

Floating History

By Alex Lear (published: May 03, 2007)

Virginia to sail again, 400 years after predecessor

BATH – It was 400 years ago when the pinnace Virginia first set sail on the Kennebec River. And soon, if all goes well, it will sail again.

While 1607 is known to many as the year marking the founding of Jamestown – the first permanent English settlement in the New World – it is also a crucial and often-overlooked date in the history of Maine. The Popham Colony, in what is known today as Phippsburg, may have only survived 14 months, but it was there that the first English-built ship is said to have been constructed in North America.



Susan McChesney, executive director of Maine's First Ship, with an 8-foot-long rigging model of the Virginia.

Lear Photo

And it is from that achievement that Maine's First Ship, a nonprofit organization formed 10 years ago and headed by Susan McChesney, gets its name, as well as much of its cause. McChesney and others are spearheading an effort to build a new Virginia and launch it next year.

Maine's First Ship is conducting a \$2.2 million capital campaign, begun in 2005, to complete that project. The organization is halfway to reaching the \$900,000 it needs to begin construction. The total \$2.2 million includes a \$700,000 endowment for future maintenance.

The work will take place on the Washington Street grounds of the Maine Maritime Museum, where programs will be featured this spring and summer on the Popham Colony and the craft of shipbuilding. McChesney hopes that construction will begin in October, and that the vessel will set sail next August.

The Virginia exhibit will open toward the end of June, and for the next few months, Rob Stevens, shipwright of the reconstructed Virginia, will demonstrate traditional wooden boat-building techniques, tools and processes along with other volunteers. People of all ages will be able to experience a variety of displays and hands-on activities.

An early Maine history workshop will also be held for teachers on June 25-26.

The Virginia exhibit will also run alongside one by Maine Maritime Museum on the Popham Colony, running from May 26 to Oct. 15, curated by archaeologist Dr. Jeffrey Phipps Brain and jointly sponsored by the Maine State Museum. It is that museum which sponsored archaeological digs for nine years up until 2005 at Fort St. George, on the Popham Colony site, literally unearthing clues to those settlers who came four centuries before. A caulking iron, used in shipbuilding, was among the artifacts found.

“This is a piece of Maine history that not a lot of Mainers know a lot about,” McChesney said. “This is really a Maine story ... it’s the beginning of 400 years of fine shipbuilding that continues to this day.”

Gift of God, Mary and John

That story began in May 1607, when two ships – the Gift of God and the Mary and John – left Plymouth, England, en route to the New World. Three vessels had left a few months before for what became Jamestown, establishing a settlement on the southern end of the coastal land claimed in America by England. Fort St. George at Popham was to mark the northern boundary of that expanse.

The two ships, carrying 120 men and boys, sailed into the mouth of the Kennebec in late summer. Led by Sir George Popham, their intention was to build a pinnace – a sturdy, small vessel – in order to prove the quality and value of the region’s lumber to the colony’s financiers. The colonists were unaware, though, of the hardship that was to come.

For one thing, they realized in the fall that they didn’t have enough food to last them through the winter. Fifty colonists remained at

Fort St. George while the rest returned to England in December to conserve food supplies. On top of that, the settlers were not used to the harshness of Maine's coldest months.

"They had a horrible winter," McChesney said, explaining that it was one of the coldest of the century. Popham died the next February and was replaced by Raleigh Gilbert, under whose leadership the colony further declined, according to Maine's First Ship.

Still, work continued on the pinnacle, designed by a Londoner named Digby. Construction of the vessel began three days after the colonists landed, McChesney said. They hung on until relief ships arrived that spring. Even so, Gilbert heard he'd inherited his family's estate and left for home later that year, and in October 1608 the remaining crew abandoned the effort and returned to England in the Mary and John, as well as the Virginia.

The Virginia had been built for coastal trade and exploration and was rerigged in order to travel across the sea, and then back to America in 1609 to carry supplies and men to Jamestown. Building the ship under the circumstances was a challenge in itself.

"I hate to hear people refer to the Popham Colony as a failure," McChesney said, pointing out how the settlers accomplished completion of the pinnacle in a short period of time, and without modern conveniences like electricity. How the settlers were able to move large timbers over land remains a mystery.

"There are lots of mysteries in this story," she said with a smile, "but that's what makes it so much fun."

Another mystery surrounding the Virginia is its final fate. It disappears from record in 1610, and no one knows what the Virginia actually looked like.

"This is not a replica," McChesney said, "because we have no images or plans of the original boat."

A 1607 plan of Fort St. George does show a ship, potentially the Virginia, with features familiar to a pinnacle. A bluff bow, a shallow draft and a square transom are among those features, according to Maine's First Ship. According to documents from the time, the

vessel was about 50 feet long, a length that may seem small by today's standards for a transatlantic trip.

The 8-foot rigging model of the Virginia at Maine's First Ship headquarters gives a preview of what is to come. It has been used as an educational tool, just as the new Virginia itself will be used.

Its hull design has been approved by the U.S. Coast Guard, which will inspect the vessel through its construction. The Virginia has preliminary approval to be able to carry 35 passengers, and will have an engine, navigational instruments and a metal hull, in order to meet safety needs. Still, on the face it will look like a craft of the early 17th century, offering a unique educational experience.

"I see her, when she's in the water, as a floating classroom," McChesney explained. "I envision her being able to offer science, math, history and humanities courses."

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FYI: More information about the educational events taking at the Maine Maritime Museum are online at mainesfirstship.org, mainemaritimemuseum.org, popham400.org and penobscotnation.org.