

Pioneer and Patriot John Marsh

He purchased his island for thirty bushels of corn

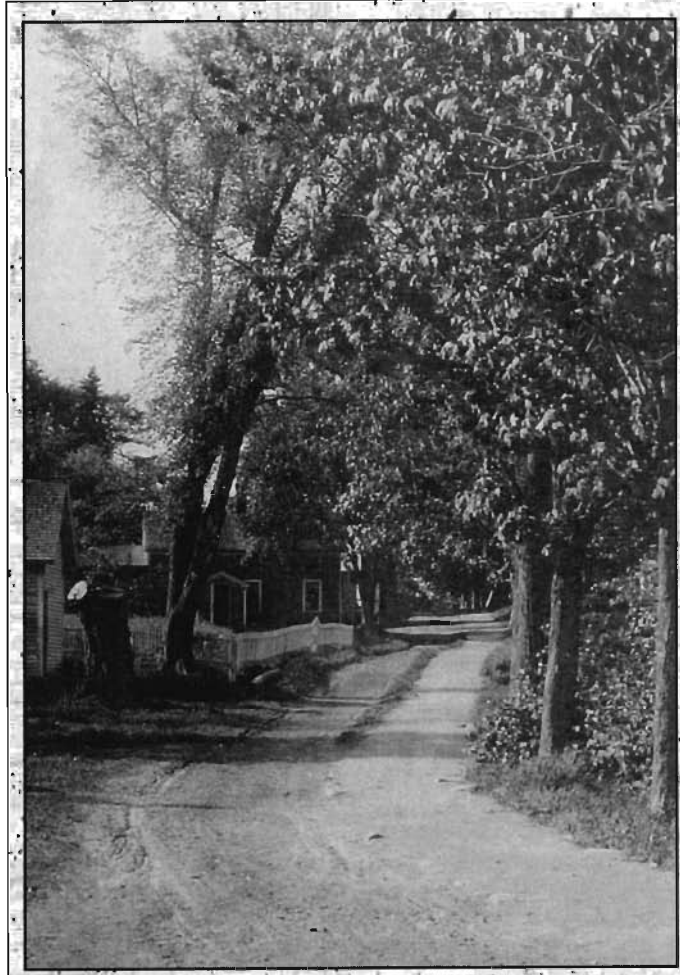
by Charles Francis

Few students attending the University of Maine in Orono realize that their school is situated on an island. Even though you must cross a bridge to get to the university, it simply doesn't occur to most people that they have crossed to an island.

The northern part of the island begins where the Penobscot River sends out its arm known as the Stillwater in the Indian Island area. The Stillwater curves to the west and then to the east before rejoining the Penobscot. The island formed between the Stillwater and the Penobscot is Marsh's Island, named for John Marsh, who acquired it from the Penobscots. The Penobscot name for the land is Arumsunkhungan.

In 1793 John Marsh petitioned the Massachusetts General Court to affirm his ownership of the island. At that time his ownership was being contested by a number of parties who saw the island as ripe for development. In his petition, which was being made from Marsh's position as a veteran of the Revolution, he cited his right to the island as well as some of his service record. It was an impressive record, but only represented a bit of John Marsh's remarkable life on the Penobscot frontier and further Downeast.

John Marsh is best described as some-



Main Street, Indian Island

one who could get along with most anyone, with the exception of the British, and as a consummate communicator. As evidence of this, local historian Percia White described Marsh as "so much loved and

respected by the Indians in the vicinity that he was adopted by the tribe and made blood brother to the chief, Orono."

John Marsh was born in Bellingham, Massachusetts in 1751. He first came to the area that would become Old Town and Orono in 1774 with Joshua Eayres and Jeremiah Colburn. Eayres and Colburn, who were from Pittston, are usually identified as the first white settlers of the region. Marsh married Colburn's daughter, Sarah, four years later, when he had established himself on the island that came to bear his name.

According to one account, John Marsh purchased the island from the Penobscots for thirty bushels of corn. Regardless of the accuracy of this legend, the purchase price or manner of purchase of the island was not what was being questioned; it was whether the Penobscots had the right to sell the island in the first place.

John Marsh's most important contribution to the Patriot cause during the Revolution came about because of his ability to communicate with, and get along with, the Indians who lived east of the Penobscot. These Indians, in addition to the Penobscot,

included the Passamaquoddy of the St. Croix region and the Maliseet of the St. John. Marsh had a natural gift for languages, and was fluent in their varying dialects. Because of this facility with languages, Colonel John Allan made Marsh his chief interpreter and emissary to those tribes. He also served as Allan's messenger, and traveled hundreds of miles throughout northern Maine and what is now New Brunswick. Allan was the Army officer charged by George Washington with the defense of the eastern frontier, as well as with establishing and maintaining good relations with the Indians.

Besides working for John Allan, Marsh was also associated with Colonel Jonathan Eddy in his unsuccessful attempt to drive the British out of Nova Scotia, which at that time included New Brunswick. In the latter effort, he traveled to the St. John region and persuaded a small band of Maliseets to take part in Eddy's capture of the British stronghold of Fort Cumberland at the head of the Bay of Fundy. He also made numerous journeys to visit the Maliseet as Allan's emissary.

Much of Marsh's duty was centered in Machias, which was a hotbed of Patriot activity. From Machias, Marsh carried messages to Washington's headquarters in Cambridge, and later to the Massachusetts General Court when Washington moved south. When the British occupied Castine and took control of the Penobscot River, Marsh was forced to detour well above present-day Bangor before swinging back to the coast to get to Boston. At this point in time he moved his family from his island to Camden.

Following the treaty ending the war in 1783, Marsh and his family returned to their

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Corner of Center and Brunswick streets, Old Town

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home. It was at this point that he purchased the island. He made improvements by clearing land, planting more crops and building a mill. When others began to notice what he had accomplished, they challenged his right of ownership.

It is doubtful that John Marsh was in any real danger of being dispossessed of his island. He was a war veteran, and the Massachusetts General Court was quite liberal in granting awards of land to veterans. For example, Jonathan Eddy and veterans who had served with him in Nova Scotia were granted land just east of the Penobscot. Today the land they settled is known as Eddington, named for Eddy. Marsh's petition to the General Court included a deposition from his father-in-law, Jeremiah Colburn, stating he had purchased the island from the Indians. The deposition was attested to by none other than Jonathan Eddy, who at that time was a justice of the peace.

In 1795 the Massachusetts General Court settled the issue of the ownership of Marsh's Island in John Marsh's favor. In part the decision reads, "Resolved that all the right, title, interests, claim and estate which this Commonwealth now have in and to the island ... is remised, released and forever quitclaimed to the said John Marsh and to his heirs and assigns forever."

Today, much of Old Town, as well as the University of Maine, is on Marsh's Island. Ironically, few know anything of John Marsh, the man who was both a Patriot and a pioneer, and who could well be called one of the founders of Old Town, Orono and the University of Maine. Perhaps, in time, the accomplishments of this important figure in Maine history will become more widely recognized. 🍷



Penobscot River and Indian Island, Old Town



Main Street, Old Town