

Separateness & Togetherness

Independence means Chebeague islanders
can preserve their unique community

DAVID A. TYLER

“When you live on an island, every journey begins and ends with a boat ride.”

These are the words of Chebeague Island resident Donna Colbeth, part of a PowerPoint presentation she wrote and narrated to help show Chebeague Island to Cumberland town officials.

For islanders, Colbeth's statement is a fact of life. But it's an aspect of island living that mainlanders never seem to get. The journey emphasizes the essential separateness of island communities: you have to cross an ocean to get there.

Islanders know the ferry is part of community life: everyone has to take the same boat to get where they want to go. On every ferry ride, islanders spend time with their neighbors catching up with the daily news—a ritual missing from the mainland.

The separateness of islands imposes a unique sense of togetherness that does not exist in suburban towns. The limitations imposed by a ferry schedule would seem incomprehensible to most mainlanders, for whom community is often the place with the best commute to and from work.

A powerful sense of togetherness allows island communities to accomplish remarkable things. But the increasing divergence between the mainland and islands means those on the mainland often don't even understand island issues, which only compounds the challenge of maintaining year-round island communities.

This problem is particularly acute in Casco Bay, where all the year-round communities on un-bridged islands are governed from the mainland, with the exception of Long Island. Casco Bay's island communities are the only ones along the Maine coast that do not run their own affairs.



Peter Ralston

The suburbanization of the mainland over the past 35 years in the Casco Bay area has led to a disconnect between island and mainland communities. In 2005 this disconnect led residents on three of Casco Bay's island communities—Cliff, Chebeague and Peaks—to consider seceding from the mainland governments that now run these islands. Cliff and Peaks are part of Portland, Maine's largest city, and Chebeague has long been part of Cumberland.

Although individual circumstances are different, what all these secession movements share is a passionate desire to preserve unique island communities and a belief that islanders—not mainland governments—know what is best for their own survival. The specific event that triggered Chebeague's independence movement was a proposal by School Administrative District 51 to remove the fourth and fifth grades from the island school. But the root cause is that island and mainland communities have been growing steadily apart.

In the 19th and early 20th century,

island and mainland shared a rural, maritime way of life. In the 1890s, 40 percent of Cumberland's population lived on the island. But in the 1960s, Cumberland grew by 48 percent, marking the start of the divergence between the island and the mainland.

As Cumberland changed from a farming village to a bedroom suburb of Portland, Chebeague maintained its age-old ties to the sea. On Chebeague, fishing remains the island's largest industry, with at least 47 residents working as lobstermen.

Chebeague remains a small, rural community of 350 where the median income is \$32,000. Mainland Cumberland is a growing suburb of around 7,200 people where the median income is \$73,000. Fewer than 5 percent of mainland Cumberland residents have lived in town for more than 30 years, compared to 40 percent of island residents.

As the mainland population grew and Cumberland abandoned the Town Meeting form of government, Chebeague residents increasingly felt they could no longer have a significant voice in the town's direction. They are outnumbered and often unable to attend government meetings on the mainland because of ferry schedules.

Islanders in Casco Bay don't blame mainlanders for the different goals each community has. But they believe passionately in their right to fight for their own way of life, which is rooted in the separateness of these islands and their unique geography.

Those who live on an island cherish that place, its landscape and its features, in a way that those in suburban communities, where the emphasis is on mobility and access to services, may not understand. The island is viewed as a shared resource, not a commodity to

“Who are we? We are islanders, and no matter how we got here, whether by design, by choice, or by chance, it is our sense of community, and our will to maintain it, that keeps us here.”

DONNA COLBETH, CHEBEAGUE



David A. Tyler

A NEW DAWN: Islanders hold a sunrise service to celebrate Chebeague Island's independence on July 1, 2007.

be sold to the highest bidder. On Chebeague and Cliff islands, many depend on the ocean and the land for their living; they are bound to land and sea in a way that has vanished in suburban towns.

“Most islanders have a sense of place, and we are on the road to reemphasizing that place,” said Mabel Doughty, a secession representative, speaking at a public hearing on Chebeague Island's effort to become independent in August, 2005. Doughty, married to Sanford Doughty, a retired fisherman, has lived on Chebeague for 60 of her 83 years.

For many suburbanites, community and identity is no longer tied to a sense of place. Thomas Urquhart, former executive director of the Maine Audubon Society, wrote of the fundamental human desire to be connected to the land in his 2004 memoir, *For the Beauty of the Earth*:

“Better career opportunities have made us mobile beyond our grandparents' dreams, but our geographical roots continually erode until home is no longer an unqualified place,” he wrote. “We have let the treasure of rootedness slip through our fingers.”

Not only do islanders treasure that rootedness, but they are also prepared to fight for it. And to fight to preserve a unique community in the face of the

forces threatening it is a radical act. “We're concerned that we're going to be gentrified, we are going to be homogenized,” says Chebeague Island resident Donna Damon, the island's representative on the Cumberland Town Council.

The secession movement in Casco Bay, particularly on Chebeague Island, is not, at its heart, a reaction to a specific event. It is the result of changes on the islands and the mainland over decades. “Separation is a step in reclaiming our values, in making our day-to-day decisions, and solving our own problems,” said Doughty.

“What Chebeague is undertaking is just as American as apple pie and the Fourth of July,” said Chebeague Island resident Phil Jordan, at a September 2005 secession hearing. “From the earliest days of this nation, people have decided that their future required them to separate and take charge of their own affairs.”

It is a process of self-determination that began with the American Revolution. It continued in 1820, with the creation of the state of Maine. As more people settled here, and the needs and goals of different communities diverged, new towns were created. Four towns emerged from what was originally North Yarmouth: Freeport, Pownal, Cumberland and Yarmouth.

For Casco Bay residents, the rewards of self-governance are evident on Long Island, the only island community that achieved independence during a bay-wide secession movement in the early 1990s, when Cushing, Great and Little Diamond, Long and Peaks sought to secede from Portland. It took Long Island several years, but on July 1, 1993, it became its own town.

Many thought Long Island was crazy to go it alone. But 12 years later, the Town of Long Island has a stable tax rate, a new library and school addition, a new fire truck and its own rescue boat.

The metaphor Chebeague islanders have used for their independence movement is rooted in the family. “The time is right for us to leave our parents, and for them to wish us luck,” said Doughty at the September secession meeting.

The negotiations between Chebeague and Cumberland, conducted with goodwill and civility, showed that islanders and mainland communities can remain on good terms, even as islanders make the case that they need the power, through secession and independence, to run their own governments and preserve their way of life.

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