
A SUMMER PLACE

EVEN DURING THE HIGH SEASON, PEMAQUID BEACH
MOVES AT ITS OWN LUXURIOUSLY SLOW PACE.

BY VIRGINIA M. WRIGHT
PHOTOGRAPHED BY IRVIN SERRANO



A whisper of a village lies off the beaten path

to Pemaquid Point Light in the sprawling midcoast peninsula town of Bristol. Pemaquid Beach (population: it depends on the week) occupies a tranquil point on Johns Bay. Here you'll find one of the sweetest sandy strands in the state of Maine, a replica of a late-seventeenth-century British fort, a small collection of Victorian cottages with white picket fences, and the languid, carefree air of an old-fashioned summer vacation, which is what this hidden little hamlet means for most of the people who are here.

Pemaquid Beach is a village more by tradition than present-day reality. There is no store, no school, no church, no post office – but there used to be. And you can just about count on your fingers the number of houses that are occupied year-round – there used to be many more. “The village is like a favorite family recipe that gets passed down,” says Carol Ring, who lives in her great-grandmother’s house in the village’s heart – the curve at the junction of Snowball Hill and Huddle roads, which form a horse-shoe-shaped loop to Route 130, Bristol’s main thoroughfare. “It started out one way with certain ingredients and through the years and generations those ingredients have changed.”

Ring was nine when she moved to Pemaquid Beach from Pemaquid Falls (half of Bristol’s eight villages have “Pemaquid” in their names) in 1952. By then, the one-room schoolhouse, where Marlene Loznicka now has an art studio and gallery, had closed, but the fishing

families were still here and Ring could name the occupants of every single house. “You knew who their children were, and you knew who they were related to,” she says. “We used to have neighborhood clubs. The women would get together to sew and play cards, and they’d have suppers where their husbands and children would come. Now a large proportion of the houses are owned by people from out of state. There are very few lights on down here in winter. The people who come back and forth are friendly with the people who live here year-round, and we’re glad to see them come back. There is still a sense of community, but it’s different than it was.”

To be sure, summer people have long been a part of Pemaquid Beach. Sisters-in-law Nancy Dodge and Joyce Dodge have spent more than half a century of summers on the neck that shelters boat-filled Pemaquid Harbor from Johns Bay. Their husbands – Nancy is married to George and Joyce is the widow of Arnold – are descendants of two families with deep roots in the region: the Dodges, whose name is affixed to a number of landmarks on the adjacent Boothbay peninsula, and the Partridges, who once owned much of Pemaquid Beach, including the land that is now the Colonial Pemaquid State Historic Site. George and Arnold’s aunt, Arlita Dodge Parker, authored *Pemaquid*, a history of the region.

“It’s thanks to Aunt Lita’s looking

forward that any of us has a place here,” says Joyce, who lives in what was once Lita’s antiques shop. “She bought some of the fish shacks in the village and stuck them together and rented them out. Arnie was the caretaker. After he died, we had to let them go. People have bought them and converted them into Victorian cottages. Before that, no one in this area had built a big swanky house.”

Decidedly not swanky are Nancy and George Dodge’s Ye Olde Forte Cabins, built in the 1920s by George’s Uncle Fred. Other than cottage rentals, which are plentiful, the nine cabins are Pemaquid Beach’s only accommodations. They are small, spic-and-span, and sparingly appointed, with a communal shower house and cookhouse. “It’s a step up from camping,” Nancy suggests.

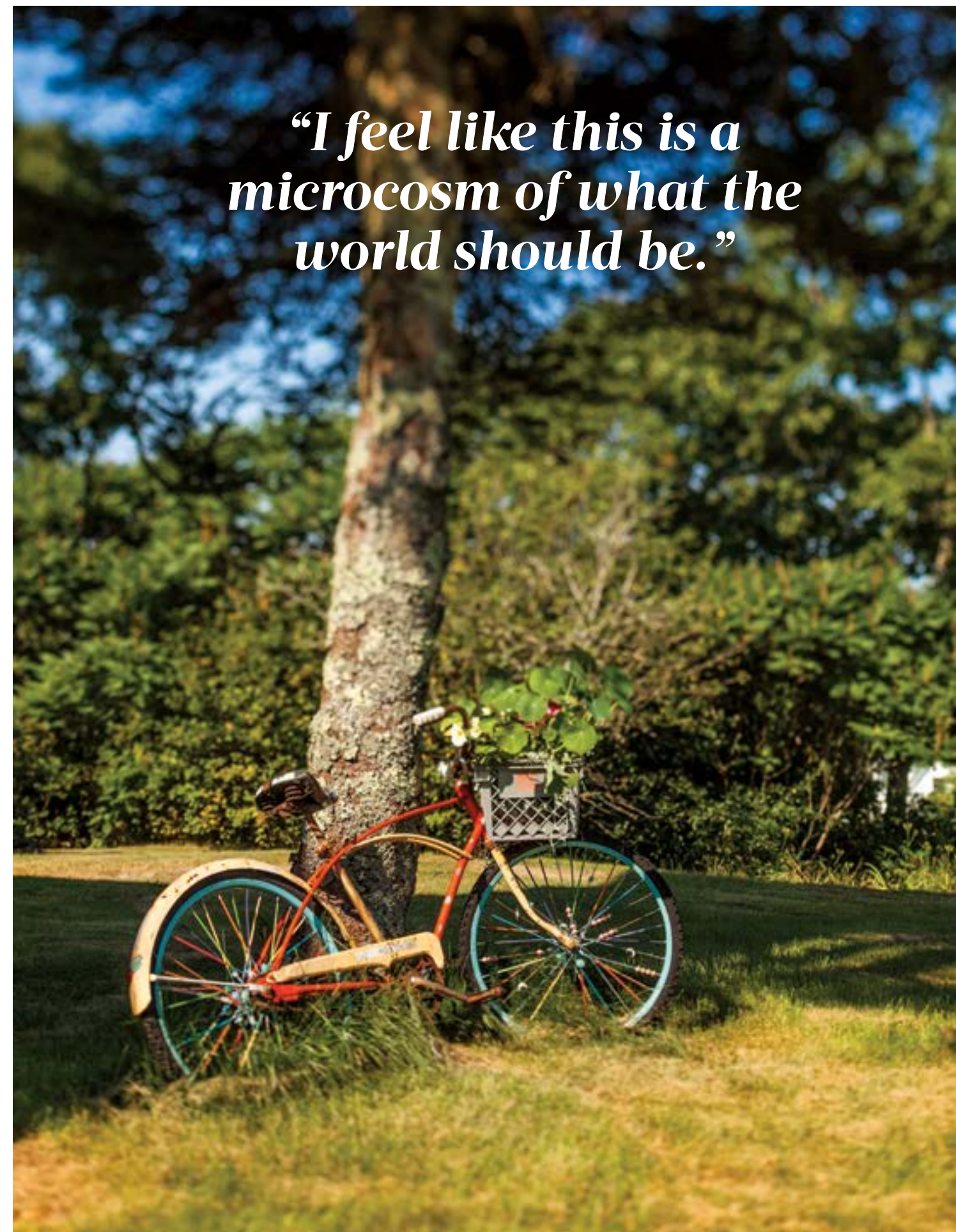
Guests, some of whom have been coming to Pemaquid Beach nearly as long as Nancy and Joyce, cherish the simplicity. “I feel like this is a microcosm of what the world should be,” says Barbara Flewelling, a speech pathologist from New Jersey who manages the cabins and resides on the office’s second floor, which has a commanding view of the water. “Everyone cooperates. Everyone honors everyone else’s space.”

Every few years, the Dodges and Flewelling debate the cabins’ future. “They are expensive to maintain,” Flewelling explains, “but they are an important part of the summer experience for so many people. Even kids will go sit in the lawn chairs and look out at



(One of eight villages in the town of Bristol, the one-time fishing community of Pemaquid Beach is now a summer retreat with a quarter-mile white sand beach on Johns Bay and a delightfully restful ambiance.)





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(The village of Pemaquid Beach lies just off the well-beaten path to Pemaquid Point Light, one of the state’s premier tourist attractions. Nearly deserted in winter, it comes alive in summer, though it never feels crowded or hurried.)



the bay for hours. There’s something about the energy of this place.”

If anything, the energy is even more restful and restorative than it was when Nancy and Joyce first began coming to Pemaquid Beach. Nancy and George met at the Lewis Pavilion, a popular roller skating rink and dance hall that sat on pilings on what the locals call Mothers’ Beach, a short stretch of sand by the causeway that connects Beach Loop Road to Fish Point. The pavilion was washed away during a storm in 1962 and never rebuilt. The Pemaquid Beach Community Club on Huddle Road was another social center, a venue for movies, holiday parties, and community suppers; today it’s a private cottage rented by the week to vacationers. So, too, is Pemaquid Tavern, where the fishermen and the summer people once played pool. And Waneta House on Fish Point, originally a rooming house for a pogie processing plant and later a hotel, is now a private summer home. “There are no places for people to gather at Pemaquid Beach now,” says Bristol historian Peter Hope.

There are, however, attractions, natural and manmade, that lend Pemaquid Beach a distinctive charm. For starters, there is the village’s namesake, a quarter-mile crescent of fine white sand that Hope declares “is second only to Pemaquid Point as the crown jewel of Bristol.” Likewise, there is the Colonial Pemaquid State Historic Site, whose significance is, in Hope’s estimation, often overlooked by historians. “It was settled just a little later than Jamestown,” he points out. The site contains an ongoing archaeological excavation of a seventeenth-century English settlement, a museum showcasing some of the recovered artifacts, and an impressive-looking 105-year-old replica of Fort William Henry, which was built in 1692 and abandoned by the British four years later following a devastating attack by French and Indian soldiers. Every August the town of Bristol celebrates its history on this glorious promontory with colonial re-enactments, a parade, games, and fireworks (this year’s Olde Bristol Days celebration is August 10 and 11).

The latest chapter in Pemaquid Beach’s history is told by the license plates on cars in the driveways on Beach Loop and Fish Point roads: Illinois, Connecticut, Florida, Texas. “They’re all from away, every one of them,” says Phil Crocker, who grew up on Fish Point and, after a career that took him to Alabama, New York, and Massachusetts, retired there with his wife, Claire, whose parents owned the Lewis Pavilion. “They’ve brought a lot of money into the village. They bought cottages, demolished them, and rebuilt them. Their boats are out in the harbor. They’re nice people, but they’re not natives.”

It’s not a complaint, just an observation of the way things are. The complaints are reserved for the bureaucrats who saw fit to retire Pemaquid Beach’s zip code a few years ago. Now travel guides, Wikipedia, and even the local newspaper are putting the beach and Colonial Pemaquid in New Harbor. “This village is Pemaquid Beach,” Claire declares. “They’re trying to eliminate it, but it is still Pemaquid Beach.” 🍷