

Fireworks and Fantastics: The Rowdy Roots of a Beloved Castine Tradition



by John Broadwell
Summer 2020 Intern

In the image above, a parade of Fantastics in Castine stopped at the corner of Court and Pleasant Streets to pose for a photo. July 4th, late 1800s. Photograph taken by William Sargent and donated to the Castine Historical Society by Jane Sweet.

When I was a child, I loved Halloween. I remember some of my costumes specifically - a vampire, a football player, the blue Power Ranger (sadly, my brother got to be the red one). For me, the entire month of October just had a certain spooky energy in the air, and the first thirty days were all just one big leadup to Halloween. Something I quickly learned when I got to Castine this summer though, was that the tradition of children dressing up and walking the streets of town is not reserved just for Halloween. Never in my life had I heard of a Fourth of July celebration in which children dress up in costumes and join in a parade. As it turns out though, the roots of Castine's tradition of children dressing up for the Fourth of July go quite deep.

Castine's beloved Fourth of July children's costume parade probably has its roots in nineteenth-century "Fantastics Parades," also called "Parades of Horribles," like the one shown above.

People across the country in the mid-to-late 1800s regularly participated in these parades on a number of different holidays, including Thanksgiving, Christmas, and the Fourth of July. Primary sources show that these parades occurred in our region as early as the 1840s, including one in Bangor in 1844.¹ They quickly caught on, especially (though not exclusively) in New England, and were common spectacles throughout the mid-to-late nineteenth century.

As with Halloween, the people who participated in these events saw them as an opportunity to pretend to be something else for a day. Often men dressed up as women, poking fun at gender roles, or in rags to rail against the wealthy and other aspects of society that left them downtrodden. They paraded through their towns and often used the events as a time to break social norms.

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extraordinary past and,
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and North America.

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of membership.*

Karen V. Lyons, Editor

A View From The Common

Director's Letter



by Lisa Simpson Lutts

I'm pleased to report on the 2021 season even though, as I write this letter, six weeks remain before we close the exhibits on Indigenous Peoples' Day. We found planning for this season over the winter and spring of 2020-2021 quite challenging because the COVID protocols changed daily. In the end, we did our best to achieve our goal of providing a safe environment for our volunteers, staff, and visitors.

We can't thank our docents and walking-tour guides enough for their work this season, greeting guests, making gift shop sales, and leading walking tours. Although we were not open daily, attendance was good on the days we were. Visitors are eager to get out, see and learn new things, and shop.

We've had a very busy season of educational programs. Most were on Zoom, which let people from throughout the United States participate. Members who live away from Castine were particularly grateful for that option. Next year we will continue to offer some lectures via Zoom to reach this broader audience.

In this issue, you will read about one of our in-person events, the Back in Bloom fundraiser. The event was a huge success because

it allowed us to gather with old and new friends. It was equally successful in raising needed funds for the Historical Society after last year's hiatus. We were also pleased to offer the in-person maritime music concert on the Town Common in August.

While we will be sad to see the exhibit, *Risky Business* come down in October, we are excited to announce next year's exhibit: *Clark Fitz-Gerald: A Sculptor's Life and Vision*. Guest curator and noted Maine art historian, Carl Little, is selecting items to display from our vast Fitz-Gerald archives. He also created a final list of sculptures to borrow that will augment the exhibit. The show will look at four major themes in Clark's work, including his figurative, religious/spiritual, abstract, and nature-based sculptures and preparatory drawings. We are grateful that we received two grants from the Maine Arts Commission to help underwrite this exhibit. One is a Maine Arts Commission organization project grant and the other an arts and humanities project mini grant. We are excited to present this exhibit and feel certain this will be popular!

We wish you a safe and healthy winter season and look forward to seeing many of you next summer.

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Fireworks and Fantastics:
The Rowdy Roots of a Beloved Castine Tradition

The city of Augusta, Georgia had an annual parade of Fantastics involving both children and adults even into the 1930s, but it died out soon after. However, it still lived on in the town’s collective memory. In 2019, *The Augusta Chronicle* reported that, “‘Fantastics Day,’ a tradition resembling today’s Halloween, was held in other cities, but only in Augusta did children, and sometimes adults, take to the streets on the Fourth of July.”² Little did they know that over 1,000 miles away in Castine, the same tradition had developed. Some elementary school students in Augusta even recreated the tradition in 2006, dressing up in costumes and parading through the streets in town.

We know that Augusta, Georgia’s Fourth of July costume parade went on hiatus for several decades from the 1930s until the early 2000s, but the tradition seems to have persisted in Castine. The Castine Historical Society holds in its collection one photograph from the late 1800s and several from the 1950s onward. Newspaper records fill the gaps to show that the tradition of Fantastics continued in the intervening years as well. *The Bangor*

Daily News reported on these Fourth of July parades in Castine in 1907, 1933, and 1950, the last of which drew over 1,000 visitors into town. The town even awarded a prize for the child who arrived in the best Horribles costume in 1950.³ It is easy to see how the contemporary tradition of Castine children dressing in costumes for the Fourth of July has evolved from this other longstanding tradition.

Surprisingly, historians have done very little research into Fantastics parades and the ways in which the tradition may have continued into the present day. Elizabeth Pleck, a historian at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, is the authority who comes up most often in this discussion. In an excellent 1999 journal article, she explored the development of Thanksgiving as a national holiday and the role Fantastics parades played in early celebrations. Both the *Washington Post* (1999) and the *Smithsonian Magazine* (2017) use Pleck’s work to support their articles recounting stories of this obscure tradition.



Group of Fantastics, late nineteenth century. Photo courtesy of the Belfast Historical Society & Museum collection.



Fourth of July, c. 1959. Donated to the Castine Historical Society by Barry, James, and Martha Hamilton.

Records from the 1950s and 1960s provide a lot of documentation for the July Fourth children’s parade. One of the most interesting sources is the famous Castine-based poet Robert Lowell’s 1966 piece “Fourth of July in Maine.” He writes,

*“Another summer! Our Independence
Day Parade, all innocence
of children’s costumes, helps resist
the communist and socialist.
Five nations: Dutch, French, Englishmen,
Indians, and we, who held Castine,
rise from their graves in combat gear—
world-losers elsewhere, conquerors here!”*

If Lowell’s mindset is any indication of how the townspeople were thinking about the Fourth of July parade at the time, then it was an excellent way to embrace patriotism during the uncertainty of the Cold War.

The Fourth of July children’s costume parade is just one of many activities that show how much Castine and its people value the history of their town. Castine supports two excellent museums. The town also goes to great lengths to preserve its historic buildings and elm trees. As it turns out, Castine also honors its history through long-standing traditions, though many living residents may be unaware of their origins.

The costume parade in Castine is still going strong today. Even in 2020 and 2021, as the town canceled its normal parade festivities due to the COVID-19 pandemic, they still made an attempt to put on a spectacle by hosting a drive-by parade in which costumes were encouraged. This annual tradition certainly seems like it is here to stay, come whatever may.

Fourth of July in Castine, 1981. Castine Historical Society Collection.



Endnotes

1. “Bucksport Fantastics.” *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier*. July 22, 1844.
2. Susan McCord, “July 4th ‘Fantastics’ Tradition Lives on in Memories.” *The Augusta Chronicle*. July 3, 2019.
3. “Throngs at Castine for Holiday Events.” *The Bangor Daily News*. July 7, 1950.

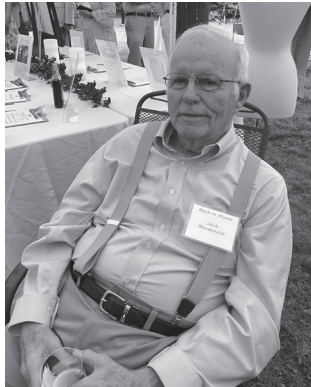
Back In Bloom Fundraiser



by Lisa Haugen, Chair, Development Committee

The Development Committee was excited to organize a summer fundraiser for 2021 after a hiatus in events in 2020. On the evening of July 21, members and friends gathered for “Back in Bloom,” a cocktail party combined with a silent auction. The collection of auction items ranged from a handwoven shawl to a gourmet dinner prepared in your home. A wide variety of items tantalized bidders, including original artwork, boat outings, and items of interest to the Castine collector.

The food was splendidly prepared and served by Trillium Caterers of Belfast. Development Committee member, Penny Carlhian, masterfully designed the party layout under the grand tent, which was full of happy conversation throughout the evening.



Jack Macdonald enjoying the evening

The full bar was busy and attended to by four volunteers. The venue was the beautiful backyard of the Macdonald family property, “The Hedges,” and the honored guest for the evening was Jack Macdonald.

Jack enjoyed sitting in the middle of the action and having the chance to visit with so many friends. During her remarks, Executive Director Lisa Lutts



Attendees Jordan Richards, John Curtin, and Stefanie Scheer Young

spoke about Jack’s significant contributions to the Historical Society during his many years of leadership. These years were transformative for the Historical Society, and Jack was a steady hand and a generous heart during his time on the Board of Directors and as President.

Even the pouring rain could not dampen the evening’s fun and or peoples’ spirits. The audience of 140 or so guests did not seem to mind one bit. Don Tenney was our auction coordinator for the evening, alerting people when the bidding came to a close on each of the three tables.

A big thank you to everyone who attended the fundraiser and to those who bid on auction items. The evening raised a significant amount for the Castine Historical Society, and we greatly appreciate everyone’s generosity!

The Development Committee is now working with the Castine House & Garden Tour chairs, Ruth Scheer and Lynne Dearborn, to plan next year’s event for July 21, 2022! So please save the date.

The Castine Historical Society Gift Shop – The Perfect Solution for Your Holiday Gift Giving!

The 2021 season in the Historical Society’s Gift Shop has been a resounding success. After a year of not traveling and not shopping in person, more people than ever visited the exhibits and shopped in the store.

Over and over, visitors complimented us on the unique Castine-themed gifts we offer. Many items we sell are indeed unique to our gift shop and are sourced from throughout New England. Whether it is our Castine nautical chart gift wares (travel mugs, trivets, coasters, cutting boards, pillows, and throws) or our items displaying the painting of the ship Castine (cutting boards, matches, and prints), we can help you decorate your home!

For the third year, we will also open our Holiday Pop-Up Shop in Compass Rose Books during December. Many thanks to our friends at Compass Rose Books for giving us space for this opportunity.

We always like to offer you new items for the holidays both on our website and in the Pop-Up Shop. So watch for these fun, new gift items in late November—all unique to CHS:

- Castine nautical chart tote bags
- Etched four flags logo wine glasses in a new 28 oz. size
- Castine nautical chart Christmas ornaments
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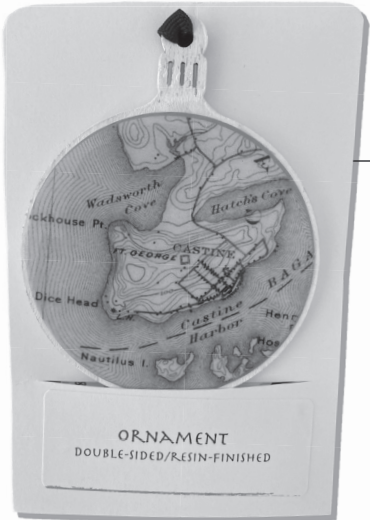
Thank you for your continued support of the Castine Historical Society by purchasing items at our gift shop.

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Vintage Castine town map cuff bracelet



Vintage Castine town map Christmas ornament



Castine nautical chart wine bag



Castine nautical chart tote

The Mystery Behind the Naming of Castine’s Negro Islands

by Lisa Simpson Lutts

Over the past year, the Castine Historical Society has been trying to answer three questions: why are the two islands in the Bagaduce River named Upper Negro Island and Lower Negro Island, who named them, and when?

Our research led us down many interesting rabbit holes, some fruitful, and some not. Let’s start by admitting we still don’t definitively know where the name “Negro Island” comes from. But we are certain the name does not hark back to the Underground Railroad, which is what many people think.

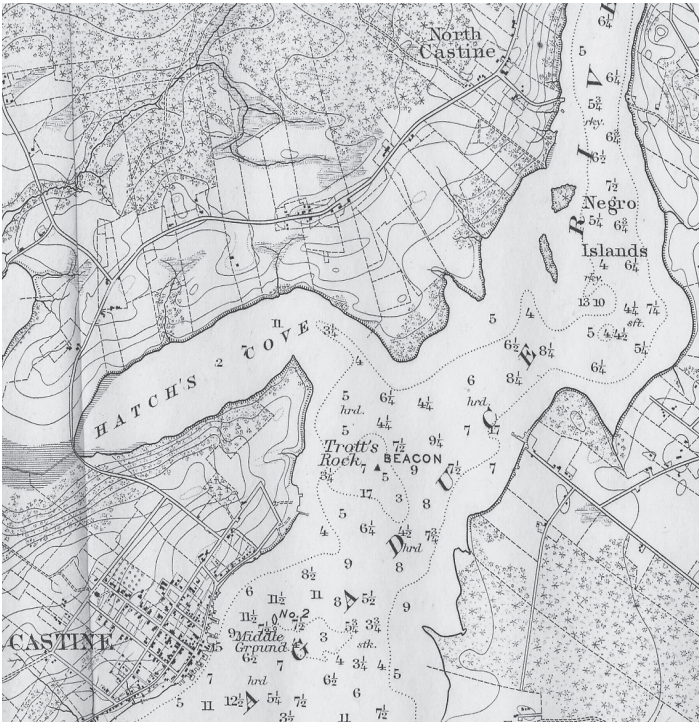
The first recorded use of these names is found in the deeds. The earliest mention is dated February 9, 1790, when Joseph Binney sold the “northernmost parts of two pieces of land known as Negro Island” to Joshua Woodman. A deed paper trail continues from then until the present in which various forms of the name appear. Prior to 1883, deeds referred to them as Negro Island. After 1883, this descriptor was replaced by the “N-word.”

Several written notes in the Historical Society’s research files shed a bit more light on the name’s origin and evolution. *The Bangor Historical Magazine*, Vol. IV, July 1888–June 1889, reprints an 1831 remembrance by Joseph Mansell about growing up in the area in pre-Revolutionary times. He wrote “I lived at Dailey’s Eddy, at the foot of the first narrows on Casteen’s River,¹ over the neck, two miles above Negro Island. In the spring of 1771, I removed to Kenduskaeg...”

Mansell’s narrative shows that he and his parents were living on the Bagaduce River before the spring of 1771. But the question remains: did residents call it Negro Island in 1771 or was he using the term in 1831 when he told his story to help readers recognize the place? Questions like this one pose a dilemma for historians as we try to tease out these scarce details. We doubt Mansell ever thought we would fixate on what to him was a small detail of an island’s name in his life story!

In a similar vein, the Historical Society has four separate written documents in the research files that refer to land and a house on the shore across from the islands. Each one was written in the 20th century, long after the event took place. And like many histories that were handed down over generations, each story is slightly different.

One document states that, according to Jefferson Devereux’s²



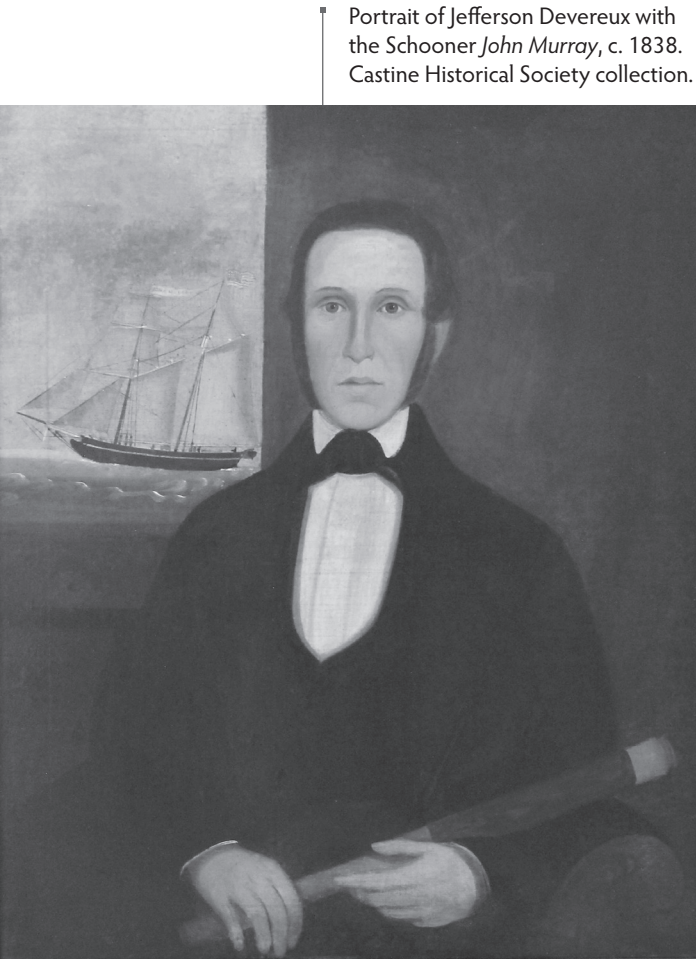
Detail of Castine Harbor, Maine nautical chart from *Atlantic Coast Pilot, Eastport to Boston, United States Coast and Geodetic Survey*, Washington, D.C., 1879. Castine Historical Society collection.

diary, a sea captain came home from a voyage, infected his family with smallpox, and they all died. The bodies were left in the house. Devereux bought the land and wanted to remove the corpses, so he “had black men remove the corpses and whipped them when they refused.” The site where this occurred was identified as the “Ordway property,” near Ferry Road, which is quite close to the islands.

A second document describes the history of Lot 53 on the Bagaduce River. “According to Jefferson Devereux’s diary, for Capt. Devereux was a long-time owner of the property, a sea captain had come home from sea and had given smallpox to all of his family. They all died and the bodies were left in the house. This house was down toward the water and further northerly of the Ordway house. According to the diary, Devereux, who had bought the land, had black men remove the corpses and whipped them when they refused.”

The third document, is a house history recorded by Virginia Koffman in 1984, says “Jefferson Devereux, also a sea captain, held a gun on his servants (slaves?) while they cleaned out the bodies from this first house on tract 54 and 55 of the Peters Plan for Penobscot (later Castine).”

While none of these documents refers to Negro Island, the fourth, a history written by Dorothy Farnham, does. However her account seems to contain a number of errors. In reference to the Walter Ordway House, she wrote: “In 1826, Jefferson Devereaux acquired the house, land, and holdings. The house had been vacant for seven years. It is believed it had been inhabited by an itinerant family and all had died (perhaps of the plague) and the bodies remained in the house. Capt. Devereux “got two n....rs (from ‘N-word’ Island) who had jumped ship from a whaler and he whipped them to get the bodies out and bury them outside the door.”³



Portrait of Jefferson Devereux with the Schooner *John Murray*, c. 1838. Castine Historical Society collection.

Dorothy Farnham’s written account is the most specific including dates and the name of the island. We are not sure when Dorothy, who lived in Castine and Penobscot from 1912–1997, wrote this, but the document entered our collection in 1997. Stories passed down often conflate fact and hearsay, include assumptions made by the teller, and may contain typos or significant errors. Dorothy may have assumed that the two male African Americans mentioned in Jefferson Devereux’s diary came from the island and were living there after jumping off a ship. Of these four documents, hers is the only one to connect the men to Negro Island. If she is correct, her statement suggests that African Americans were living on the islands in the

mid-1820s, but again, this may have been her assumption. The second problem is that in 1826, Jefferson Devereux was 16 years old and it is highly unlikely that he owned land. Is this a typo and should it be 1836? Until we can find the Jefferson Devereux diary this question will remain a mystery.

Whether or not the two African American men came from Negro Island, if the event took place sometime between 1820–1840 there were numerous possible men who could have been forced to remove the bodies. Those African American families whom we know were living in Castine between 1820–1840 include the Niles, Price, DeFleet, and Jackson households, all of which included young males.

The beforementioned deeds and references to the Jefferson Devereux incident remain the only written clues to help illuminate the origin of the islands’ names. We know from the early use of the name on the deeds, as well as from documentation on the Underground Railroad in Maine, that the story that the islands served as a refuge for self-emancipating enslaved individuals on the Underground Railroad is false.

The system of routes and connections that served to facilitate the movement of enslaved people from the American South, which eventually came to be known as the Underground Railroad, was not operative in 1790. Emerging in the 1810s, it didn’t really take off until the 1830s and 1840s. Historians studying Maine’s Underground Railroad have also documented that fugitives from slavery tended to travel to Portland, where they could be taken in by the large African American population associated with the Abyssinian Meeting House. Among Portland’s African American community were active organizers who would arrange transport of these individuals to Canada via a northern overland route rather than by water. ⁴

In our own research, we found scant evidence of abolitionist sympathies in Castine. This is understandable because our trade economy was so closely aligned with the institution of slavery in the very early 19th century with the Caribbean and from the 1820-1850s in the South. While residents may have privately opposed slavery, they knew its end would result in large losses for the Castine economy.

As we documented in the *Risky Business* exhibit, Castine ships carried salted cod to southern ports where it was purchased to feed enslaved plantation workers. Castine captains then bought raw cotton produced by these men, women, and children on plantations to sell to mills in Europe. Once there, the captains bought raw salt for the return trip home to sell to Castine’s fishing fleets to start the trade cycle all over again.

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View of Upper and Lower Negro Islands in the Bagaduce River from Brooksville.

In small-town New England, churches often hosted Abolitionist speakers. We researched the files of both the Castine Meeting House (today’s Unitarian Universalist Church) and the Trinitarian Congregational Church; neither has records documenting Abolitionist speakers.

We did learn that during the brief tenure of Rev. Wooster Parker at the Trinitarian Church that abolition may have been a topic of sermons and discussions. Thanks to one preserved letter in the Boston Public Library, we know that at least one Abolitionist was invited to speak at the Trinitarian Church.

Rev. Parker served as the Trinitarian minister for a brief four years, from 1832–1835, when he suddenly resigned to take a position at a church in Bangor. A September 1834 letter from Rev. Parker to New England Abolitionist Rev. Amos A. Phelps shows that by 1834 Rev. Parker was becoming a firm Abolitionist.⁵ In the letter, Parker expressed a newly found commitment to the Abolitionist movement after he heard Rev. Phelps speak in Bangor. He also invites Phelps to come speak in Castine.

We know that Rev. Phelps must have visited Castine because in 1839 he married Caroline Little, the daughter of Doty and Mercy Little. After Caroline’s early death, Rev. Phelps married her sister, Lucy Little, in 1844. Although Phelps and his wife did not live in Castine, he came here while dying from consumption and stayed in the Castine home of Doty Little in 1847.

One wonders about Parker’s sudden resignation from the Trinitarian Church in 1835. Was the congregation indifferent to his new interest in Abolition and did he find a congregation in Bangor more willing to participate in the movement to end slavery? We need to do more research on this subject.

Returning to the subject of how the islands got their name, it is clear that we will need to do more digging. What we do know from census records is that from at least 1785–1820 enslaved African Americans lived in Castine households. As these men and women won their manumission from their enslavers, it is possible that they needed a place to go until they got on

their feet. Upper and Lower Negro Islands could have served as a refuge, if even a temporary one.

We must also consider the fact that these islands were not a refuge but could have been a place where African Americans were forced to live because they were not welcome in town. Throughout coastal Maine there were at least thirteen Negro Islands and inland there were uninhabitable areas outside of towns where African Americans lived in places with names like Negro Hill or Negro Brook. This designation by whites of separate spaces outside of towns and villages for African Americans to live shows widespread and persistent marginalization and exclusion that negates the idea of “refuge.”⁶

This in fact is the crucial question to answer. Were Castine’s Negro Islands a place of refuge for enslaved individuals or an isolated area away from town where whites forced African Americans to live during the late 18th and early 19th centuries? The Historical Society staff will continue to search for answers as we pore through the town records and discover hidden gems of information about the African Americans who lived and worked in Castine while making important contributions to the town’s growth and development. We look forward to continuing to learn and share our findings with you.

Endnotes

1. The Bagaduce River was known as Casteen’s River during this time.
2. Jefferson Devereux (1810–1892) was a sea captain living in Castine. Among the vessels he captained or owned were the schooner *Patapasco*, built in Castine in 1835 and the *John Murray* built in Castine in 1838. While all these narratives mention the Devereux diary, the original has never been found. We hope a family member still owns it.
3. This is an exact quote from Dorothy Farnham including the reference to “N-word Island”.
4. Price, H.H. and Talbot, Gerald E., *Maine’s Visible Black History: The First Chronicle of Its People*, 2006, pp. 255-257.
5. Letter from Rev. Wooster Parker to Rev. Amos Phelps, September 19, 1834. Collection of Boston Public Library.
6. Price, H.H. and Talbot, Gerald E., *Maine’s Visible Black History: The First Chronicle of Its People*, 2006, pp. 343-344.

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Fourth of July parade in Castine, 1996. *Castine Historical Society, donated by Gardiner Gregory.*

This photo of a Fourth of July parade in Castine shows Katie Fitch (left) and William Bakker (right) holding the banner, with Miles Bisher dressed as a pirate in the middle.

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