



THE SOUND OF YOUTH

Frenchboro fills its school and finds its future

PHILIP CONKLING

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PETER RALSTON

In the early 1980s when the population of the one-room schoolhouse on Frenchboro had dwindled to a single student, David Lunt knew the island was at a life-threatening crossroads. Without children, there is no school; without a school, there are no young families; and without young families, an aging population just peters out—like a Shaker village.

David Lunt's solution was visionary, if improbable: The town would seek to obtain a piece of land, build a handful of new houses on it, and convince young families to settle there. David lobbied the town (where he was the first selectman) and the school (where he was board chair) to approve the concept. He convinced the highly territorial lobstermen (in Lunt Harbor, where he owned the only lobster-buying and bait operation) to make room for a few more young fishermen with families. He convinced the Rockefeller family, which owned a thousand undeveloped acres on Frenchboro, to donate 50 acres to the new, non-profit, Frenchboro Future Development Corporation (FFDC), and he recruited a few off-island organizations, including the Island Institute and the Maine Sea Coast Mission, to help out.

By 1987 the FFDC had acquired a \$450,000 low-interest loan from the Maine State Housing Authority to build seven new houses. Two years later the community began looking for young families, which some of the older, less-delicate islanders colorfully referred to as “breeders.”

After a promising start, events quickly overtook the islanders. The national media picked up on the modest advertising Frenchboro had initiated. A headline in the *National Star* tabloid read “Come Live with Us on Fantasy Island.” Unimaginable opportunities awaited anyone who applied for the seven houses that were virtually free for the asking, the article implied. Over a thousand applications poured in, each dutifully read by the committee of islanders Lunt had assembled to screen them.

The FFDC had asked applicants to detail how they proposed to make a living and pay their mortgage on an island where there were no stores (not to mention movies or entertainment), where there were no ready-made jobs, and where a ferry connected them to the mainland only once a week.

Many imaginative and idealistic people thought they had the answer. A cowboy proposed to graze his herd of 50 Texas longhorns on Frenchboro’s thousand undeveloped acres. A woman writer had signed a book contract and needed peace and quiet to work on her manuscript, tentatively titled *Women Who Murder*.

After sifting through the applications and conducting face-to-face interviews on Frenchboro during a midwinter visit, the islanders had by 1990 selected the initial group of six families to come live with them on Reality Island. And reality proved to be harsh: Within three years, five of the six original families had “removed.” Two were fishermen from Massachusetts, one of whom had suffered through a divorce. The other owned a small boat whose engine had failed offshore on a bitter winter day. A nasty northwest wind blew him farther and farther out, and he “kind of lost his courage,” said David. The women among the settlers were more isolated than their husbands, and many felt estranged from their new community.

By 1998, the school population had bottomed out again—down to a single student. Still, several of the new houses had been rented by young, still childless families who were deciding whether or not they wanted to make a long-term commitment to island living.

Slowly, however, nearly a decade after the first settlers had arrived, the waters around the island stopped receding. The island’s schoolteachers were as instrumental as any in turning the tide. Becky Smart came to teach on Frenchboro in 1999 from Milo, her hometown, where she had returned fresh out of college with a teaching degree. She was impressed when the whole Frenchboro community turned out to meet her during her interview, after she had applied to teach the island’s two students. She taught for two and a half years, during which she married Mike Lenfesty, who had originally come to the island to be a sternman for his sister’s husband.

A few years earlier, a Methodist minister and his wife, Rob and Lorna Stuart, had sailed into Frenchboro and fallen in love with the island—an easy thing to do when you round up into Lunt Harbor on a summer’s day and first see the picturesque anchorage framed by the church and school at its head. Something in the demeanor of the Stuarts apparently appealed to David Lunt, who offered to sell them a small piece of land he owned so they could build a house and retire to the island. In the spring of 2001, David asked Lorna Stuart to take over from Becky in the schoolhouse, where there were then three kids in school.

Rob Stuart credits his wife with helping to change the culture, first in the school and eventually on the entire island. “Lorna taught children always to look people in the eye and to introduce themselves and shake their hands,” he says. Although islanders had always waved to each other when driving by, some had avoided simple eye contact in other contexts, especially with people they did not know well.

From that simple beginning, other changes began to happen. Becky remembers attending her first baby shower on the island: “People I did not even know came. They just wanted to hold the baby to see a new life on the island.” Becky also remembers another turning point for her new family on Frenchboro. “Three years ago Mike lost his boat in a storm. It was smashed all to pieces on the rocks. It was a hard day. But the community all got together. Several people dragged the pieces up on the shore to burn. One of the fishermen, Lewis Bishop, gave Mike a job as a sternman to make it through.”

Meanwhile, the school population slowly increased as the initial batch of settlers’ children reached school age. In 2004, the school population edged up from three to five. The following year it doubled to ten and Lorna needed a helper. Lorna and the school board, where Becky was chairperson, recruited Rachel Bishop, the wife of lobsterman Lewis Bishop, to work half-time with Lorna. Rachel and Lewis’s son, Lance, was the oldest student in the school, so Rachel was familiar with the school’s limits as well as its opportunities.

“Things present themselves,” said Alan Davis. The Davis family was among the original families who settled Frenchboro with the Lunts in the early 1800s. But Alan’s father, Ben, a contemporary of David Lunt’s in the early 1960s, left the island to pursue a career in the Boston area. “Mentally my father never left the island, even though he worked most of his life in a high-tech science career for Polaroid and bought a home in Massachusetts,” recalls his son Alan. “He was always a Mainer; he always voted up here.” Alan continues the story of his own return to Frenchboro with his wife and two little girls: “When my dad died and we got the house, I was working for a software startup, and I realized I could telecommute from here. I had health insurance and a job and it was an opportunity.”

Alan Davis and his wife, Erica, and their two daughters, Lily and Hannah, had spent time every summer in the Davis house on the east side of the harbor. “When the girls would come up for the summer, there would be this big sigh of relief. They just knew they could go outside and get some sticks or something to play with. They could run around without shoes on. They could go down to the harbor by themselves and enjoy life like it was for kids 100 years ago. No play dates, no commitments and no schedules. So I watched that and wanted to get back here, the way my dad did.”

When Rachel took over from Lorna, the Davises had been on the island during the school year. Erica Davis had taught third grade in Massachusetts for eight years. David Lunt asked Erica to work half-time with the upper grades. Things had just presented themselves. . . .

As the echo of the echo of the baby boom continued on Frenchboro, Becky, who has three children herself, decided to start a preschool program in 2003 to help young kids develop the kind of social skills that are very important in the small, multiage teaching environment of Frenchboro’s one-room schoolhouse. Three of David Lunt’s grandsons, Nate, Zach and Travis; a granddaughter, Kristy; and a niece, April, had settled down on the island. The tenth generation of Lunts all enrolled their kids in Becky’s preschool program to help get them ready for school and, not coincidentally, get a break from the isolation of child-rearing that can overwhelm fishermen’s wives.



David Lunt



The Frenchboro school holds an open house.

Now, amazingly, the Frenchboro School is bursting with 13 students—seven in the younger grades taught by Rachel, and six in the upper grades taught by Erica. If you visit, you are likely to have the memorable experience that Rachel Bishop has continued for the younger grades: Students line up to introduce themselves to you, trying as hard as they can to look you in the eye as they greet you. It is good to meet you, Austin, Myron, Amber, Elijah, Hannah, Saylor, Brody and Teresa. Across the room Erica is giving the older kids, Lance, Lily, Cody, Dylan and Jesse reading assignments before they head downstairs to the newly conditioned “science lab” (and gym and art room), stocked with an aquarium full of both common and mysterious forms of sea life that lobstermen in the harbor have helped provide, as well as other materials.

Erica is amazed by this group of students. “The kids don’t get here late,” she said. “Whenever I get here, there are kids waiting to go to school. Kids love to be here.”

When we at the Island Institute organize lessons about other Maine island communities that we work with, we ask the students for their definition of an island. Before the Frenchboro students get around to the definition of “water all around,” their first three excited answers are “beaches,” “sea smoke” and “sea glass,” which all speak to their grounding in a strong sense of place.

Ask the new young families—or some of the old-timers—on Frenchboro why and how Frenchboro’s wildly improbable homesteading plan has worked, and a number of themes keep emerging. First, people truly credit David Lunt’s “tremendous insight, tremendous vision,” in Alan Davis’s words. Rob Stuart, currently a town selectman and also an Internet businessman who locates rare books for customers, remarked that David Lunt “did not have a lot of experience in process, but was successful because he didn’t spend time worrying about the naysayers.”

Frenchboro also presented itself as a welcoming community at the outset. However, cautions Alan, “We are a welcoming community under [certain] conditions: we are not giving away homes in a lottery.” As Becky says laughingly, “They wanted us and now they have us.”

Equally important, the community was willing to make changes as problems became evident. “It really changed after they opened up the opportunity to fishermen,” Alan says. Now that there are 15 fishermen in the harbor, there is an added benefit, Becky says: The older fishermen are “happy to have a few more to help hold their ground.”

The community was also willing to address some of its hardest cultural problems, matters it had been obliged to face as it bottomed out. As Alan Davis describes it, “I remember a lot of the older fishermen. It was a pretty rough place. They came in from fishing, bought their bottles, and drank until they ran out of money, and then went fishing again. Sternmen can earn \$30- to 40,000 in a season of fishing. That’s a lot of money for a young kid, and some of them wanted to raise a lot of hell. It’s been flushed out of Frenchboro. The church had a lot to do with it. There’s no need for that kind of escapism.”

Frenchboro clearly faces a lot of challenges as it moves into the future. Alan describes the community as something “like a helicopter, with 40 different pieces moving in different directions—but somehow it flies.” Nevertheless, it’s just as clear that Frenchboro does have a future, captured in a collective sound. “All the older people say they know it’s 11 o’clock when the kids get out for lunch,” says Becky, “because they can hear the kids laughing and screaming around outside. It’s the sound of youth!”

Philip Conkling is president of the Island Institute.

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