

Treat Island History

Eastport, Maine

Overview

Treat Island lies in easternmost Maine at the entrance to Cobscook and Passamaquoddy bays, a region known for its extreme tidal range, frequent fogs, strong currents and abundant wildlife. The fine line between the bays, where Treat lies, marks the boundary between the United States and Canada—a border that shifted through two centuries of political strife.

Four prominent international boundary range markers stand on the 73-acre island, which is midway between Eastport and Lubec and directly across from the cliffs of Roosevelt-Campobello International Park in New Brunswick. Known historically as Treat's, Allan's, Hubbard and Dudley's Island (the name now given to the adjoining island), Treat offers visitors a microcosm view of the region's complex history, demonstrating how local residents sought to sustain themselves through fishing, smuggling, tidal energy production and military supremacy.



View from Treat Island, looking south to Lubec
© Bridget Besaw

“Treat Island is a place on the edge. It lies at the entrance to one of the richest wildlife areas along the entire Eastern Seaboard, at the far end of the country, and on the leading edge of American history.”

-- Marty Anderson
MCHT Project Manager in *Maine*
Heritage, Fall 2009

Treat Island today looks much as it may have when the first European settlers arrived. Yet the island was nearly treeless for more than a century, and no part of it is untouched by human activity. Visitors can find signs of dike excavation and construction, old cellar holes, boundary range markers, a cenotaph honoring early settlers, and an artillery battery. Through all its resculpting Treat has remained, a tidal setting—shaped and reshaped by the currents of change.

Geology

Beneath the spruce woods and open meadows of Treat Island lies a mix of volcanic rock (primarily rhyolite and breccia on the northern two-thirds and partially metamorphosed volcanic rocks on the southern third). Visitors can find evidence of a fault line that runs between varied rock types,

particularly along the island's eastern beaches. Eight gravel beaches and several smaller boulder beaches are interspersed with the bold ledges that rim much of the island.

On parts of Treat, the soil layer is much deeper than is typical of Maine's ledgy islands. Soils of weathered glacial till, most stony silt or sandy loam, run up to 5 feet deep and are relatively well drained on the island's northern half. Soils on the southern half are kept wet by a seasonally high water table (which helps nourish wetland plants and provides the island with a fresh water source). At the island's southernmost tip, both soil and bedrock were excavated in 1935 to construct a dike between Treat and Dudley islands.

Early Settlement

The Passamaquoddy Tribe may have used Treat Island as a camping destination or stopover for generations before European settlers arrived. No archaeological research has been done on the island to date, and early artifacts may have been disturbed by the 1935 excavation.

Passamaquoddy people living in the region around the time of the American Revolution found a friend and ally in Colonel John Allan (1746-1805), an early owner of Treat Island. A native of Scotland raised in Nova Scotia, Allan became a Representative of their Provincial Assembly. His open advocacy for American colonists led to charges of treason, and Allan had to flee Nova Scotia in 1776. General George Washington subsequently appointed Allan Military Commander of American troops stationed in Machias and Superintendent of the Eastern Indians.

While native people might have preferred staying neutral in the war, Allan recognized that their support was critical to holding the British east of the St. Croix River. With help from several tribes, Allan's forces at Machias were able to repel a sea raid by British naval vessels. During one year in which he traveled south to Massachusetts to secure more help for the region (and seek just compensation for Indians' military service), Allan left his two eldest sons (aged 11 and 13) with the native tribes to assure them that he would return, counseling his sons to "be very kind to the Indians."

Allan sustained his friendship with area tribes after the Revolution, and is still revered by them for his sustained efforts to negotiate treaties with Massachusetts on their behalf.

Following the war, Allan took a lead role in Eastport town politics. He purchased Treat Island and lived there from 1784 to 1786 farming and running a trading post with his wife and four

"...Had not the neutrality of the Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, St. John and Micmac Indians been secured, the infant settlements in eastern Maine could hardly have maintained their existence."

--William Henry Kilby, *Eastport and Passamaquoddy* (1888)

"Colonel Allan was a friend of the Passamaquoddy Tribe, providing support in treaty obligations by reminding the President and Congress about the services of the Tribe."

-- Donald Soctomah,
Passamaquoddy Tribal Historian
in *Maine Heritage*, Fall 2009

children. Among those who traded with him was the notorious turncoat Benedict Arnold (who had property on Campobello Island).

A ceremony held in 1860 erecting an obelisk monument on Treat that honored Allan as a “Revolutionary servant” reportedly drew nearly 200 of his descendants.

“There is also God’s acre in miniature, wherein lies the earthly remains of the late Colonel Allan. The fine shaft was erected to ‘his memory’ by his relative in that lonely but lovely spot...”

- January 1910 local newspaper article (publication and author not recorded)



The Allan obelisk has stood for more than 150 years
© Bridget Besaw

Border Conflicts

Treat’s strategic location near the mouth of the St. Croix River placed it at the center of territorial conflicts that occurred at every scale from local to international. At the municipal level, Treat and neighboring islands were originally part of Eastport but went to Lubec when that town incorporated in 1811 (within the Commonwealth of Massachusetts). In response to a petition from local residents, an Act of the Maine Legislature in 1847 allowed Eastport to annex the island. Because the federal government owned and managed Treat Island between 1935 and 1959, neither town levied taxes on it for decades and the aquatic line between Lubec and Eastport blurred. Title research in 1987 finally confirmed Eastport’s claim to the island.

International border disputes took far longer to resolve. The first European claims on the area trace back to 1684, when the Governor of Canada made a grant of Campobello and surrounding islands to Jean Sarreau, whose early settlement survived until his death in 1705. Britain laid claim to the area after the French and Indian War (1754-1763), and even after America declared its independence, British loyalists envisioned a colony of “New Ireland” encompassing Downeast Maine. While the legal basis for such action was disputed, British troops continued a military rule in much of eastern Maine until the optimistically named “Definitive Treaty of Peace” (at the conclusion of the Revolutionary War in 1783).

That treaty set the easternmost boundary between British colonies and the newly formed United States as the “mouth of the St. Croix River in the Bay of Fundy,” but it and several subsequent treaties failed to define the river’s course or resolve the ownership of disputed islands. It was not until 1908 that a treaty successfully committed Canada and the US to constructing clear markers delineating the water boundary. Today, the International Boundary Commission maintains four prominent boundary range markers on Treat (which help determine the centerline and turning points of the boundary where it lays on the water), each reflecting different treaties dating back to the early 1900s ([more details](#)).



Photograph by Charles Brown of Civil War battery on Treat’s Island, c. 1890

© Tides Institute (courtesy of Hugh French)

During the many years of failed political negotiations, area residents were left in limbo, fending as best they could and often relying on near neighbors regardless of nationality. Across the ever-shifting border, settlers traded whatever supplies they had (often foodstuffs from the colonies and gypsum for fertilizer from crown lands). When Thomas Jefferson in the Embargo Act of 1807 forbade American vessels to trade with England or France, residents of Lubec and Eastport experienced great hardship. Smuggling became commonplace as a means of survival. Roughly 160,000 barrels of flour moved through Eastport into Canadian ports in one year, historian C. Donald Brown reports, and 14 smuggling boats were captured in a single night.

“As the maritime provinces of Canada had always received their foodstuffs, meats, and naval stores from the United States, it can readily be seen that the border towns did not intend to lose this lucrative trade even if forbidden to engage in it by so eminent an authority as the President himself...The risks were great but the rewards were high.”

- C. Donald Brown,
Eastport: A Maritime History

The embargo was lifted by 1809, but trade was disrupted again in 1812 when the US declared war against Great Britain. Mainers close to the border wanted to live and trade amicably with their northern neighbors, and deeply resented this turn of events (particularly after the British occupied Eastport and further constrained trade between 1814 and 1818).

Treat Island later played a role in helping defend America’s easternmost port from Confederate raiders during the Civil War. In 1863, soldiers constructed an artillery battery from timber and earth that spanned nearly an acre along Treat’s southeast shore (facing Campobello Island). The compound apparently had a storehouse, barracks housing up to 50 soldiers, and a magazine for munitions (although no evidence has been found indicating the guns were ever used).

Harvesting the Bay's Bounty

The hardscrabble existence of the region's early settlers was eased some by the plentiful fish in Cobscook and Passamaquoddy bays. By the 1820s, many residents relied on fresh or smoked cod, herring and mackerel. Two decades later, a canning operation in Eastport began (quite secretly at first) to experiment with canning seafood. One of the cannery's founders, Upham Stowers Treat (1808-1883), went on to become a pioneer in the canning business and later was invited by the Japanese to offer canning instruction there. The Eastport/Lubec region became famous for canned seafood, with more than three dozen canneries operating in the late 19th century.

The weirs privileges on Treat's Island are not so valuable today for the simple reason that what are known as the down river weirs come in play and catch the prospective sardines before they reach the enchanting shores of this fair haven of rest.

- January 1910 local newspaper article (publication and author not recorded)



Men standing by weir, pulling in the catch
© Courtesy of Border Historical Society

Treat, who served one term in the Maine Legislature as a Democratic representative from Eastport, bought Treat Island and petitioned to have it take his name. He moved to the island around 1842 and began constructing buildings to accommodate workers for the weirs he managed between Treat and Dudley islands.

A mile-long road of crushed clam shells bisected the island and a small railroad conveyed herring from the shore to a press shed where fish were processed for oil and fertilizer. This era may have been the island's most populous, with up to 18 houses on Treat and Dudley Islands, along with a school, post office and customs house.

When fish were less plentiful, Upham Treat undertook fisheries research trying to determine whether the offspring of captive salmon, striped bass, shad and alewives hatched in unfamiliar waters would return to those settings when they matured. Upon the return of the introduced species, Treat was ecstatic, noting "Who can now doubt the success of our experiments: here we have the water crowded with a species of fish never before known to these waters. It has astonished the old settlers I assure you."

"At Treat's Island, near Eastport, some 150 or 200 tons of fish guano is made annually, but it nearly all finds a market among the farmers of Connecticut...."

- 1864 Maine Board of Agriculture Annual Report

The fishes have returned and Mr. Treat will now be repaid we hope, for his labor, anxiety and expense. He has, in this experiment, done more for our state, we fully believe, than any other man has done since we have existed as a state.

- Machias Union
June 4, 1861 (page 2 article)



Treat's southern end, taken circa 1885
© Tides Institute (courtesy of Hugh French)

As the regional harvest of fish began to decline in the early 20th century, interest grew in tapping the productive power of the bays' strong tides (which have an average change in water level of 20 feet). Dexter Cooper, an engineer with family ties to Campobello Island, proposed an ambitious and controversial plan in 1920 to build a series of gates and dams that would trap 70 billion cubic feet of tidal waters flowing into Cobscook and Passamaquoddy bays. As the tide fell, water would be channeled into Cobscook Bay through turbine electrical generators at Moose Island (Eastport). Water would then be held in Cobscook Bay until low tide, when it would be released through another set of gates into the Bay of Fundy.

Private investors withdrew support for the plan following the stock market crash of 1929, but President Franklin D. Roosevelt saw the project as a means of economic recovery for Washington County during the New Deal. While Cooper's Passamaquoddy Tidal Power Development Project (known locally as the Quoddy Project) relied on a "two-pool" system involving both bays, the US Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works recommended initial construction of the Cobscook Bay Pool. This first phase represented one of the largest engineering projects undertaken during the New Deal, employing more than 3,000 people through the Works Progress Administration.

The federal government acquired Treat and Dudley islands in 1935 and began constructing a clay-cored, rock-filled tidal dike between them. That dike is still visible today, but it has eroded considerably since its initial construction and is now nearly submerged at high tide. Other dikes were built from the Pleasant Point Passamaquoddy Reservation out to Carlow and Moose islands (Eastport). Those dikes now form the causeway underlying Route 190.

The federal government spent \$7 million on the initial construction, but after the first dikes were built, Congress withdrew funding and work on the project ended late in 1936. Eastport, which had invested heavily in attracting new businesses to the area, had to declare financial bankruptcy in 1937.



Quoddy Tidal Power Project
Dam, Lubec, circa 1937
© Lubec Historical Society

Conserving Treat Island

Like many Maine islands that saw sporadic occupation over centuries, Treat has a complex title history and changed hands more times than historians can reconstruct. There were numerous private owners of the island between Upham Treat's tenure and the federal government's purchase in 1935. The following year, the federal government built a dock below the high tide line along the island's northwest shore to serve as a natural weathering exposure station. That wharf and 3.6 acres of Treat Island is still owned and used today by the Army Corps of Engineers for testing marine concrete.



Treat Island in the evening, from Lubec
© Bridget Besaw

In 1959, the US government declared the remaining 70 acres of Treat “federal surplus” and sold it off to a private buyer, Goodwin Wiseman. He then resold the island to Dr. Victor Zilaitis and Dr. Arnold Abrams, two friends who enjoyed it as a family summer retreat without ever building any structures. By the 1950s, woods had begun regenerating after more than a century of near complete deforestation. Roughly two-thirds of the island is now forested, but few trees are more than 60 years old.

In 1987, the families divided ownership of Treat into equal halves, and several years later the Eastport Land Trust and Quoddy Land Trust began discussing conservation options with the landowners. Not until 2009, though, was the island permanently conserved when both families sold their halves of the property to Maine Coast Heritage Trust. Support for the purchase came from MCHT donors, Open Space Institute, Partridge Foundation, Pew Charitable Trust, and Elmina B. Sewall Foundation.

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service has designated Treat a nationally significant coastal nesting island, and Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife records indicate that a pair of bald eagles nested consistently on Treat for more than two decades. State wildlife biologists have seen up to 30 eagles at a time roosting on the island, and visitors have reported sightings of two Maine species of “special concern,” long-eared owls and northern harriers.

Maine Coast Heritage Trust now owns and manages Treat Island as a public preserve where wildlife can thrive and visitors can enjoy the island's natural beauty and fascinating history. The Trust continues to seek additional historical information on Treat, and welcomes contact from those who have records or images of the island.

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Maine Coast Heritage Trust acknowledges the contributions of Harold Bailey (at Roosevelt Campobello International Park), Hugh French (at the Tides Institute), Joyce Kinney, Liane Grodewald, Border Historical Society and Lubec Historical Society in preparing this historical overview.

Those who would like to see a creative reenactment of the region's history done by local students can watch the "Colonel John Allan Documentary" posted by Cobscook Community Learning Center on YouTube. An historic silent film of the Passamaquoddy Tidal Project can be found at <http://windowsonmaine.library.umaine.edu/fullrecord.aspx?objectId=6-11> (with footage of Treat beginning at minute 14:22 of the 18-minute film).