

Monhegan Island, Maine

# Quadricentennial of Captain John Smith's Landing, 1614-2014

by Jeanne Schinto

It was supposed to have been a quiet vacation on a rustic island ten or so miles off the coast of Maine. My husband and I had visited Monhegan once before, on a day trip a few years ago. Since then, I had wanted to see it by starlight. So we booked a room at the Island Inn. I knew our stay would coincide with the 400th anniversary celebration of Captain John Smith's landing on Monhegan in 1614, but I thought it would be just a little ceremonial interlude with a speech or two that we might or might not witness, depending on our hiking plans. Eighty percent of Monhegan is undeveloped, the so-called Wild Lands, crisscrossed by a dozen or more miles of public trails through deep forest and rugged coastal cliffs. That's what Bob and I thought our vacation would be mostly about.

Yet as we approached the island on a Hardy Boat ferry, we saw an amazing sight on the horizon, a foreshadowing of the different holiday in store. It was the U.S. Coast Guard's sailing ship *Eagle*, looking just like the subject of a vintage seascape. From the ferry crew we learned that the three-masted barque, with every one of its sails unfurled, was sailing back to home port in New London, Connecticut, after having fired a multi-gun salute to commemorate Monhegan's quadricentennial. Now I understood: national attention was being paid to this milestone in the life of tiny Monhegan.

Not quite one square mile, the vaguely whale-shaped island measures just 1 3/4 miles long and 3/4 of a mile wide, but it sits high. When John Smith described it in *Description of New-England*, published in 1616, he wrote: Monhegan "is a rounde high isle, and close by it [is] Monanis [now known as Manana], betwixt which is a small harbor where we ride." In that work, in which he was the first to use the term "New England," he expressed his vision of the region's future, and by extension all of America's, declaring: "Here every man may be master and owner of his owne labour and land... If he have nothing but his hands, he may...by industrie quickly



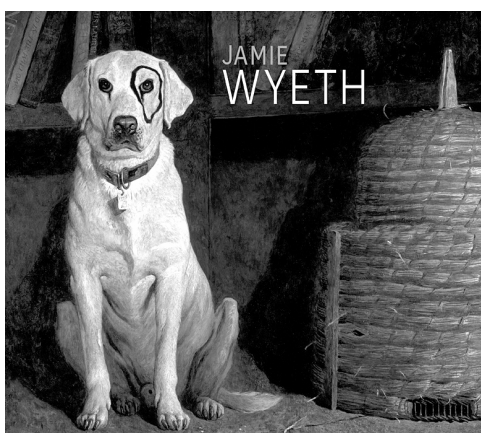
Crowd at the top of Wharf Hill during the tercentennial celebration. The woman with dark sweater left of center is George Bellows's wife, Emma. Jenney collection. Courtesy Monhegan Island Art and History Museum.



Monhegan Cornet Band, 1914. In the front row, left, is George Bellows. Courtesy Monhegan Island Art and History Museum.



Monhegan Lighthouse plate souvenir. Gift of Marion Wiley. Monhegan Island Art and History Museum collection.



Cover of the catalog for Jamie Wyeth, the artist's first-ever retrospective, on view at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, through December 28, 2014. The show will travel to three additional venues, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas; San Antonio Museum of Art in San Antonio, Texas; and Brandywine River Museum in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania. For more information about the Boston show, see the Web site ([www.mfa.org](http://www.mfa.org)). The dog's name is Kleberg. Jamie Wyeth told me he painted the circle around the dog's eye as a homage to the dog, Pete, portrayed in the old comedy films of *Our Gang*, later known as *The Little Rascals*.



Jamie Wyeth at the MFA, Boston. On left with folders in hand is Elliot Bostwick Davis, the show's curator and author of the show's catalog. Davis is the MFA's John Moors Cabot Chair, Art of the Americas. On far left, MFA's outgoing director, Malcolm Rogers.

grow rich." The book, a description of fishing, fauna, flora, and more, from Long Island Sound to Newfoundland, amounted to an extended advertisement for the New World, written by a convinced booster for colonization. Monhegan was part of what convinced him.

Smith arrived on Monhegan six years before the Pilgrims established their colony in Plymouth. (Members of Smith's group, who became the island's first European settlers, subsequently sent fish to their British brethren in Massachusetts to help them through a cold winter.) The month was April, but the major celebration in 2014 was scheduled for August 6, not only because the weather would undoubtedly be better and more people free to participate, but also because on that day 100 years earlier islanders had marked

the landing's tercentennial. The quadricentennial was fashioned after its predecessor.

Tercentennial celebrators had mounted a plaque on a rock, staged a parade down Monhegan's unpaved Main Street, and put on an art exhibition. Quadricentennial planners had a plaque of their own to unveil; they had scheduled a parade down the same

unpaved road through the village; and on Fourth of July weekend the Monhegan Museum opened an exhibition that harked back to the one of a century earlier. *The Famous and the Forgotten* displayed paintings of Monhegan by artists of the tercentennial period, e.g., George Bellows and Frederick Judd Waugh, who had helped organize their contemporaries in 1914. (Bellows also played snare drum in the marching band in the parade.) By then, Monhegan was well established as a summer artists' colony and vacation destination for non-artists. Our hotel had been built in 1907 to accommodate seasonal visitors, who'd been given the nickname "rusticators" by the year-round residents. Fishermen or otherwise, they made their living from the sea, while rusticators only temporarily played at the rustic island life.



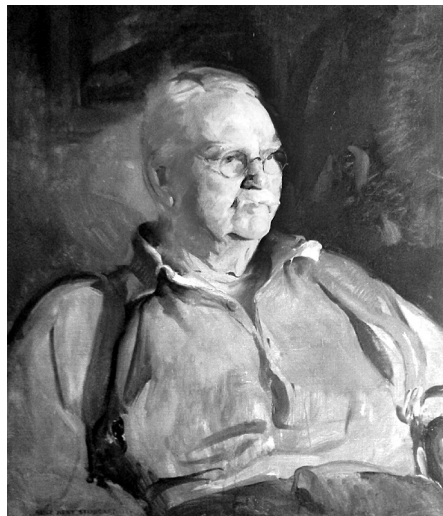
*Cutting Ice*, Monhegan Island is a 1946 oil on canvas by Andrew Winter (1892-1958). The ice house is gone now, and the ice pond is used by gulls as a place to clean themselves, although a local naturalist told me it is ringed by an unmarked hiking path. Gift of Mary Taylor Winter. Monhegan Island Art and History Museum collection.



*To Work*, Edmund Ward (1892-1990), oil on canvas panel. Gift of Elizabeth Ward Taylor. Monhegan Island Art and History Museum collection.



"Men vs. Lobsters." The poster was designed by illustrator Frederick Dorr Steele (1873-1944). Games from the time of this poster were often fishermen vs. rusticators. Monhegan Island Art and History Museum collection.



This oil on canvas portrait is by Alice Kent Stoddard (1884-1976). The subject was the lighthouse keeper on Monhegan from 1902 to 1919 and foghorn keeper on Manana Island from 1890 to 1902. The portrait's title is *Daniel Stevens*, but according to a Web site ([www.newenglandlighthouses.net](http://www.newenglandlighthouses.net)), it was an adopted moniker. Born Mathew Murphy in Boston, he enlisted in the U.S. Navy when underage, was discovered and discharged, then reenlisted after changing his name. Gift of Joan Harlow. Monhegan Island Art and History Museum collection.

The Island Inn is a wooden structure four stories high, a rare survivor of its era. The largest building on the island, it is also the grandest accommodation. As an artist-friend quipped, it is "Monhegan's Ritz-Carlton," compared to the more typical, modest cottage and studio lodgings. Still, many of the rooms have shared baths, none has a phone, TV, or air conditioning, and Internet access is spotty. We weren't surprised. We expected and welcomed the simplicity. What we hadn't expected was, within the first 15 minutes of our visit, running into a couple in the lobby whom we knew from the antiques show circuit. They were Wilmont M. "Bill" Schwind Jr. and his wife, Arlene, whose shop is in Yarmouth, Maine. The Schwinds were with their friend Sally W. Rand of South Freeport, Maine, whose professional life had been spent restoring historic houses on the mainland. All three of them are longtime Monhegan lovers.

Bill Schwind assumed I had come to write about the quadricentennial for *M.A.D.* It took only minutes to convince me that I should. Adding to the quadricentennial's newsworthiness and the art show was the fact that the whole island exudes one of the primary values that collectors of antiques and art hold dear—authenticity. It says it right in a little booklet (*A Visitor's Guide to Monhegan Island, Maine*) that we got at the ferry dock, back in New Harbor: "Monhegan is NOT a theme park." As we already knew from our previous day trip, it is as real a deal as it gets.

Bob and I walked through the village that afternoon. It has a few stores for provisions, three or four galleries and gift shops, one church, a little white-clapboard schoolhouse, a minuscule library, and a post office only slightly larger than, well, a postage stamp. Only about 50 people live on Monhegan year-round. Many of the island's buildings were festooned with patriotic bunting, anticipating the next day's celebration. Vehicular traffic, if you could call it that, was unusually heavy, we were told, as drivers of native pickup trucks trundled past us, completing their final errands. Golf carts are the other mode of four-wheeled transportation. (We also saw a few bicycles during our stay, but ferry riders are not allowed to bring them, and the roads aren't suitable for them, anyway.) That evening, the Quadricentennial Ball took place under a tent on the lawn of another island hotel, Monhegan House. Suggested dress was black, orange, and white—the chosen color scheme for the quadricentennial.

The following morning, Monhegan's 48' tall granite lighthouse, built in 1850,



*The D.T. Sheridan* by Rockwell Kent (1882-1971) is a circa 1950 oil on panel depiction of a shipwreck on the rocks of Lobster Cove that is still there today in the form of a far rustier hulk. Gift of William Wilbur in memory of William Craig Smith. Monhegan Island Art and History Museum collection.



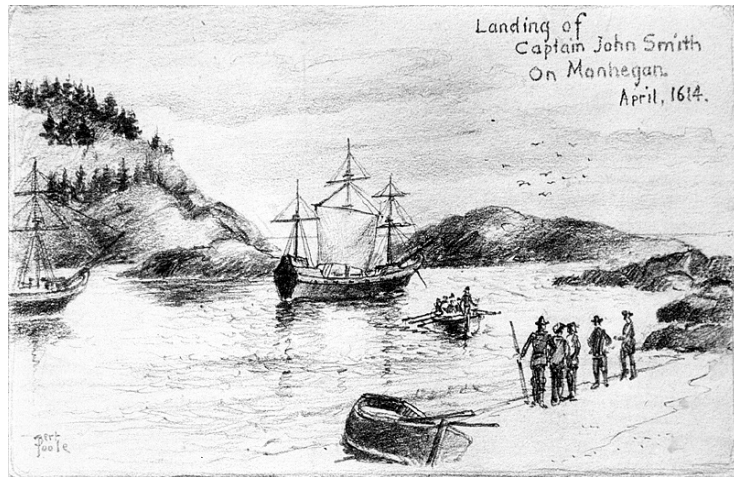
Cup and saucer designed by Rockwell Kent. Gift of Richard Farrell. Monhegan Island Art and History Museum collection.

was open for tours. We ascended the tower where a young man, an islander, gave a brief presentation about the signal, which still beams nightly. A graduate of the white-clapboard schoolhouse, he had gone off-island for his secondary education, boarding at Hebron Academy in Hebron, Maine. Someone in the tour said, "I bet you were ready to leave by then." He replied, "Actually, I didn't want to leave."

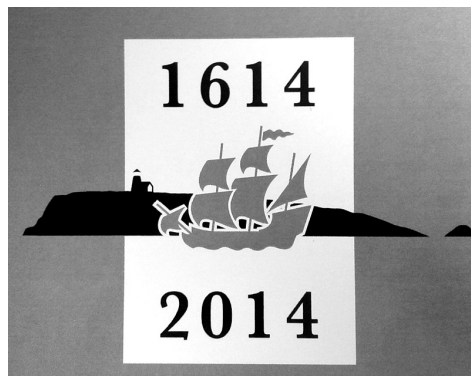
The lighthouse has been owned since 1998 by the Monhegan Historical and Cultural Museum Association. The organization has reconstructed the 1857 assistant keeper's house to serve as an exhibition space for its collection of art and artifacts. When we descended, we took that in. Among the paintings we saw there was Alice Kent Stoddard's oil on canvas portrait of Daniel Stevens, Monhegan's lighthouse keeper from 1902 until his death in 1919. When I looked him up later, I found a Web site ([www.newenglandlighthouses.net](http://www.newenglandlighthouses.net)) that

quoted him as telling a *Boston Globe* reporter in 1904: "We are satisfied here because it's a good place. Why shouldn't we be satisfied? This is one of the loveliest spots on the great round earth. What do we want better than this? And it's all ours! We can look at it all when we want to, and breathe this good air, and be free and well and happy as anybody can be in this world." It reminded me of the lighthouse tour-giver's reply to the question about his leaving the island. I imagine he feels about the same way as Stevens did.

Next we went to see *The Famous and the Forgotten*. It was in the Monhegan Island Art and History Museum on the same hilltop as the lighthouse. Represented were 18 of the original 24 exhibitors from the 1914 show. There I saw two works by Bellows, one a 1913 oil on board seascape, *Iron Coast, Monhegan*, and the other a 1911 self-portrait in pencil on the back of an envelope addressed to Robert Henri at Monhegan House. *Grammy Richards' House* by Charles H. Ebert, another organizer of the 1914 show, is on the cover of the show's catalog. It is one of two paintings in this show that was also in the first. The circa 1914 oil on canvas is



This small (4¼" x 6½") pencil on paper drawing is by Albert "Bert" Poole (1853-1939), whose house on Monhegan was the location of the 1914 art exhibition. It is titled *Landing of Captain John Smith on Monhegan, April, 1614*. Museum director Edward Deci hung it near the entrance to the 2014 show and speculated that it was probably hanging in the Poole residence during the time of the 1914 show. Poole's circa 1910 oil on canvas *The Hermitage* (not shown) was definitely in both shows. Monhegan Island Art and History Museum collection. Gift of Lee Winslow and Ruby Court.



The quadricentennial logo shows one of Captain John Smith's ships. "In the month of, April, 1614, with two ships from London, of a few Marchants, I chanced to arrive in New-England, a parte of Ameryca, at the Ile of Monahiggan, in 43½ of Northerly latitude....," Smith wrote in *A Description of New-England*.



The Monhegan Lighthouse.

## We saw an amazing sight on the horizon, a foreshadowing of the different holiday in store.

a depiction of a then brand-new residence built on a green, pink, and gold hillside as seen on a perfect blue-skied day on Monhegan. Ebert and his wife, watercolorist Mary Roberts Ebert, whose work *The Gull's Pool* is also in the show, built their own cottage on Monhegan, where they spent more than 40 summers. The art colony of Old Lyme, Connecticut, was their winter home.

Among the numerous other seascapes I saw were examples by Wilson Irvine, Frederick Judd Waugh, George Clowes Everett, Woodhall Adams, Randall Davey, Eric Hudson, and Monhegan's earliest year-round resident artist, S.P. Rolt Triscott. Born in 1846, Triscott visited Monhegan for the first time in 1892; a decade later, the watercolorist and photographer moved permanently to the island. Almost as plentiful as seascapes were paintings of the village, its buildings, and other structures (many unchanged today). These works include Everett's *Monhegan Village*, Adams's *Below the Wharf*, Robert William Broderick's *Monhegan Harbor*, and Stoddard's *Monhegan Island Harbor Looking toward Manana*.

As I signed the guestbook, I was startled by a freshly penned name that, like Schwind, was familiar to me from the antiques-show circuit, Helen Meserve. I caught up with Helen and Hamilton "Ham" W. Meserve of Newagen, Maine, who were still in the gallery. They told me they had retired from their business, Running Battle Antiques, and that Ham was now serving as a Lincoln County commissioner. That's why he and Helen had come to the island today. He would be taking his turn on the dais when the speeches were given later.

At noon Bob and I found a seat outside a little grocery, L. Brackett & Son, to wait for the paraders. They had assembled to the south, near Lobster Cove. One group we sneak-previewed on their way to the starting point wore red costumes I found mys-

terious until I realized that, taken together, they would form a huge, multisectioned lobster. Such is the creativity in a place peopled by artists.

Speaking of artists, James "Jamie" Wyeth, owner of a property on Lobster Cove that was formerly owned by Rockwell Kent's mother, walked into L. Brackett & Son as we sat there. I recognized him because three weeks earlier I had been to a press event that preceded the opening of his first-ever retrospective at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Actually, what caught my eye wasn't his face, body type, or gait, but his outfit: he wore the same kind of clothing he had worn that day in the city, knickers and knee socks. On Monhegan, where people wear a wide range of whatever-they-darn-well-please, he seemed just another islander and was treated as such by people obviously familiar to him. When he emerged from the store, a teenage boy passing by with a fishing spear in hand discussed flounder fishing with him. Afterward, Bob and I decided to speak to him.

Bob asked him about his *Screen Door to the Sea*, which depicts Wyeth's well-known islander and model Orca Bates, standing alongside a tall clock. We'd seen the painting a few years ago at the Farnsworth Art Museum in Rockland, Maine. Bob, a restorer of antique clocks, wanted to know if Wyeth still had the clock. Someone we knew had been in his house on Monhegan and hadn't seen it. Wyeth said yes, he still had it, but that it was at his property on Southern Island near Tenants Harbor. He talked and joked a little more with us; we congratulated him on his retrospective; then he went on his way.

By the time the parade began, a crowd had gathered with us to applaud the inventive, homespun delights we were about to see. Besides the sectioned lobster that came sashaying down the road, there was a 400-year-old lobster rolling along on a golf cart with a mermaid as his passenger; a man portraying Captain John Smith walking along inside a sailing ship made of painted cardboard; a couple in circa

1914 dress dancing to banjo music; and a schoolchild playing a harmonica on the back of a pickup truck designated to represent the schoolhouse. Several other pickups had been transformed into “floats,” as had a few golf carts and one sit-down lawnmower.

No parade is complete without politicians, and this one had its share. Ham Meserve, when we’d spoken earlier, had alluded to his lowly political stature, compared with other expected guests. Both of Maine’s U.S. senators, plus the congressperson who represents Monhegan on Capitol Hill, came walking and waving. On hand, too, were the state representative and state senator.

When the last float had passed, parade watchers took up the rear, ending at the schoolhouse lawn to hear the speeches. I found a seat, whereupon the man in front of me asked to borrow my pen. He turned out to be yet someone else I know from my regular *M.A.D.* beat, auctioneer and appraiser Paul Royka, who told me he has been coming to Monhegan since age four. He needed the pen to add to remarks he’d prepared to introduce a special guest, John Bear Mitchell, a member of the Penobscot Nation, whose forebears were here eons before Captain John Smith. A footnote in the art show’s catalog notes that there were three Native American settlements on Monhegan several centuries before

Smith’s landing and a Red Paint People fishing outpost on Monhegan several millennia earlier.

When he returned my pen, Royka gave me a limited-edition commemorative coin created to mark the passing of the tall ship *Eagle*. It was he who had arranged that passing.

I took only a few notes during the speeches, not because they lacked quotable lines but precisely because they were so good that I forgot to be a reporter. “We celebrate our connections to this storied past,” the Reverend Robert Benson of the Maine Sea Coast Mission said during his benediction. U.S. Senator Susan Collins said, “Happy birthday, Monhegan,” and explained that the name Monhegan is Wabanaki for “island of the ocean.” U.S. Senator Angus King Jr. said, “History is all we’ve got.” Maine State Historian Earle G. Shettleworth Jr. read some texts written on backs of circa 1914 Monhegan postcards from his collection. August 6, 1914, we learned, had been a cold, cold day, very unlike the perfect weather we enjoyed 100 years later. When it was John Bear Mitchell’s turn to speak, he addressed the crowd in the Wabanaki language of his people and then translated it. “Keep it sacred,” said Mitchell, who is associate director of the Wabanaki Center at the University of Maine in Orono. “We are all on this journey together.” It is “a day of reflection for

us all,” a day of “camaraderie and partnership.” His words were followed by those of U.S. Congresswoman Chellie Pingree, who handled the unveiling of the 2014 plaque. In the closing benediction the Reverend Richard Bennett of the West Parish Congregational United Church of Christ in Bethel, Maine, reminded us of our humble position, in the universe, saying this is “our own little time living on the edge of big time.”

That night, fireworks set off from a barge anchored just outside the harbor boomed and bloomed in the night sky. (It was better than starlight, although we saw that too, before the end of our time on the island.) The following afternoon, there was a rare tour opportunity: nine privately owned historic houses on the island were open to visitors. One of them, the Partridge House cottage, was painted by Jamie Wyeth in 1969. Other artists before and after him have found it equally picturesque. Being inside it was a special treat, and we were grateful for the chance to see there a magnificent stone carving above the fireplace depicting Captain Smith’s ship.

A second, memorable house on the tour was the curiously named Wik-Wak, a converted fish house near the entrance to Dead Man’s Cove. It has no electricity and is still lit in the 19th-century manner by oil lamps and piped-gas fixtures. On the kitchen floor is a painted shuffleboard. Rockwell Kent and other artists used to

gather there and play the game, we were told by one of Wik-Wak’s owners. She also told us about its name. When her forebear bought it, an artist, perhaps Kent, was heard to say, “What would you want to go and buy that wik-wak place for?”

In the remaining days of our stay, we got plenty of hiking in, logging at least the 20 miles that got registered on the phone app ([www.MapMyRun.com](http://www.MapMyRun.com)) we were using to supplement our trail map. We came to know well the contours of Black Head and White Head, represented by Charles Ebert’s *Black Head, Monhegan* and Randall Davey’s *Across Whitehead*, respectively, in the art show. We said to ourselves, as we’ve said in Old Lyme, Cape Cod’s Provincetown, and Pennsylvania’s New Hope: a place like this becomes an artists’ colony for a reason; it’s simply beautiful.

Leaving on the ferry, we were not disappointed by the Monhegan dock jumpers, who came out to do their traditional seeing-off leaps from the pier. Ferry boat riders, in turn, threw flowers. The thought is that if the flowers float back to shore, then you too will return to Monhegan. As for us, we are guaranteed a return trip, since we won the Hardy Boat raffle, a free ferry ticket.

For more information about Monhegan, begin with the Web site ([www.monheganwelcome.com](http://www.monheganwelcome.com)).



Eric Hudson (1864-1932), *Fishermen and Boats*, circa 1915, oil on board. One of the paintings from *The Famous and the Forgotten* exhibition. Photo courtesy Monhegan Island Art and History Museum. Private collection.



Wik-Wak, one of the historic houses on the tour.



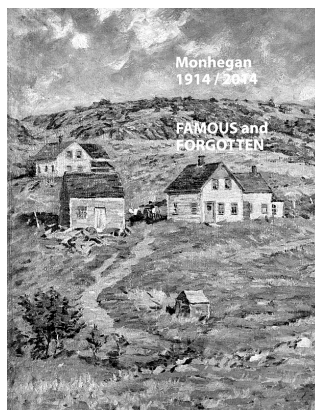
Waiting for the speeches to begin at the schoolhouse on the day of the quadricentennial celebration. The plaque affixed to this rock says: “Captain John Smith, adventurer in many old world countries, a pioneer in the new world, governor of Virginia, came here with two vessels in 1614, anchored in the island harbor, and explored the coast from Penobscot Bay to Cape Cod, discovering a larger opportunity for adding to England’s glory by colonization. He returned home and spent his remaining years in advancing American enterprises. Because of his great interest in the future of America, and to commemorate his connection with the island, the tercentenary tablet is placed by Monhegan residents. 1914.” [Punctuation added.] The new plaque will be affixed on the same rock.



The celebratory arch.



One of the views that have attracted artists for decades. During our stay, we saw many people with easels set up on the rocky shores and in the village.



Cover of the catalog for *The Famous and the Forgotten: Revisiting Monhegan's Celebrated 1914 Art Exhibition*, featuring *Grammy Richards' House* by Charles H. Ebert (1873-1959). Monhegan Island Art and History Museum collection. Gift of Elisabeth R. Ebert.



Monhegan School and the dais.



Sunset on Monhegan as seen from an Island Inn window.

Edward L. Deci, Monhegan’s museum director, was the master of ceremonies. He pointed out that besides *The Famous and the Forgotten* exhibition, contemporary art was on display at the Island Inn, Monhegan House, and the Trailing Yew, all for sale. We saw red dots and empty hangers on the walls of our hotel’s dining room.



## - FEATURE -



Paraders dressed as tercentennial celebrators.



Front and back views of a 400-year-old lobster and mermaid on a golf cart.



Monhegan artists, riding the float of the Lupine Gallery. Jamie Wyeth was there signing his retrospective's catalog.



Monhegan Associates, Inc. is a land trust organization run by volunteers from the summer and year-round communities. It was incorporated in 1954. Summer resident Theodore "Ted" Edison, son of inventor Thomas A. Edison, was its founder. For more information, see the Web site ([www.monheganassociates.org](http://www.monheganassociates.org)).



Monhegan School students.



In front, from left, U.S. Senator and former Maine Governor Angus King Jr., U.S. Senator Susan Collins, and Maine State Representative Michael "Mick" Devin. Behind Senator King, U.S. Congresswoman Chellie Pingree from Maine's 1st District.



The shopkeepers of L. Brackett & Son didn't have time to decorate a float. Instead, they made what they called a "stationary float" and decorated themselves with orange price stickers, all of which said \$16.14. They are, from left to right, Nancy Vogt, Lisa Brackett, Kim Murdock, and Waqia Abdul-Kareem.



The float of the Shining Sails Bed & Breakfast.



Helen and Ham Meserve.



The rear of the parade, leading up Main Street to the Monhegan School for the speeches. This float was dedicated to a long line of canines associated with the Black Duck Emporium. The signage on the side of the vehicle said, "John Smith Should Have Had a Golden Retriever."



Monhegan as seen from the hill on which the lighthouse sits. The Island Inn is the large building at center with cupola. Manana Island is across the harbor.



Monhegan dock jumpers and a flower thrower.

