sup>1</sup>

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The coast of Maine presents a topography which is unique. While it is a little less than two hundred and twenty miles in a direct line from Kittery Point to its eastern limit, it is about twenty-five hundred miles if you follow its remarkable indentations. Scattered along its shores are hundreds of islands among which, apparently standing sentinel over them all, the first seen as you approach the coast, is Monhegan. It has been called the "Keystone of New England." Since the beginning of New England history, this island has held an important position as fishermen's home, trading post and landmark. Most of our early chroniclers make mention of it; many of them often. Early navigators, before sailing from their homes, made it a rendezvous.

Previous to the voyages of the Cabots there may have been "foot prints hastily pressed on the shining sand" of Maine, but there is no authentic record yet known.<sup>2</sup> The Cabots were first to discover the American continent in 1497, but there are few details of the points of coast they visited. Verrazzano, in 1524, in his letter to "His Most Serene Majesty," the King of France, indicates clearly that he visited the whole extent of New England coast and islands "Departing from thence, we kept along the coast [keeping so close to the coast as never to lose it from our sight] steering north-east, and found the country more pleasant and open, free from woods, and distinct in the interior we saw lofty mountains but none which extended to the shore. Within fifty leagues we discovered thirty-two islands, all near the main, small and of pleasant appearance, but high and so disposed as to afford excellent harbours and channels, as we see in the Adriatic gulph, near Illyria and Dalmatia." Dr. Kohl says of John Rut's voyage in 1527 "The Mary of Guilford not only came in sight of the coast of Maine, but she also oftentimes put her men on land to search the state of these unknown regions" Dr. DeCosta questions this statement concerning Rut, and thinks it more probable that Allfonsce—the discoverer of Massachusetts Bay—in 1542, and Thevet, in 1556, may have visited the Maine shores and islands. But however that may be, there is no doubt but that Gosnold, Pring, Waymouth, DeMonts, Champlain, Popham, Smith, and others, not only saw Monhegan, but many of them landed upon it.

Soon after the beginning of the sixteenth century, fishermen plied their vocation on the North Atlantic coast, and doubtless some came into the neighborhood of Monhegan; before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth it "had become a noted fishing station," and it was "the seat of the first fishery in Maine."<sup>3</sup> According to Sewell, "Monhegan earliest appears in the panorama of the historic scene of English life and enterprise on New England shores when Pedro Menedez, Governor of Florida, in dispatches forwarded by him to the Court

of Spain, tells Philip II that in July of the year (1588), the English were inhabiting an island in latitude 43°, eight leagues from land where the Indians were very numerous. It was the story of Carlos Morea, a Spaniard, who had learned the facts in London, and communicated them to Menedez. There can hardly be a doubt that Monhegan island was the spot occupied by these English dwellers in the New World." Whether this surmise as to the occupation of this island be true or not,<sup>4</sup> certain it is that from Monhegan came the Indian chief Samoset, to Plymouth, March 16, 1628; "he very boldly came all alone and along the houses straight to the Randevous, where we intercepted him, not suffering him to goe in, as vndoubtedly he would, out of his boldnesse, hee saluted vs in English, and bad vs well-come, for he had learned some broken English amongst the English men that came to fish at Monchiggon [Monhegan], and knew by name the most of the Captaines, Commanders and Masters, that vsually come, he was a man free in speech, so farre as he could express his minde, and of a seemely carriage, we questioned him of many things, he was the first Savage we, could meete withall; he sayd he was not of these parts, but of Moratiggon<sup>5</sup> [Monhegan], and one of the Sagamores or Lords thereof, and had beene Eight moneths in these parts, it lying hence a dayes sayle with a great wind, and five dayes by land."<sup>6</sup>

And from Monhegan, also, came succor to this same starving band of exiles, a year later, when, hearing of this resort of fishermen, Edward Winslow immediately started for that island for supplies. The fishermen refused to sell, having no surplus of provisions, but freely gave sufficient to relieve the pressing needs existing at Plymouth. And from these early days until the present time the quaint and picturesque old landmark off the "hundred harbored" coast of Maine has been well known to all "they that go down to the sea in ships," and "that do business in great waters."

The first authentic narration, of a landing on Monhegan occurs in Rosier's Journal of the voyage of Capt. George Waymouth, in 1605; wherein he says that the island, which he named St. George, was sighted on the 17th of May, but "because it blew a great gale of wind, the sea very high, and near night, not fit to come upon an unknown coast, we stood off till two o'clock in the morning, being Saturday: \* \* \* It appeared a mean high land, as we after found it, being an island of some six miles in compass, but I hope the most fortunate ever yet discovered. About twelve o'clock that day, we came to an anchor on the north side of this island, about a league from the shore. About two o'clock our captain with twelve men rowed in his ship boat to the shore, where we made no long stay, but laded our boat with dry wood of old trees upon the shore side and returned to our ship, where we rode that night. This island is woody grown with fir, birch, oak and beech, as far as we saw along the shore; and so likely to be within. On the verge grow gooseberries, strawberries, wild pease and wild rose bushes. \* \* \* While we were at shore, our men aboard, with a few hooks got above thirty great cods and haddocks, which gave us a taste of the great plenty of fish which we found afterward wheresoever we went upon the coast."

The fisheries of the North Atlantic coast were early developed, and became an incentive to much of the voyaging that took place after the time of the Cabots.<sup>7</sup> A French fishing voyage took place as early as 1504, and as in 1517 some fifty vessels of different nations were employed on the coast, coming from England, France, Spain and Portugal, it is safe to say that the fishing business had been pursued for several years previous to that date.<sup>8</sup> England, commencing soon after the beginning of the sixteenth century, had increased her business to such an extent by the year 1600, that she employed annually two

hundred vessels and ten thousand men and boys, going and returning to England the same season;<sup>9</sup> but not until about this time did many of the fishermen venture so far west as the coast of Maine. Johnston, speaking of this period, says: "A very considerable business was now transacted on this coast, connected entirely with the fisheries and the fur trade, which centered chiefly at Monhegan and Pemaquid. At both places a very considerable and busy population was "found in the summer season, and very possibly, also some in the winter, though we have no positive evidence of the fact." On the return voyage Waymouth evidently discovered the Georges Bank, where "the fish was so plentiful and so great," says Rosier, that "one of the mates with two hooks at a lead, at five draughts together hauled up ten fishes; all were generally very great, some they measured to be five feet long, and three feet about."

A very few days after Waymouth left the coast of Maine, the last of June, 1605, DeMonts and Champlain arrived. They visited Monhegan, and Champlain named it, La Nef, "for at a distance it had the appearance of a ship." In 1607, the short lived Popham colony landed and began a settlement near the mouth of the Kennebec River. Before leaving England it was arranged that the two vessels in which they sailed, the "Mary and John" and the "Gift of God," in case of separation, should meet at Monhegan, which they did; and here on old Monhegan was held the first Thanksgiving service—popularly supposed to have been established at Plymouth—ever observed in America, by these Church of England men, the Popham colonists, who landed on the island August 9, 1607 (O.S.), "and under the shadow of a high cross listened to a sermon by Chaplain Seymour, also 'gyving god thanks for our happy metinge and safe aryvall into the country.'"<sup>10</sup>

In the summer of 1611, Captain Edward Harlow, while cruising in this neighborhood, called at Monhegan, and either from here or in the vicinity seized three natives who had come on board for the purpose of trading, two of whom he carried away, the other escaping. At Cape Cod he kidnapped three more, taking the five to England. Captain John Smith, in his "Description of New England," thus begins his narrative: "In the moneth of April, 1614, with two ships from London, of a few marchants, I chanced to ariue in New England, a parte of Ameryca, at the Ile of Monahiggan, in 43 ½ of Northerly latitude; our plot was there to take Whales and make tryalls of a Myne of Gold and Copper. If those failed, Fish and Fures was then our refuge." Further on, when describing "the remarkablest Iles and mountains for Landmarkes," he says: "Monnahigan is a rounde high Ile; and close by it Monanis, betwixt which is a small harbor where we ride." Of the commodities he says: "The main staple, from hence to bee extracted for the present to produce the rest, is fish; which howeuer it may seeme a mean and base commoditie; yet who will but truly take the pains and consider the sequel, I think will allow it well worth the labor. \* \* \* He is a very bad fisher, cannot kill in one day with hooke and line, one, two, or three hundred Cods." Monhegan was the Captain's rendezvous while he ranged the coast, and "got for trifles neer 1100 Beuer skines, 100 Martins, and neer as many otters," and the information which enabled him to publish his map of New England, which he presented to Prince Charles, who gave names to several geographical points on the New England coast, some of which remain to this day. Monhegan he called "Barties Iles" a name which did not long obtain. On Monhegan Smith "made a Garden," as he says, "upon the top of a Rockie Ile in 43 ½, 4 leagues from the Main, in May, that grew so well, as it served us for sallets [salads] in June and July."

In 1618; Edward Rocroft, while on an expedition from Plymouth, had a quarrel with

his men, and put three of them ashore at Saco. Late in the season they found their way to Monhegan, where they spent a most miserable winter, being rescued the next spring by Capt. Thomas Dermer, who had been sent out by the Plymouth Company on a voyage of conciliation among the natives, who, under continued ill treatment, were becoming hostile. Dermer stayed a few weeks at Monhegan, taking in a cargo of fish and fur, which he dispatched to England. This indicates that a considerable trade was transacted at Monhegan as early as the spring and summer of 1619 and probably it was permanently occupied from that time as a fishing-post and trading station, with now and then a temporary abandonment, the one notable one being that during King Philip's war, in 1676, since which time it has maintained a thriving condition. The first owner of Monhegan was Mr. Abraham Jennens, a merchant of Plymouth, England, who bought it of the Plymouth Council in 1622. He was largely engaged in the cod fisheries and trade on the coast, and, for these purposes, he established a plantation at Monhegan. In 1626, Messrs. Aldworth and Elbridge, of Bristol, learning that Mr. Jennens intended to break up his venture at Monhegan, authorized Mr. Abraham Shurt, of Pemaquid, to purchase it, which he did for £50 sterling, giving a draft on Messrs. Aldworth & Elbridge in payment. This is probably the earliest bill of exchange mentioned in our commercial history. The Plymouth colony hearing that Mr. Jennens was to abandon Monhegan, and understanding that "diverse usefull goods was ther to be sould," "the Gove<sup>r</sup> and Mr. Winslow tooke a boat and some hands and went thither," They were joined in the expedition by Mr. David Thomson, of "Pascataway," and the purchases of both parties amounted to £400 sterling. "In 1650 the island had come into the possession of Mr. Thomas Elbridge, who mortgaged it to Thomas Russell, of Charlestown."<sup>11</sup>

Winthrop's Journal gives an incident that took place in the fall of 1641, "about the beginning of the frost," when a shallop with eight men started from Piscataqua for Pemaquid; "they would needs set forth upon the Lords day, although forewarned." A northwest storm arose which drove them out to sea, and after fourteen days of suffering and trial they reached Monhegan. Four of them died from exposure to the cold, and the remaining four were rescued by a fisherman, who discovered them in their famished condition.

In 1672, the inhabitants of "Kenebeck, Cape Bonowagon [Cape Newaggen, now Southport], Damares Cove, Shipscoate, Pemaquid and Monhegan," sent a petition to the General Court of Massachusetts, asking to be taken under its government and protection, as they had previously, had "some kind of Government settled amongst us; but for these Several years have not had any at all." This petition was signed by twenty one persons from "Kenebeck," fifteen from Shipscoate, sixteen from Cape Bonawagon," fifteen from "Damaris Cove," eleven from "Pemaquid," and eighteen from "Monhegan." It was granted, and in 1674 four commissioners, "Lef<sup>t</sup> Th<sup>o</sup> Gardiner of Pemaquid, Capt Edmund Patteshall of Kennebeck, John Palmer, Se<sup>n</sup>", of Monhegin, and Robert Gamon, of Cape Nawaggen, were appointed to take charge of all matters pertaining to the places east of the Kennebec, that came within the jurisdiction of Massachusetts, and which were organized into the county of Devon or Devonshire, and a court was authorized, to be held at Pemaquid, of which Richard Oliver, of Monhegan, was appointed recorder and clerk. This was but a short time before the breaking out of King Philip's war, during which the whole region was desolated. The inhabitants from around the Kennebec and Sheepscot rivers, and from Pemaquid and neighboring places, fled for safety, first to Damariscove Island,

and then to Monhegan. Probably at least three hundred souls were here gathered. Measures for safety were taken, for an attack was expected even here.<sup>12</sup> On the coast the work of devastation went on, the burning of many of their homes and villages being plainly visible. After some two or three weeks, during which time they were unmolested, receiving no aid from Boston or elsewhere, "they took the first opportunity to set sayle, some for Piscataqua, some for Boston, and some for Salem, at one of which Places they all safely arrived."<sup>13</sup>

When the General Court of Massachusetts levied its taxes upon these eastern settlements for the expenses incurred during this war, Monhegan's share was the largest. Although Monhegan was again re-peopled, after Philip's war, yet the population must have dwindled to a very small number previous to the Revolution, for about the year 1774, a Mr. Trefethen went from Portsmouth, N. H., and bought the island of one Rogers, for \$1,000.00. After the Revolution, Trefethen returned to Portsmouth, giving the island to one of his sons, Henry, and two sons-in-law, Josiah Starling and Thomas Orne, who afterwards had to pay a claimant, one Jennings, of Boston, \$1,000.00; and, about the year 1807, still another \$1,000.00 to Government, because of a defect in the title. Descendants of the Trefethens and Starlings are still among its inhabitants. The ruins of some of the ancient houses are still to be seen, and occasionally some relic is dug from the earth where it has lain nearly 200 years.<sup>14</sup>

Monhegan, together with its neighbor Manana (Monanis), is in Lincoln County and was organized as "Monhegan Plantation" about forty-five years ago. It is situated eleven miles southeast of Pemaquid Point, nearly equidistant from the mouths of the Kennebec and Penobscot Rivers. It is about a mile and a half long, from a half to three-quarters of a mile wide, and contains about a thousand acres. It has now a population of 150. Its officers are three selectmen and assessors, a plantation clerk, treasurer, collector of taxes, constable and a school supervisor. It is taxed for State, county, and school purposes. Its valuation in 1880 was \$10,305.00. Rate of taxation, 2 ½ per cent. There are about thirty houses, besides a school house, and a chapel built in 1880, the gift to the island of a Philadelphia gentleman. These dwellings cluster around the little harbor,—with its solitary, dilapidated wharf,—between Monhegan and Manana, in which the fleet of fishing boats lie at anchor, when their owners are not absent following their vocation; for its principal occupation is today what it ever has been, fishing; although there is enumerated among its employments, one boat builder, a carpenter; a smith, a dealer in oil-clothes, and one in fish-oil. Casual visitants can easily detect the presence of the latter commodity, but it is not so easy to see where the other occupation are domiciled.

On the highest point of the island, standing sentinel over the quaint little village—with its one rough, narrow, crooked roadway running through it—is a granite lighthouse, with a first-class flashing white light, a welcome beacon to many a storm-tossed mariner.<sup>15</sup> Near the top of the hill, just under the light-house, is the inevitable "God's Acre," where sleep the tired Monheganites of many generations. On neighboring Manana, which has the mysterious hieroglyphical characters on its rocks which have puzzled so many savants, government maintains a steam fog-horn; and lying a little way off from the head of the harbor floats a doleful whistling buoy. Until recently Monhegan had no post-office; but the mail which accumulated at Herring Gut, now Port Clyde, on Georges Islands, was brought over by any casual fishing boat chancing to be bound toward the island, when it was distributed to the expectant group which gathered about the self-appointed mail-

carrier.<sup>16</sup>

Away from the village, beyond the light-house, pasturage; and then a wilderness of trees and shrubbery. on its southern shore is the bold, perpendicular cliff called “White-head,” a hundred and fifty feet in height. Standing on its summit, the eye sweeps over the immensity in front and around you, with here and there a sail dotting the blue waters, the trailing smoke of a passing steamer, and with the surging white-caps away down below you. Grand, indeed, is the view; impressive and awe-inspiring, but grander still to stand there at sunrise, or as the furious blasts of a north east storm rage around this wild, bleak peak, isolated as it is from all other sights and sounds of civilization; thus circumstanced, a feeling of weirdness and desolation would creep over one, as if deserted by all human kind; and you would hardly sing with Cowper:

“How sweet how passing sweet is solitude!”

Between Monhegan. and Pemaquid Light occurred the famous naval battle between the *Enterprise* and *Boxer*, Sept. 5, 1814. The British flag<sup>17</sup> was humbled, but both commanders, Lieut. William Barrows and Capt. Samuel Blyth, were killed. They were buried side by side in the Portland cemetery. In “My Lost Youth,” Longfellow thus commemorated this event:

“I remember the sea-fight far away,  
How it thundered o’er the tide I  
And the dead captains, as they lay  
In their graves o’erlooking the tranquil bay,”  
Where they in battle died.”

(signed E. H. Goss)

<sup>1</sup> \* Probably a corruption of the Algonkin general name for Island Menaahan in the Abnaki language, but hardened to Munaegoo in the Micmac, through which, probably, the name came first to French and English fishermen.” MS. letter from Hon. J. Hammond Trumbull.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. B. F. De Costa, in *Northmen in Maine*, p. 78. The Northmen, in their explorations, may have visited it. Dr. Kohl says Thorfinn Karlsefne sailed along the entire coast of Maine. Dr. De Costa says that he sailed direct from Nova Scotia (Markland) to Cape Cod (Kialarness).

<sup>3</sup> Sabine’s Report of the Principal Fisheries of the American Seas, pp. 42; 106.

<sup>4</sup> Pemaquid and Monhegan were very early favorite resorts of the fishermen, but the period of their first occupation lies far back of any record, and is as indefinite as the early geographical nomenclature of our coast, which, as Captain John Smith wrote in 1624, had “formerly been called Norumbega, Virginia, Muskottcus, Penaquida, Cannada, and such other names, as those that ranged, the coast pleased.” J. Wingate Thornton, in *Ancient Pemaquid* p. 24. And Bradford, writing in 1623. says there were some “scattering beginnings made in other places,” mentioning “Paskataway” and “Monhigen.”

<sup>5</sup> Mohegan has many spellings in these early chronicles; among them, besides those in the text, are: Monbigen, Monhagen, Monhiggan, Monhiggen, Monhiggon, Monahiggan, Monnahigan, Menhiggen, Meihiggin, Menhiggon, Munhiggon, Manheigari, and others.

<sup>6</sup> *Mounts Relation*, Dr. Henry M. Dexter’s edition, pp. 83, 4—It was the same Samoset, who, together with a brother sachem, Unongoit, gave the first deed of land in America made by an Indian to a white man. This was for a large part of the country around Pemaquid, which they sold to John Brown, July 25, 1625 and the deed was duly acknowledged before Abraham Shurt, a Justice of the Peace, whom Bowditch so pleasantly remembers in the dedication to his curious volume of “Suffolk Surnames”:

To the memory of  
A. Shurt  
“The Father of American Conveyancing;”  
Whose name is associated alike with  
My Daily Toilet and my Daily occupation.

<sup>7</sup> Recent collations of the early historical narrative demonstrate that the progress of geographical discovery in America is to be credited to the fisheries more than to all other causes. Thornton, *Ancient Pemaquid*, p. 12.

<sup>8</sup> According to Sabine, France had twelve vessels employed in fishing in St. Johns harbor alone in 1527; and in 1577 there were no less than one hundred and fifty vessels thus employed on the coast; and in 1744 nearly 600 vessels, with 27,000 men. Spain had her fishermen on the coast among the earliest, employing a hundred vessels in 1577; and Portugal, it is estimated, had at least 50 vessels at that period.

<sup>9</sup> “Sabine’s *American Fisheries*, P. 40  
*History of Bristol and Bremen*, p. 47.

<sup>10</sup> Rev. Richard Mather, who arrived in this country in August, 1635, makes a note in his *Diary* to the effect that “Mimhiggin was an island without inhabitants.”

<sup>11</sup> Thornton, *Ancient Pemaquid*, p. 38. Johnston, in *Bristol and Bremen*, p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> There they settled three Guards, and appointed five and twenty to watch every night, not knowing but that the Indians might come every Hour. Hubbard’s *Indian Wars*, Drake’s Edition, vol. 2; p. 164.

<sup>13</sup> Hubbard’s *Indian Wars*, pp. 43, 44.

<sup>14</sup> MS. letter from Mrs Wilson L. Albee, a resident of Monhegan.

<sup>15</sup> The light-house keeper for twenty years was Mrs. Betsey Humphrey,—wife of a former keeper,—who died in 1880. At night the island went early to its slumbers, and only the lighthouse on the hill kept watch, It dazzled the eyes if one looked up, and rendered the darkness more profound.”

<sup>16</sup> A. recent visit to this island, by the editor of the *Boothbay Register*, was thus chronicled:

“The Monheganers are a hardy race of men, who depend upon the sea for their sustenance. They are fitted for all kinds of fishing and do not depend upon any one class of fish. In the winter and early spring it is lobsters, next cod, cusk and haddock, then comes hake, followed by mackerel and pollock. Sometimes for days no mackerel are to be seen, then they catch pollock or hake. The vessels have dwindled to two or three, owned wholly on the island though several parts of vessels that hail from Portland are owned here. About 40 or 50 sail boats have moorings in the harbor, but small boats, dories and other craft, foot up to over 100.

“In search for shelter from a coming storm, some of the ladies came upon an artists studio In an old fish house. An antiquated boat upon the shore was temporarily fitted with sails and used as a model for a wreck. Monhegan is a rich spot for the marine painter.” Its little harbor filled with boats of all sizes and kind—its bold, rocky shores—mackerel seiners casting their nets in the immediate vicinity—all combine to teach what a true fishing port is.”

<sup>17</sup> \* The old flag, now tattered and torn—17 ft. 6 in. in length, by 11 ft. 3 in. in width, with 15 stripes and 15 stars—which floated from the mast-head of the *Enterprise* during this engagement. is now in possession of Horatio G. Quincy, Esq., of Portland, Me.