

Maine's First Ship redefines goals

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PHIPPSBURG — The dream of a wooden sailing vessel plying the Kennebec for the sake of educating children may lie unfulfilled, but members of the board of directors of Maine's First Ship hope to continue the legacy of the pinnacle *Virginia*. The board, in a letter sent out to the organization's approximately 300 members, announced it "has come to the conclusion that we have not raised, nor can we realistically anticipate raising the \$2.2 million for building, operating and endowing a reconstruction of the *Virginia*."

The *Virginia* was the first deep-water vessel built by English settlers on the mainland of North America. It was built in 1607-08, at the site of Fort St. George on Atkins Bay in Popham, and according to Earle "Bud" Warren, it launched Maine's shipbuilding tradition.

"The whole heritage of this area developed from that culture," Warren was quoted in an earlier newspaper story about Maine's First Ship. This week Warren, one of the original founders of the organization and current president of the board, had mixed feelings. "I'm disappointed, yes," he said. "But if we can create something that will continue to educate our children about this, that's something positive." The letter, signed by Warren and addressed to "members and supporters," states that the board has created three working groups to explore the following alternatives:

- Continue aiming educational resources at informing the state's children of the story of the *Virginia*.
- Construct several-high quality models of the ship and interpretive display panels at Maine museums.
- Create a permanent commemorative marker at Fort St. George honoring the *Virginia* and the Popham Colony.

The groups will work through this month, Warren said, to develop recommendations for consideration by the board on April 28, then by the general membership at a meeting May 17 at the community center next to the Popham Chapel. "Members will be the ones who actually determine our future direction," Warren said.

One of those members is Merry Chapin, a fifth-grade teacher at Phippsburg Elementary School, who said she was sad to receive the letter. "There are such good people on that board, involved in this," she said. "It makes me sad the goal hasn't been realized. They had a wonderful presentation they took to the schools, they conducted teachers' workshops, they really cared about educating the kids and the teachers. It made me very proud." Chapin noted that the letter came only days after the public celebration in honor of Jane Stevens, around whose kitchen table Warren and others hatched the idea in the first place back in 1997. Stevens died March 22. "It would have been such a tribute to Jane," Chapin said. "She was so good hearted a person."

Plans for the reconstruction got as far as the creation of architectural plans that received

Coast Guard approval.

Board member John G. Morse said it was a bad time economically to be trying to raise money for such a cause. "With money being tight, we found ourselves competing with donors who may have looked upon the social service area as more deserving of need," he said. "What we needed was a special angel with a million dollars." Morse said that with any of the three alternatives proposed by the board, the education about the Popham Colony and Fort St. George will continue. "That's always been the primary goal," he said. "Building the Virginia was a tool, an educational resource. It's a shame we're not able to build it, but we've still got a role to play."