

Steady as She Goes

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Weekend symposium kicks off 400th anniversary celebration of Maine shipbuilding, Popham Colony

BATH – Credited with being the first permanent English settlement in America, Jamestown, Va., has celebrated this year's 400th anniversary of its historical burg with — among other things — the reconstruction of two of the encampment's colonial ships and a visit from Queen Elizabeth II.

Beyond the borders of Maine, Jamestown's sister colony — Phippsburg's Popham Colony — is sometimes forgotten because its European inhabitants didn't stay as long.

A little more than a year after the colony's 1607 settlement, the English who built a fort and ship at the Kennebec River site returned to their native land, leaving Jamestown as forever the country's torch-bearer in "The New World."

While the explorers didn't stay, their legacy of shipbuilding remained.

Case in point: 400 years after the first Mainers of English descent built the 50-foot-long pinnace "Virginia," Jamestown celebrants turned to today's Mainers for the reconstructions of their iconic "Discovery" and "Godspeed."

Discovery, rebuilt in Boothbay Harbor for \$1.97 million, was dedicated during a Feb. 17 ceremony in Williamsburg, Va., and joins the Rockport-built Godspeed.

"They came to Maine to get their ships built," said Earl Warren, president of Maine's First Ship. "We're not going to Virginia to get our ship built."

Starting with the Popham Colony's pinnace, shipbuilding may have the longest Maine family tree — certainly, the industry that still

thrives here traces the straightest line from this state to the country's colonial history.

Not far from where the first English ship was built on American soil, Bath Iron Works carries on the tradition by building some of this country's most recognizable vessels — the Arleigh Burke class destroyers.

"This is really a Maine story," said Susan McChesney, executive director of Maine's First Ship. "Because the settlement didn't last, it ends up as a footnote in history. They accomplished this incredible feat of building this vessel, which was the first ship built in the Americas by English settlers.

"The exciting thing is the commemoration of 400 years of Maine shipbuilding," she continued. "This was the first one, and it continues today. Explorers, innovators and engineers here are still coming up with ways to build the best ships in the world."

Digby of London, Rob of Maine

Maine's First Ship is an organization dedicated to reconstructing the Virginia, a task that, when complete, will return to Maine residents a precious heirloom from their past.

The shipwright on hand at the original Popham Colony 400 years ago is known only through old documentation as "Digby of London." The shipwright on hand these days is Rob Stevens, a man charged with remaking a wooden vessel for which there are no lingering directions or surefire drawings.

Stevens previously rebuilt a 54-foot Viking knarr that sailed on two voyages between Greenland and Newfoundland. Still, he says, his nearly three decades of boatbuilding would likely only have him carrying Digby's tools in 1607.

"It's a lot of combing through books," reflects Stevens on his efforts to determine how the original Virginia was built. "We really are standing on our grandfathers' shoulders when we do this. I've been at this for more than 25 years, and back in those days I'd be an apprentice."

Through heavy research, a picture of the first Virginia has begun to come into focus: "Knowing it was a London shipbuilder tells you it was a London-style boat at the time," points out Stevens, who has fit together several historic puzzle pieces that combine to make up the blueprints for the 2007 Virginia.

"Documents refer to a pinnace style vessel with shallow draft, bluff bow and square transom," describes a Maine's First Ship brochure. "Her size was '30 tonne,' which would make her about 50 feet long."

From late June to mid-October, Maine Maritime Museum will host an exhibit on the Virginia, which will include a tent where Stevens and any volunteer with time and energy will begin preliminary work on the historic ship.

The group is just more than halfway toward its goal of raising \$900,000 to complete the ship's construction.

"A lot of people are going to feel ownership of this," said Stevens. "Everything from nailing planks to mailing out postage — this is Maine's ship. This isn't some private yacht that'll be locked up in the harbor."

Warren envisions myriad ways to get the whole state involved with the construction of the Virginia, such as using wood from every county to build it.

"Imagine every set of frames being hauled up by school children," he said, mimicking the hand-over-hand rope-pulling motion.

Outreach and Education

At 9:30 a.m. Saturday, Maine's First Ship's campaign chairman John Bradford will give a speech titled "Designing a 17th Century pinnace" as part of the Maine Maritime Museum's 35th annual Albert Reed and Thelma Walker Maritime History Symposium.

The symposium begins with a 7 p.m. registration today and continues through Sunday morning, when Warren will cap off the events with a 10:30 a.m. talk titled "Before Virginia: European-American Vessels Prior to 1607."

Those involved with the Popham Colony ship's reconstruction are eager to get the word out about the history of their project, and aren't confined to symposiums to do so.

McChesney said children are among the most receptive to the story of Maine's First Ship.

"It's really remarkable to see children in a classroom raise their hands and say, 'Did I hear that right? The first English ship built in America was in Maine?,'" said McChesney. "It really gives a pride of place for Mainers, especially Maine school kids."

The organization hosts a yearly teacher workshop, which promises to give "a wealth of information on the Popham Colony and the vessel they built," and that will send teachers home "with a classroom curriculum unit developed with workshop colleagues."

This year's workshop is slated for June 25 and 26.

"The exciting thing about this is the way it links the heritage of this area to our kids," said McChesney.

The Virginia Sails Again

McChesney doesn't care to call the Popham Colony a "failure," and points to the Virginia as evidence that the settlement was built to be a permanent one.

"They built it for coastal trade and exploration," she said of the ship. "This was intended to be a permanent settlement. It was never initially intended for transatlantic transportation."

"They didn't build it to escape," added Warren. "Some people think that."

In the summer of 1608, colony president Raleigh Gilbert — who became the encampment's leader by virtue of George Popham's February death — received word from a supply ship that his elder brother had died, leaving him the heir to the title and estate of Compton Castle in Devon, England.

That being a more appetizing deal than spending another winter in the brutal Maine weather, Gilbert returned to England with the remaining colonists.

Interestingly, had Gilbert not been faced with an offer he couldn't refuse, early indications were that the Popham Colony might outlive Jamestown. Some records indicate that only George Popham died in the 14 months of settlement in what would become Phippsburg, while Jamestown lost half its population that same year due to disease, starvation and bouts with area natives.

The Virginia's work wasn't done in 1608. After ferrying settlers back to England in 1608 — effectively ending the short life of the Popham Colony — the pinnace was employed for one more Atlantic Ocean crossing, going ironically to Jamestown in 1609 in a supply trip to keep that settlement afloat.

According to Warren, the reconstructed Virginia will be similarly prolific, with talks to sail the ship down the coast to Jamestown in 2009 to commemorate the link between the two settlements. Outside of that voyage, though, the Virginia will be based at the museum and tour the Kennebec River and coast of Maine for educational purposes.

Wherever it is at any time, the Virginia will be a monument to Maine's history.

"We decided it made the most sense to create the biggest, best sign of the colony's development," said Warren.

"Along the way, we realized it's a tangible symbol of Maine's maritime heritage," agreed McChesney.

For more information, visit www.mainesfirstship.org.