

Winter 2024

The Society Pages:

News about the people and projects of
the Mount Desert Island Historical Society

From the Executive Director, Raney Bench

People often ask what we do on MDI over the winter months when most things are closed, island trails are slicked over with ice, and the cold winds and early nights dictate our outdoor recreation. Winter is a highly productive season for the MDI Historical Society, when we have time to write grants, plan programs, edit *Chebacco*, and catalog new archival collections. Last year we offered an unprecedented number of in-person and hybrid programs with a number of partners on the island, but we're not resting on our laurels! Lisa Murray is busy working with libraries and partners in every community to offer an exciting range of new programs based on historical trivia, new *Chebacco* scholarship, and climate change. Keep reading to learn more about our work with sea level rise in light of a series of January storms. The Society's success is dependent on our members

and donors, and after a highly successful membership campaign in December, we are well positioned to continue our outreach efforts to share island history in interesting ways. Keep reading to learn more and how you can get involved. If you're not a member, now is your chance to [join](#), ensuring you will receive the 2024 edition of *Chebacco* which will land in mailboxes in early May.



Fall Program Review - by Lisa Taplin Murray, Assistant Director

The Society stayed busy throughout the fall getting out into the community and sharing island history. Our work with Road Scholars continued at the YWCA in Bar Harbor with several presentations on the history of MDI from the Wabanaki to the present day. The Halloween edition of History Happy Hour challenged attendees with trivia based on the darker side of MDI history. We held talks on Bermuda's Out-Islands Regatta, Maine weather, and the history of MDI's mills. Our Book Club met virtually to talk about *Women of the Dawn* by Bunny McBride and *Windswept* by Mary Ellen Chase. We wrapped up our 2023 season of *Chebacco* Chats with 8 episodes, including Maine State Historian Earle Shettleworth Jr talking about Harrison Bird Brown, the Penobscot Marine Museum's Cipperly Good on Ralph Stanley's legacy, and Libby Bischof, Executive Director of the University of Maine's Osher Map Library and Smith Center for Cartographic Education sharing her research on Mount Desert Rock photographer Lucy Dodge. Raney Bench shared the story of the KKK in Maine, and storms, survival, and sea level rise in classes through MDI Adult Education.

Chebacco Chats was a great opportunity to engage with our audiences during the pandemic but we will no longer offer the virtual program. We are focusing on more in-person and hybrid programming. There are many videos of [previous *Chebacco* Chats](#) for viewers to check out on our website.

We are planning a slate of new public programs based on the 2024 edition of *Chebacco: MDI Inspired*. Our author talks will be hosted at island libraries and community spaces starting in May and include topics such as Ruth Moore, island housing, Mary Wheelwright, MDI's granite industry, the Jesup Library's print room, and the Wild Gardens of Acadia.

Many of our programs are [archived on our website](#) to view at your convenience. Are you interested in speaking for one of our public programs? Have an idea for a program you'd like to see us present? Please contact Lisa Taplin Murray at lisa.murray@mdihistory.org.

From the Collections - by Patrick Callaway, Collections Coordinator

The annual bean supper brings to mind the long island tradition of gathering together for food and entertainment. Whether we think of intimate family gatherings at home, travel adventures, or large public gatherings food is part of the story. In the collections of the society we have a large collection of menus ranging from the late 19th century to the present. Analyzing old menus presents an unexpected but rich insight to the changing types of foods available, environmental and social change, and the changing nature of eating out on the island.

The “Ye Olde Tyme Costume Party” and Ye Kimble House menu dates to 1934 and presents a number of historical clues. The drink menu notes that the fruit cocktail is 3.2%, which is a clear reflection of prohibition’s demise in December 1933. Whether this was intended to advertise that the Kimble House had alcohol or that the cocktail was watered down to allow for the long party is not clear. The fish menu is also interesting. Cod tongues and sounds were a generally available food during this time. However, due to a collapse of the Atlantic cod stocks and subsequent restrictions on fishing cod tongues and sounds are now a rare delicacy if they are obtainable at all on a commercial scale. The other curious item on the list is hot dogs with “Boston cherries”, which are presumably beans. Why they are styled Boston cherries is unclear.

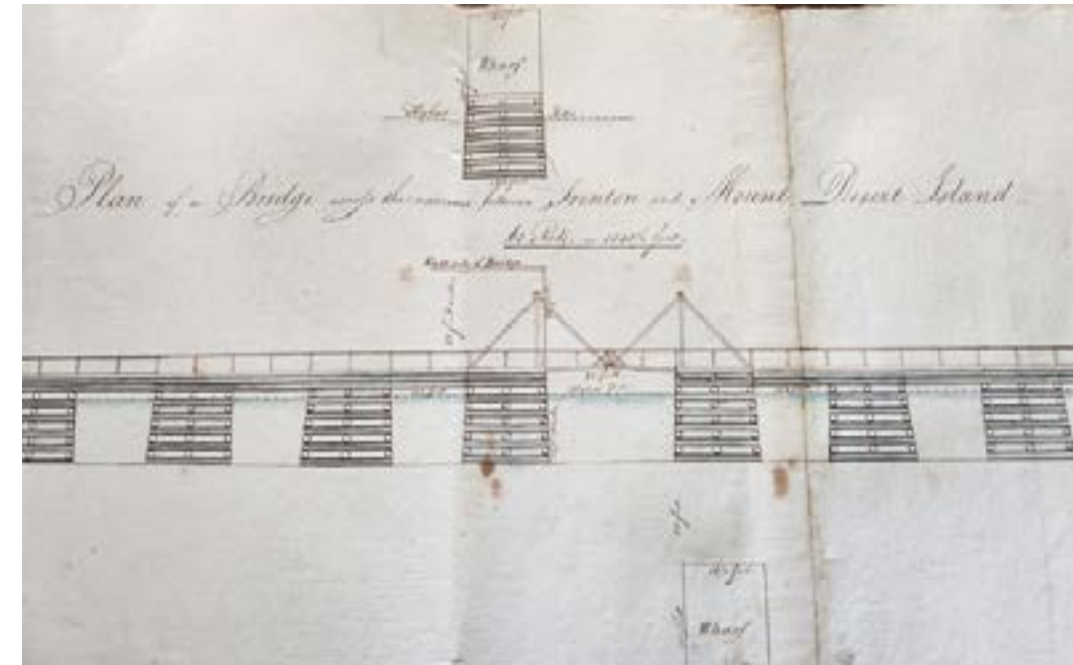


The second menu dates to 1994 from the Unusual Cabaret. There is a consistency with the Kimble House from 60 years before in the intersection between food and entertainment. We can see a couple of notable changes. The first is the inclusion of prices for menu items suggesting the break between entertainment and food with lodging. Second, the existence of a dedicated kid’s menu suggests a changing audience. The quote from the New England Magazine is suggestive of another change. The market base for food and entertainment was not just locals or long-term visitors, but rather a broader cross-section of people driving to the island for shorter stays.



History Matters: Sea Level Rise

Mount Desert Island has experienced an 8” rise in sea levels since 1950, and we’re expected to experience at least another foot by 2050. In practical terms, it’s hard to understand what one foot of additional sea level rise looks like on the island’s natural and developed environments, but two storms in January showed us exactly where we’re most vulnerable. Thanks to many island residents, the Society has collected images and stories to add to our archive and to an [interactive map](#) produced by Schoodic Institute.



Mount Desert Island Bridge Blueprints. Image courtesy of Woodlawn Museum.

Decisions made in our past are important to understand and take into consideration as we plan for the future. The first bridge onto the island built in 1836 anticipated the maximum height of the sea would not exceed 16’, yet our January storm exceeded this height, as well as inundating several roads, bringing the road onto the island down to one lane for a time. Although MDI is made up of independent towns and villages, these storms prove that we are one island, and there are opportunities to come together as a community to solve common problems. The MDI Historical Society has worked in partnership with the Oceanarium, Maine Coast Heritage Trust, Schoodic Institute, and artist Jenn Steen Booher to add markers to our landscape indicating where rising seas will flood by 2050 and 2100. You can walk the sea rise trail at the Oceanarium and Kelley Farm Preserve, or if you want to try predicting sea level yourself, borrow one of our kits. Contact Raney Bench at raney@mdihistory.org to learn more. And, if you want a more complete picture of our work and how it serves as a national model for community engagement on climate change, [check this out](#).



Baked Bean Supper

The 13th Annual Baked Bean Supper on January 15 was a smashing good time! Sponsored by MDI High School, Lynam Real Estate, and Hannaford, the supper attracted 175 volunteers, Society members, friends, and neighbors to this community gathering to feast on beans and desserts from over 35 volunteer cooks. While many attendees were lured to the Bean Supper by dozens of home-cooked bean recipes, brown bread, and pies, it was clearly community and camaraderie that circulated among the dining tables. Tim Garrity brought the nine-piece Bagaduce Northern New England Ensemble to play in the auditorium, entertaining with contra dance music from the Northeastern United States, focusing on the traditional fiddle style of Maine. With energetic and danceable music, the concert captured the sound that dominated Maine's rural dance halls for the 19th and 20th centuries.

Many thanks to the over forty volunteers and sponsors who helped to organize, cook, clean-up, promote, and fund this beloved community gathering!



Upcoming Programs -Save the Date

February 26: Book Club, *Murder with an Ocean View* by Rob Lawton, online via Zoom, 6:00pm

February 29: History Happy Hour with the Bar Harbor Historical Society, Jack Russell's Steakhouse, 5:30pm

March 22: *Tales of Lightning: Stories from 20th century Mount Desert Island* with Brent Richardson at Town Hill VIA Community Center, 6:00pm

You can learn more about our programs and register to attend at mdihistory.org/events or on [Facebook](#) and Instagram [@mdihistory](#).



In Praise of Bean Suppers - by Bill Horner

Of the many traditions and rituals of growing up in Maine, perhaps that which for me attains the highest level of sublimity is Baked-Bean Saturday and its fine public manifestation, the Baked Bean Supper. Mind you, I did not say "dinner", but rather "supper", or more properly "suppah."

I am not alone in this assessment. Fellow Maine native and Bowdoin professor Robert P. Tristram Coffin in *Mainstays of Maine* said, "That cornerstone of New England's civic serenity and domestic righteousness, called Baked-Bean Saturday, begins a long time before the last day of the week. Oh, a long, long ways!" Even Kenneth Roberts, born uncomfortably close to Massachusetts but a Maine man nonetheless, waxed reminiscent in the *Grandma's Kitchen* chapter of his *Trending Into Maine*: "Thursday nights were big nights for the young fry in Grandmother's house, because that was the night for boiled dinner; but the biggest night of all was Saturday night. The rich scent of cooking had percolated through the house all day, and above all the other scents had risen the meaty, fruity, steamy odor of baked beans." (cont'd)

In Praise of Bean Suppers (continued)

Growing up in 1950's Bar Harbor, my winter Saturday nights actually began 24 hours earlier. My grandfather lived on Wayman Lane, kitty-corner from the hospital. After Friday school got out I would head over to his house, (or perhaps I should say his kitchen laboratory) for this was where the great and delicate process got underway. I remember the kitchen always being warm, even during the coldest January nights. This was due to a big copper hot water tank that stood between the refrigerator and the stove. The stove was partly electric and, more importantly, oil-fired. This second feature heated the coil to the hot water tank and partially heated the well in the back of the stove. It was this feature, the well, indeed the wellspring of all things delicious and memorable, in which the carefully prepared legumes and accompaniments would slowly mix and distill and cook into the final ambrosia of Saturday Night Beans.

It is difficult to imagine more closely held opinions than those pertaining to bean selection, pre-cooking preparation, cooking additives, and cooking duration. The commonly agreed upon elements of this persistent debate are to start with dried beans, soak overnight, parboil, and cook slowly for six or eight hours. Beyond that, it is difficult to find any agreement. Perhaps the liveliest argument starts at the very beginning: which bean should one use? It must have been grown in Maine, to pass through the rigors of our thin Maine soil or, as Brother Coffin says, "They must have the benefit of a New England education...a California pea-bean needs to be redeemed and rededicated..." This reverential attitude is reinforced by the passion with which people proclaim their preferences. The Pea Bean, for example, never entered my grandfather's kitchen. While an occasional Red Kidney or Yellow Eye may have made it to the well, the hands-down favorite was the lordly if not biblical, Jacob's Cattle. It was, in essence, the ONLY bean. Indeed, Jacob's Cattle is a beautiful bean to behold, with its white purity and vivid maroon splashes. It is said to be full-flavored, to hold its shape under long cooking, and to stand up well to plenty of seasoning. The Jacob Cattle is our family bean to this day.

Once chosen, the beans, about 2 pounds of them, must be "picked over", floaters eliminated and then soaked overnight in just the right amount of water as they are restored to their hydrated and natural state of plumpness. Early the next morning, the beans are transferred to fresh water and carefully brought to a parboil over low heat. In about an hour, the bean skins start to loosen. Heat off, the water is poured off and saved. The beans are now ready to receive their seasonings and here we approach the holy ground of long and closely held belief. There are two fundamental and inviolate elements: salt pork and onion. The amount of salt pork is generally a "junk", sliced and diced down to but not through the skin. The onion should be strong and have character. Dried mustard, salt, pepper, and an occasional pinch of paprika are customary. But now comes the great divergence or, perhaps, what is in some families the great schism: to sweeten or not to sweeten. Few decisions are more critically important in New England cookery. Some say that anything other than a hint of sweetness will spoil the flavor of the bean. Others disagree vehemently. My grandfather, and thus my education, was of the sweet school. Molasses, brown sugar, and white sugar were added to the concoction. This may represent an extreme if not radical end of the bean-baking spectrum. Still, molasses connects us to our history as cultural ascendants from that original colony to our south where rum was distilled in vast quantities. By precedent, molasses should be our New England sweetener, not the maple syrup sometimes used in bean preparation to our north.

Sweetened or not, the beans are anointed with just enough of the saved parboiling water to cover, and placed in the appropriate vessel for at least 6 hours of slow cooking. In this era, not many stoves have my grandfather's oil fired well, so the oven must do. And what is the "appropriate vessel"? Here again, a debate. Some say metal poisons the beans and insist upon using stoneware or terra cotta. These people would never buy beans in a can. Here is uncertain and potentially dangerous ground and I approach this issue with caution. Who would dare refute our North Country forebears in their time-honored practice of cooking lumber camp bean hole beans in the ground with a cast iron bean pot? My grandfather used an aluminum pot in his oven well and our family, as far as I know, managed to avoid toxic side effects. Nowadays, though, I use enameled cast iron. It just seems to be the right thing to do.

However grown, chosen, picked over, soaked, parboiled, anointed, and cooked in this or that pot, there comes the grand moment of presentation, the opening. And what better setting for this than a cold January night and the company of family and friends?