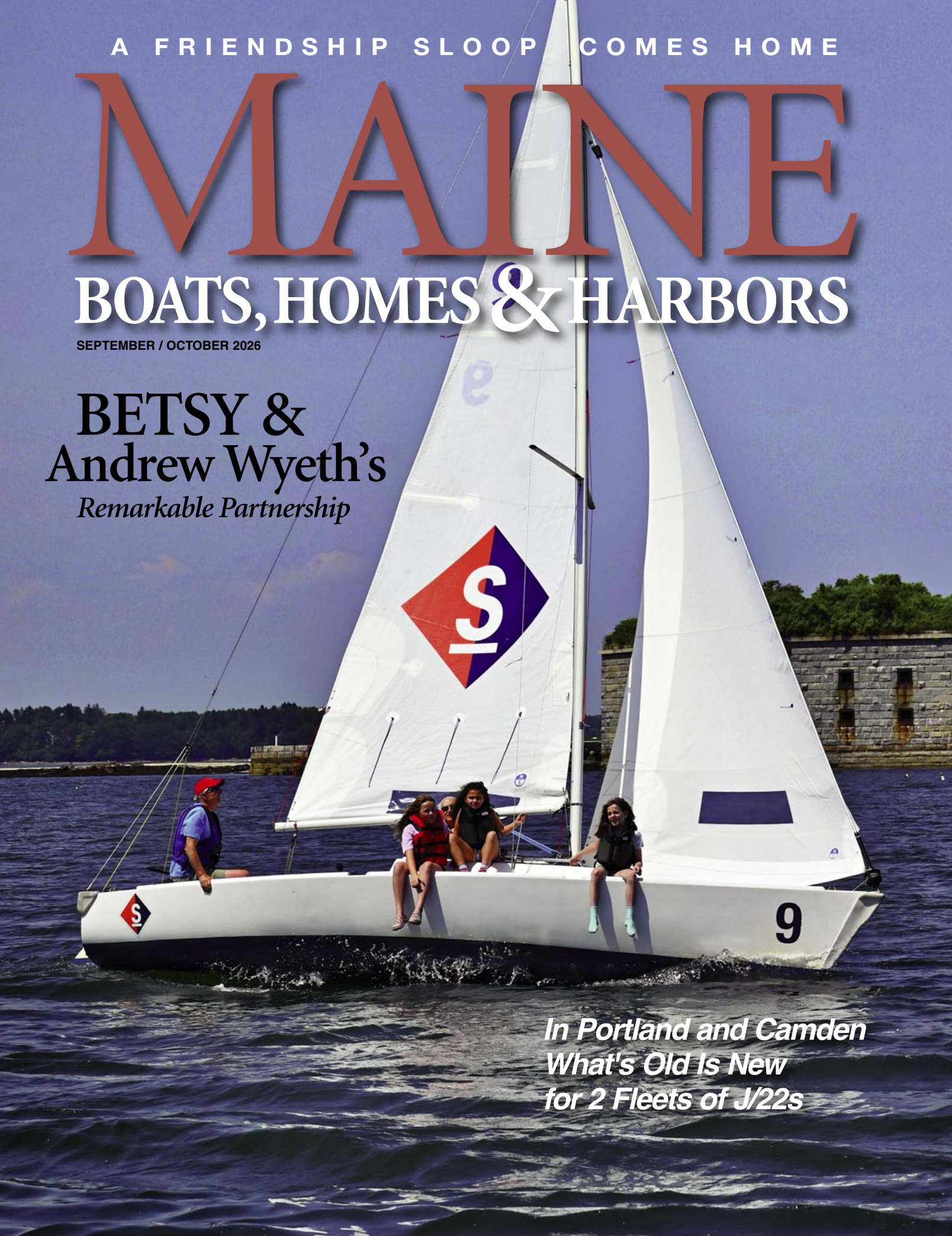
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What's Next for the WILDCAT?

BY PAUL KAROFF



The so-called Wildcat property in St. George consists of a dilapidated dock, a 5-acre lobster pound, and an unfinished building.

Courtesy Joseph Corrado Photography

WHAT DO YOU DO with an unfinished 3,700-square-foot waterfront building sitting astride a derelict 5-acre lobster pound? That's the question the Maine Coast Fishermen's Association is grappling with as they map out a strategy for utilizing the parcel they recently acquired on Long Cove, just north of Tenant's Harbor in St. George.

The so-called Wildcat property takes its name from the adjacent granite quarry that opened in 1873 and operated until the early 20th century. A towering pile of grout—discarded chunks of scrap granite—still sits on the eastern edge of the parcel. Some people view that as an unofficial monument to the thousands of workers, mostly immigrants from Scotland, Sweden, and Finland, who toiled in St. George's once-thriving granite industry.

"The community is invested in the future of fishing. We don't want this to turn into just a beautiful place for people from somewhere else."

The site was last operated as a lobster pound in 2009. Around 2015, entrepreneur John Wagner purchased the property with plans to establish an innovative oyster hatchery. Wagner planned to harvest granite from the rubble pile to reinforce the deteriorating edge of the pound where it meets the open bay. He theorized that by this method he could stabilize water temperatures within the pound, promoting faster, more consistent oyster growth.



Photo by Paul Karoff

Originally built to house an oyster hatchery and residence for an on-site manager, the structure is awaiting its next act.



Courtesy Maine Coast Fishermen's Association/Jill Harlow

Construction was halted before plumbing, electrical and insulation were installed, leaving a 3,700-square-foot blank slate.

Unfortunately, Wagner passed away before he could execute his plan. A few of his partners in the venture, along with his widow, completed construction of the structure Wagner had planned to house the hatchery and living quarters for a manager. Then, the pandemic came along; progress stalled before plumbing, electrical, and insulation could be installed; and the project backers drifted away.

Eventually, Barbara Wagner put the Wildcat property up for sale. Unable to find a buyer after several years on the market, she changed course and decided to donate the property, approaching several coastal and marine-focused nonprofit organizations. After weighing how acquiring the working waterfront site could align with its mission to support the commercial fishing community, the MCFA board took the bait and formally assumed ownership of Wildcat last fall.

"The building was empty for a long time and there was growing concern in the community about what was going to happen, so there's a lot of optimism

If Life Gives You Fish, Make Fish Tots



Above: Fishermen process a day's catch, some of which could one day make its way into a new line of fish cakes being developed by Leni Gronros and the crew at Graffam Brothers Seafood in Rockport.



Courtesy Maine Coast Fishermen's Alliance/Scott Gable, top, Nina Murray, bottom

ONE OF THE WAYS the Maine Coast Fishermen's Association advances its mission to sustain fishing communities for future generations is by creating new markets for "underutilized" species—fish that are locally abundant but not widely consumed, such as hake and redfish.

The group has partnered already with Maine processors to develop a smoked pollack dip and a ready-to-eat monkfish stew for the retail market. Now, MCFA is collaborating with Rockport-based Graffam Brothers Seafood on its next value-added product: kid-friendly fishcakes that will be available in school cafeterias starting in the fall.

The venture is part of MCFA's larger strategy to stabilize and expand markets for Maine-caught groundfish. The organization's Fishermen Feeding Mainers campaign is a donation program that provides filets to food banks and schools through out the state. More broadly, MCFA encourages people to move beyond staples like haddock and cod and to try new species, in restaurants and in home kitchens.

The fishcake project, which came out of a conversation at the 2024 Maine Fishermen's Forum, was a good fit for family-run Graffam Brothers, said Vice President Leni Gronros. The 80-year-old company is always looking for over-the-winter work for its employees, when seasonal residents migrate south and the retail business slows down. Gronros envisions being able to use the slow season to make fishcakes. Once frozen, they can be sold throughout the year.

A self-taught chef, Gronros tested several iterations before settling on a recipe to put before the real customers—kids in school cafeterias. Over the past few months, Gronros and collaborators from MCFA, the Maine Department of Education, and the Gulf of Maine Research Institute, have run tastings at dozens of Maine schools. Reviews have been overwhelmingly positive.

The recipe includes Maine-caught flounder, Maine-grown potatoes, carrots, garlic, onion powder, panko, paprika, and pepper. The team has been sampling 1-ounce, Tater Tot-sized "fish tots" that have proven even more popular than traditional fishcakes. Several school culinary departments are busy developing sauce recipes.

Thanks to a U.S. Department of Agriculture School Food System Innovation Grant, administered by Brunswick-based Full Plate, Full Potential, Graffam Brothers was able to purchase the equipment needed to scale up to institutional volume, including a commercial-grade mixer, dicer, large-capacity freezer, and even an automated potato peeler. Graffam has constructed a new food prep area to house the production equipment.

The flounder is purchased at the Portland Fish Exchange, fileted at Saco-based seafood processor Sea Salt, and then shipped frozen to Graffam Brothers, where Gronros and his team work their magic.

Dabs and gray sole, sometimes called American plaice (*Hippoglossoides platessoides*), are among the species classified by regulators as flounder. They were overfished in the around us coming in," said MCFA Executive Director Ben Martens. At the same time, he added, "everyone wants to know what we're going to do with it."

As part of what it anticipates will be a 12-to-18-month strategic planning process, MCFA has held an open house at the site and reached out to year-round and seasonal residents, elected officials, fishermen, and several educational and scientific groups based on the St. George peninsula. An online questionnaire solicited public input, stressing that "no concept is too farfetched, half-baked, or outside the box."

According to Selectboard Chair Jane Conrad, St. George residents will support any effort that will promote the town's working waterfront and commercial fishermen who have long been the mainstays of the local economy. "The community is invested in the future of fishing," she said. "We don't want this to turn into just a beautiful place for people from somewhere else."

Marine-based uses rule out converting Wildcat into a restaurant or wedding venue, but there are myriad other possibilities, ranging from seafood processing to farmers markets to a location for drop-in clinics serving fishermen's mental health and wellness needs. Martens and his colleagues have discussed safety training and gear demonstrations, for which the docks and adjoining building would be well suited. They're also considering aquaculture-related uses, recognizing that many of the fishermen they support are looking at ways to stay on the water while diversifying their income.

There are likely to be different uses for the building itself, the pound, and the working waterfront. Because it was never completed, the building, which sits high on cement pilings to protect it against storm surges, is a blank slate. The long-unused pound will require rehabilitation regardless of its next incarnation. The docks and wharves need repairs from the significant damage they suffered in the historic storms of December 2023 and January 2024. No matter which path MCFA ultimately settles on, the required capital investment will be substantial for a not-for-profit whose current annual

operating budget is $3 million.

"It's an incredibly generous donation, but it's a donation that's going to cost us money," Martens acknowledged. "The pound is broken down. The working waterfront is broken down. The building is not completed."

It may be possible to raise funds, including federal monies with the help of the state's congressional delegation, but the organization will have to define a clear plan for the project before it can engage in serious fundraising. For now, Martens is striving to think big-picture and high-impact.

"If we want to do something aspirational and impactful, we can't be solving the problems of yesterday, or even the problems of today. We need to be anticipating the problems of tomorrow and building the solutions for those problems or opportunities for our fishing and harvesting communities."

MCFA has engaged with a number of potential partners, several of whom are eager to find opportunities to collaborate. Sarah Oktay, who leads the Herring Gut Coastal Science Center, would like to extend the educational programming her organization now provides to children and adults at its Port Clyde campus to "help people understand what a working waterfront is all about, what fishermen fish for, what aquaculture is all about."

Michael Felton founded the Grace Innovation Center, the nation's first pre-K-12 vocational program, located next to St. George's elementary school. He envisions the Wildcat property becoming "a place where our students could work and do research alongside fishermen, scientists, and policymakers."

MCFA's Wildcat project comes at a time of transition for the St. George community. A 2023 fire destroyed the iconic Port Clyde general store, and for several years it has been an ugly scar in the neighborhood next to the docks from where the mailboats ferry passengers back and forth to Monhegan Island. The new owner of the general store parcel, Colby College, will begin construction next year on a building that will house a street-level restaurant and space for a newly formed Center for Resilience and Gulf of Maine over the years and as a result, the market all but disappeared. But flounder stocks rebounded and today fishermen harvest only about 25 percent of their allowable quota. That's why they're considered underutilized—they are locally abundant, sustainably available, but not widely consumed or marketed.

"It's a great, inexpensive protein source from the deep, cold, clean waters of Maine that we can catch in abundance," said Justin Libby, who runs his trawler out of Port Clyde and whose catch is being used in the fishcake initiative. He said there is a decent market for large and medium-sized flounder, but not so much for smaller fish because they are not as appealing as filets when put on a plate or in a fish market display case. Libby said there have even been instances of flounder being sold for bait.

When school starts in the fall, Gronros hopes to be up and running, with the ability to provide 10,000 to 15,000 pieces a month. Under the state's Local Food Fund, schools can send receipts for purchases of Maine-produced food and get back $1 for every $2 spent, up to $10,000 per school. Susan Olcott, MCFA's director of strategic partnerships, said there's more demand for the fish cakes and tots than the team can currently meet.

"While the product was designed for schools, we do hope to have a retail version in the future," Olcott said. "There have been inquiries from parents and community members about purchasing it, which we are thrilled about." ■







Top and right photos courtesy Maine Coast Fishermen's Association/Susan Olcott. Courtesy Leni Gronros

Students at dozens of Maine schools have tested the new fish cakes and tots. The verdict? The tally board (left) shows they loved them.

Economic Impact. Some locals are concerned about how the private college will change the character of the village. MCFA has had conversations with the Colby team about potential opportunities for collaboration.

MCFA has its roots on the St. George peninsula; it was started there 20 years ago by inshore fishermen who worried that they lacked a voice in fisheries management decisions being made at the state and federal levels. Fifth-generation Port Clyde lobster and halibut fisherman Gerry Cushman was one of the founders and continues to serve on the MCFA board. He said the Wildcat property could serve lots of community needs, including as a laboratory for aquaculture experimentation.



Courtesy Joseph Corrado Photography

With access to the waters of midcoast Maine, the Wildcat site could have multiple maritime-related uses.

Cushman said he's intrigued with the idea of implementing a version of Wagner's original idea for the site. "We'd have the ability to create an ecosystem that we can study, see what effects temperatures have on raising scallops, clams, oysters, making seed." (Wagner had secured the required permits from the Army Corps of Engineers, state regulators, and the town to build his proposed oyster hatchery and farm, but those permits have expired.)

"I'm hopeful for a silver bullet," Cushman said. "I believe it's out there."

Camden-based freelance writer Paul Karoff spent most of his career as a university administrator. He currently serves as president of the Friends of Camden Hills State Park.