

Maine's First Ship Resource Materials 2007
FACTS ABOUT THE POPHAM COLONY and the *VIRGINIA*



The Situation in England: When James I assumed the throne after Elizabeth I's death in 1603, he found the treasury heavily in debt and Parliament reluctant to deal with him. One way he sought to raise funds was to grant charters taking advantage of what earlier English explorers said would be easy financial gain in the New World. One such charter was granted to the Virginia Company in 1606. The Virginia Company, in turn, was made up of two divisions (1) the London Company, which

subsequently established the first permanent settlement in North America in Jamestown, Virginia, and (2) the Plymouth Company, which organized, financed, and established what we now know as the Popham Colony at the mouth of the Kennebec River.

The Colony: Sir John Popham, England's influential and controversial Chief Justice, was the colony's primary investor, namesake, and driving force. The leaders of the colony were George Popham (a kinsman of John Popham) as President, and Raleigh Gilbert (a son of explorer, Humphrey Gilbert, and nephew of Sir Walter Raleigh), Admiral. In mid-August of 1607 about 100 colonists arrived on our coast aboard the *Mary and John* and the *Gifte of God*. Their goal was to create wealth for themselves, the colony's financial backers, and their king by tapping the anticipated riches and resources of the area. One way to help reach their goal was to build a vessel suited to their needs. Thus they planned and constructed the pinnace, *Virginia*.

Who Was Here: The site of the Popham Colony, and the mouth of the Kennebec in general, has a rich 8000 year artifact history revealing an important place in aboriginal life. Samuel de Champlain, representing France, visited the area in 1605 and made a fine map showing structures used by native inhabitants of the area. They had had enough negative experiences with Europeans and the English in particular to be wary of new contacts. Not surprisingly, these original inhabitants greeted the Popham Colonists with suspicion and some belligerence.

The Fort Site: The first thing the Popham Colonists did was to begin building Fort St. George on Sabino Head just inside the mouth of the Kennebec. Remarkably, a detailed plan of this fort was drawn by John Hunt in October, 1607, and sent back to England that same month on the *Mary and John*. Possibly used to warn off the Spanish and French, or, less likely, to attract more financial backing, it shows a fully developed and imposing complex with stone walls, turrets, and about 20 buildings of various sizes. Just how many buildings were erected and how the fort actually looked is unknown.

What Happened: Between building Fort St. George, exploring the Kennebec Valley and coastal waters, establishing relations with the Maine Indians, and starting

construction of the *Virginia*, the colonists were active indeed. From early October 1607 forward, however, little is known about the Popham Colony. We do know that the *Gift of God* left in mid-December with about half of the colonists, probably due to low food supplies, that the winter was unusually cold, and that their President, George Popham, died in February. Maine Indian oral tradition also relates a deteriorating relationship with the colony. Two supply vessels arrived in the late spring, with the news that Chief Justice, John Popham had died the previous year. Another supply vessel arriving in September brought news that Raleigh Gilbert's brother had died leaving him the family estate to administer back in England. Without leadership or adequate financial support, the colony was dissolved, some returning to England on the supply vessel, the rest aboard the *Virginia*.

After the colonists left in 1608, what was left of the fort deteriorated and dropped from memory. Except for the Federal Government's erection of Fort Baldwin on Sabino Head in 1905, and its activation during World Wars I and II, intermittent farming was the primary activity on the site of the old Colony. In 1997, an archaeological team confirmed the site of the fort's storehouse, and in 1998, found what may possibly be a section of the western rampart and ditch. More excavations of Fort St. George took place in subsequent years.

The *Virginia*: The "30 tonne" pinnace, *Virginia*, is the first known deep water ship built in North America by the English. A London shipwright named Digby was specifically hired by the colony organizers to oversee her construction. *Virginia* was a shallow-draft vessel with a square transom, probably fore-and-aft rigged, and capable of being rowed or sailed. Marine architects estimate she was about 51 feet long, 13.5 feet wide, and drew about 6 feet. We do not know when the *Virginia* was started or completed. After returning some Popham Colonists to England in 1608, she made at least one additional crossing as part of a convoy bringing supplies and colonists to Jamestown in 1609.

The Reconstructed *Virginia*: The new will not be a "replica" because there is no original to "replicate". We know only three things about her: her name, tonnage (3), and that she was a pinnace. An image of a pinnace appears on Hunt's 1607 plan of Fort St. George, but we don't know if it represents the *Virginia* or if it is just typical of pinnaces of that period. Since so little is known of the original ship, our design will be based on images in common use during the early seventeenth century as well as details drawn from the vessel on Hunt's plan. This basis for design is the same as that used by many other historic vessel reconstruction groups.

What is Important about *Virginia*: Building the *Virginia* under the difficult conditions of the time was simple proof that settlements and industry were possible for those willing to invest in them. *Virginia* was important, too, because she was the first of thousands of ships built here in Maine. The new *Virginia* is important, for she will be a tangible representation of 400 years of Maine's maritime heritage. As she sails regularly in the Kennebec region and voyages further along the coast of Maine (and perhaps even to Jamestown), *Virginia* will be something for all Maine to celebrate.

