



In the late nineteenth century, Islesboro, Vinalhaven, and other Penobscot Bay towns faced a painful transition when their economic mainstays — fish, granite, and wood products — were undercut by interregional competition and market obsolescence. Women had always worked within and around their homes, be it at cleaning, finishing work or outwork, making butter, or marketing garden produce. All of this income-producing effort was disguised in the census records as “keeping house.” Knitting nets was one way island women contributed to the well being of the family during this time of economic hardship. Photo courtesy of the author.

“TAKING UP THE SLACK”: PENOBSCOT BAY WOMEN AND THE NETTING INDUSTRY

BY NANCY PAYNE ALEXANDER

Between 1860 and 1900 the economy of Penobscot Bay communities changed dramatically, from the steady growth and prosperity of their natural resource based economy to the decline in population and a painful transition to manufacturing and service industries. Both men and women had enjoyed independence in their labor in the old economy. The new cash economy made it necessary for them to seek out new ways of supporting their families, with home manufacture, or putting out work, one way of earning an income. They remained independent from an employer's direct supervision and earned cash payment, a change from the face-to-face economy of the earlier part of the century. Netting provided income that helped to take up the slack — a term in netting — in their family incomes while maintaining such remnants of their old way of life as best they could. Dr. Nancy Alexander is a 2006 graduate of the University of Maine's History Department's PhD program. She has a home on Islesboro and both her thesis and dissertation for her degree are related to women's lives and work around Penobscot Bay.

IN 1870 Georgianna Philbrook of Islesboro had no idea she was on the cutting edge of an important industry for her little island community. The daughter of a man who could call himself a farmer, master mariner, and shopkeeper, and a mother who was a traditional housewife managing her household of six children, Georgie spent most of her life on Seven Hundred Acre Island, just off Long Island (Islesboro's early name), surrounded by relatives and members of a few other families. At twenty-four, Philbrook had noted in her diary that she learned to net from her Uncle Jabez in early December of that year. Later in the same month she recorded the sale of dip nets she had knit. She was the first documented woman from the island to reap financial benefit from that skill.¹

Women's net making became a crucial source of cash income for

many island families in Penobscot Bay, filling in the gaps that appeared between their husbands' periods of paid labor. In the early 1800s Islesboro and nearby Vinalhaven were traditional subsistence farming, fishing, and merchant shipping towns, but steadily growing populations brought changes. By mid-century, farming could not provide all the food the communities needed, and inshore and offshore fishing were becoming unstable in terms of the catch.

The second half of the nineteenth century began with all signs pointing to a prosperous future for the population living around Penobscot Bay. The traditional seafaring and resource-based economy continued to grow. Merchant shipping and ship building increased, fishing expanded with new technologies, granite became a crucial building block of America's growing cities, and lumber poured out of the Penobscot River watershed. Optimistic forecasts, however, failed to predict the Civil War, westward expansion, declines in the cod fishery, the use of the steam engines in iron-hulled ships, or concrete as the eventual replacement for granite. The decade of the Civil War appears to have been the peak of prosperity and promise for most Bay residents and communities. Merchant shipping, while still strong, was beginning to feel the effects of steam-powered vessels with iron hulls. Coastal shipping also suffered as the nation's population shifted steadily westward, out of the reach of ocean-going shippers.

In 1870 over 85 percent of the working men on the island went to sea, either fishing or in shipping, often leaving women to care for themselves and their families for extended periods. In the next decade the Bay population began its decline. Participation in the deep sea fisheries diminished, shipping and shipbuilding with wooden vessels declined, and granite was replaced by lime as the Bay's offering to the national building industries. Penobscot Bay's economy was in eclipse, and its people were grounded in a traditional way of life that had sustained them for one hundred years. Cash had replaced barter and face-to-face economics, and the manufacturing juggernaut of the northern United States was in full swing. As late as 1870 store advertisements in the newspapers in both Rockland and Belfast emphasized that they were willing to trade country products for credit on goods, but with the national financial crisis of 1873, commercial interests wanted cash. For people who still traded butter, eggs, and spruce lumber for store credit and owned shares in small family fishing boats, the growing cash requirements were yet another new demand for change.²

These changes forced island communities to seek other sources of

income. Vinalhaven developed a superior granite quarrying economy, and in the 1880s its population grew to more than twice the number of people living on Islesboro. That year also signaled the peak of Vinalhaven's growth, and its population followed the decline of quarrying over the next several decades. Islesboro, with no comparable resources to develop, began losing population between 1860 and 1870, finding itself below its 1850 population by the end of the century. Towns around Penobscot Bay experienced similar hard times, developing alternative sources of work that could provide a living or supplement the family income. By 1900 the three counties that encompassed Penobscot Bay, Hancock, Waldo, and Knox, had lost about 45,000 people from their 1850 population.³

From the peak of prosperity in 1860 to the end of the century, Vinalhaven and Islesboro saw a shift in demographics from a significant majority of men to a slight majority of women. The trend emphasizes the economic difficulties faced by Bay residents who stayed behind while others, mostly male, left for the mainland or for opportunities further west. Living standards were reduced commensurate with the value of the lost income and labor of the departed men. One of the consequences was the rise in numbers of women entering the public labor force; another was the increase in home production of products for sale. The low monetary value placed on women's labor meant that more than one woman in the family had to work in a cash-earning capacity to equal the earnings of a single man. With limited opportunities for wage labor, island families saw a decline in living standards relative to living standards in industrialized parts of Maine. The netting industry, an economy hidden from most economic or industrial indices, was one way island women, men, and children could contribute to the well being of the family during this time of economic hardship.

Island Economies

The Bay's painful transition from extracting natural resources — fish, granite, wood — to a more diverse economy was buffered somewhat by alternative sources of income available to both men and women. Traditionally, Maine coastal men were multi-skilled, working in farming, fishing, and shipping, depending upon the season. These occupations allowed a certain independence of action by the workers, who set their own work schedules and their own priorities. When patched together, these skills could often provide something more than a subsistence existence for men and their families. Women, multi-skilled as well, had always enjoyed a similar independence about their work within the



Penobscot Bay's transition from extracting natural resources to a more diverse economy was buffered by alternative sources of income available to both men and women. Working in their homes, women sewed clothing and shoe tops, braided straw hats, wove simple coarse fabrics, or made fishing and decorative nets. Much of this product found its way to the seaports that rimmed the bay. Gilkey's lighthouse at Grindle Point, established in 1851 at the entrance to the main harbor at Islesboro, suggests the increasingly important connection to jobs and market opportunities on the mainland. Photo courtesy of the author.

sphere of domestic work, be it cleaning, butter making, or market gardening, and their labors, although disguised as "keeping house," contributed to the financial well being of the family. For example, in 1857 Georgie Philbrook's sister Maria informed her fiancé, who was at sea, that she planned to grow pumpkins for sale as her way of adding to the family's coffers.⁴ Maria also helped teach school, although she was not a trained teacher. Their grandmother sold butter. Women's talent for stretching resources and creating marketable goods from their homes supported the efforts of their husbands, fathers, and brothers. These many skills gave men and women flexibility when any particular segment of the economy began to weaken or shift focus, allowing them to reshape their lives by adaptation. A change in multiple segments of the economy, however, required changes in the traditional forms of employ-

Population by Decade

Town	1850	1860	1870	1880	1890	1900
Islesboro	984	1276	1230	1208	1006	923
Vinalhaven	1252	1667	1851	2855	2617	2358

Population of Islesboro and Vinalhaven by decade.

Greatest population for each town is in bold figures.

Source: *U. S. Census Bureau Reports, 1850, 1860, 1870, 1880, 1900,*
and *Maine Register, State of Maine, Augusta, 1891.*

ment. Georgianna Philbrook and her newly acquired skills at knitting nets for local fishermen fit this pattern.

After the Civil War, men gradually moved into quarrying, day labor, and trade, swapping independence for a steady income. Women continued their gradual entrance into the public labor force as service workers, factory workers, and telegraph operators. However, most women worked from their homes producing income, doing piecework and out-work with materials provided by local agents for businesses located elsewhere.⁵ In 1887 Helen Campbell, a reporter for the *New York Tribune*, discussed the dire straits of the needle workers in New York City in her book, *Prisoners of Poverty*. Campbell felt that companies that put out work to “country women,” like those around Penobscot Bay, were taking work away from women who truly needed it in the cities.⁶ Rather than challenging the low wages paid for the work, Campbell assumed that somehow rural poverty was better than urban poverty. Her bias, shared by many, demonstrated that urban reformers remained out of touch with the deteriorating rural economy of the late nineteenth century.

Home production frequently consisted of sewing clothing and shoe tops, braiding straw into hats, weaving simple coarse fabrics, and, in parts of the Bay, making fishing and decorative nets. Georgie Philbrook was one of the first women on record on Islesboro to earn cash for her net making, which was the first and perhaps the only kind of piecework performed by women on Islesboro. The island of Vinalhaven, also in Penobscot Bay and a short day’s sail from Islesboro, had a longer history of net making, dating back to the 1840s.

Making nets, or knitting, was a skill that women and men along the coast had practiced since the first seasonal fishing settlements in the early seventeenth century. Net making for personal use continued

throughout the period, and exists even today, with materials for netting available in most marine supply stores along the coast. As the fisheries of southern Maine and Massachusetts increased in the mid nineteenth century, the demand for nets created a need beyond the capacity of fishermen to fill for themselves, particularly with the large trawling nets in use after 1860. Inland fishing opportunities and increased sport fishing added to the demand. According to records from Vinalhaven, net making evolved into an organized system of commerce in this region perhaps as early as the 1840s and reached its peak in the 1880s and 1890s.⁷ Particular nets were designed for specific fisheries: dip nets for minnows, funnel-like nozzles for eels, trap heads for lobsters, and bags for crabs. Twine companies, located mostly in Boston and New York, created networks of agents along the coast to provide women and men with the appropriate weight twines for various net designs. They also provided fixed patterns, or recipes, for each net, so they could offer their customers a consistent product of regular size, strength, and capacity. This industry was particularly strong in Islesboro and Vinalhaven, where forms of women's employment were more scarce than they were in the more diversified economies of the mainland towns. As women grew in experience and as women's journals began featuring new designs for fine needlework skills, the netting industry included among the more mundane recipes fancywork versions of basic netting stitches, resulting in elaborate laces using variations on netting stitches, adding darned netting stitches and crocheted designs as well.

An additional strain on family finances occurred when men went to sea for extended periods. Mrs. Arline Pendleton of Islesboro, born in the last half of the nineteenth century, recalled in an interview for a twentieth-century history of Islesboro: "my neighbor taught me to knit when I was eight years old. It has afforded me a great deal of comfort. At one time knitting (or should it be netting?) was the salvation of Islesboro. When the men went to sea and left their families for months on end, netting was a means of survival. The entire family from youngest to oldest would take part."⁸

The Netting Industry

Information about net making is limited today because records were scattered or discarded. However Vinalhaven's centennial town history, written in 1889, offers some information about its extent.⁹ Barbara Morton's *Down East Netting: A History and How-To of Netmaking* includes a brief history of Vinalhaven's industry and speaks of the most unusual

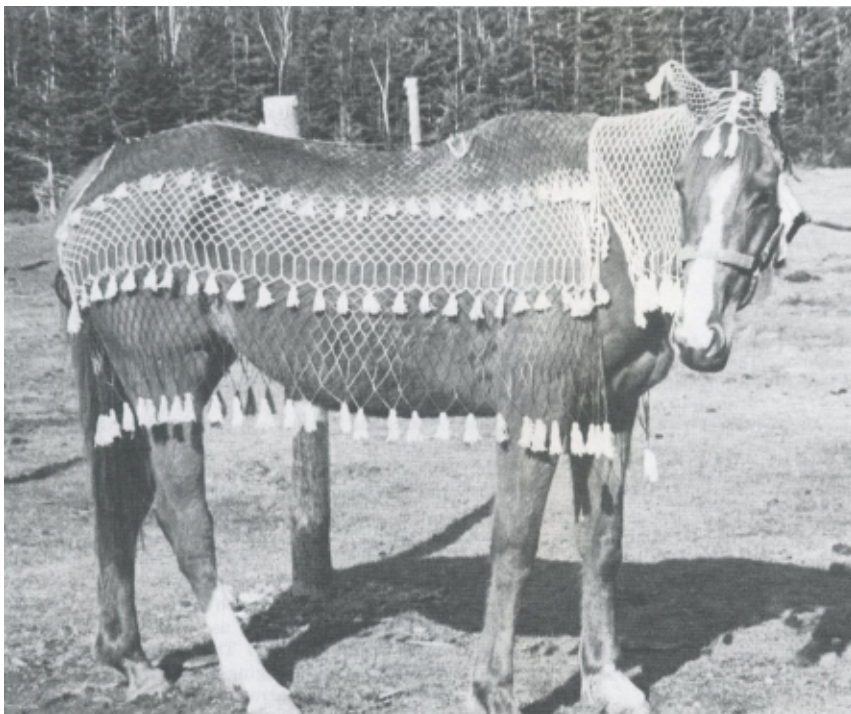
order the Vinalhaven netters filled: an elephant net!¹⁰ In the early twentieth century many corporate fishing fleet owners turned from domestically made nets to less expensive, good quality nets available from other countries. Netting continued to some extent, however, on both Islesboro and Vinalhaven, and during the Second World War, when commercial fisheries could no longer import nets, Vinalhaven and Islesboro women found their old needles and went to work filling orders. They also made nets for the military to hold hot-air balloons with their cargoes hung below.

Existing netting records from Vinalhaven include amounts of finished goods shipped off the island, but as Morton points out, it is difficult to tell how much of this product originated in Vinalhaven and how much originated from other towns that were part of the Vinalhaven agent's territory. The Islesboro Historical Society has a few records left by the island's agents, some of which were salvaged from the town dump in 1976 by Wayne Rolerson and presented to the Historical Society. These few records show a small community's involvement in the industry and hint at how it grew and who was involved in making nets. Because the names of makers are available from these records, we know the Islesboro agents dealt only with people within the township of Islesboro, unlike the much larger region managed by the agent on Vinalhaven. This local information about the families, mothers, fathers, and children who netted tells the story of economic hardship and adaptation on a small island town.

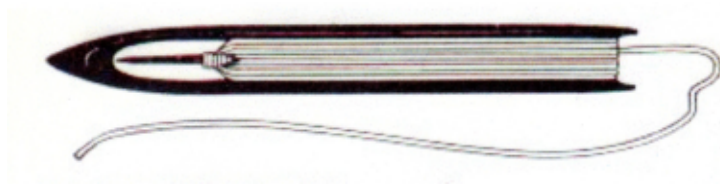
The netting industries on Vinalhaven and Islesboro developed along different paths. In the nineteenth century it was common for commission merchants to distribute materials for shirts, vests, coats, shoes, and hats to rural areas throughout New England. Local agents collected the finished product and returned it to Boston or New York for sale. For these kinds of piecework, women had to be trained to some degree. In the case of netting, women and men learned the trade as youngsters from family members or friends and had been making nets for years. Agents found trained coastal workers ready to take up their needles.

Vinalhaven's Netting History

The netting industry began in Vinalhaven in 1843 on a small scale. Local history offers no information about its origin: did an enterprising citizen seek out this business, or did a businessman from Boston seeking a labor force make the first contact? In 1852 islander John Carver followed up on an existing Vinalhaven industry and began collecting con-



Among a variety of other items, women made nets that kept biting flies off horses. These nets covered the head, neck, and back and included decorative touches such as tassels. Photograph by Lance Morton, used with the permission of Pea Soup Publishing Company, Vinalhaven, Maine.



Knitting nets was a skill women and men along the coast had practiced since the first seasonal fishing settlements in the early seventeenth century. The basic tool for net-making was a shuttle that produced the broad weave necessary for fish netting. Shuttle from www.bertaut.com, accessed January 13, 2008.

tracts for horse nets, designed to protect urban horses from the hordes of biting flies that could cause havoc with runaway wagons and carriages in crowded areas. These nets covered the head, neck and back of the horse and included decorative touches such as tassels. Some of the most elegant horse nets were made from silk. While Vinalhaven netters produced other kinds of nets, the horse nets appear to have dominated their production through 1890. In 1863 Carver received almost a ton of twine for fly nets, and about the same in twine for seine nets. His company passed through several hands, but the major source of twine was always the American Net and Twine Company of Boston, and most of the finished work was sold back to the company. Vinalhaven's history notes that at one time knitting and weaving nets was carried on the year round, employing more than four hundred persons, "but at present [c.1888] not so many are employed and nothing is done during the summer months."¹¹ By 1889 the Vinalhaven business had been mechanized, with looms that did much of the weaving and netting located in a large building in downtown Carver's Harbor. The company produced over 140 different designs, including striped hammocks, fancy work, and all the necessary fishing nets.

The 1900 addendum to the town history reported that "the net business furnishes employment for from 700 to 1000 people, including Port Clyde and Deer Isle."¹² The figure of 1000 netters in the three communities is difficult to accept without proper records. The Deer Isle Historical Society published a small biography, *An Island Woman: Salome Sylvester Sellers, Deer Isle, Maine, 1800-1909*, that included no references to net making on that island, despite the fact that Sellers supported herself by making quilts and knitting with yarn. However, the *Industrial Journal*, published in Bangor in 1895, reported over 300 people netting on Deer Isle.¹³ No women reported themselves as net makers in the Deer Isle census, but then only one woman reported herself as a netter on Islesboro, and only 25 Vinalhaven women did so in 1880 when the town history suggested 400 people, both women and men, were so employed.

Islesboro's Netting History

The origins of netting on Islesboro are more obscure than on Vinalhaven. The first known mention of netting in any form is the 1870 Georgianna Philbrook diary. Philbrook wrote of her widowed aunt Ruhama Philbrook, who was eighty-four: Hama went to Long Island [the old name for Islesboro] after some twine.¹⁴ The source of the twine is not mentioned, nor its intended use, but the likelihood that she was making

nets is strong, particularly as the netting outwork system had been in place on nearby Vinalhaven for twenty-five years. We have no information as to whether there was an independent Islesboro agent working directly with a twine company at that time. A Vinalhaven-based agent would probably have used an Islesboro sub-agent for farming out the netting assignments, and the fact that John Carver had people working for him in other towns around the bay supports this notion. On December 5, 1870, about three weeks after Hama received twine, Georgianna Philbrook “went to Capt. Jabez [Philbrook, an uncle] to learn how to knit dip nets.”¹⁵ By the end of the month she had completed eighteen nets. Even though her family members fished commercially, Philbrook did not make these nets for their use but to sell to someone on Islesboro. In late 1873 Philbrook received twenty dollars for nets and thirty-five for ear tips, and in the following January she made more ear tips and some hammocks. Philbrook may have omitted some of the netting transactions in her diaries, but these figures do give an idea of the earning possibilities from netting. Philbrook also earned money by nursing invalids, cutting men’s hair, and minding the family store.

The first known agent’s ledger for Islesboro netting is dated 1873 and appears to have belonged to Lura Philbrook, who is not directly related to Georgianna Philbrook. Mrs. Philbrook and her husband Thomas appear only in the 1870 Islesboro census. It is likely that Thomas’s place of origin was Vinalhaven, and he moved to Islesboro before 1870, remaining a few years and trying to start a netting operation similar to the one in Vinalhaven. He then departed with his wife to places unknown — part of that transient Bay population looking for better opportunities elsewhere.¹⁶

The ledgers kept by Mrs. Philbrook are distinguished by their clear writing and meticulous figures. The Philbrooks conducted their business exclusively with the American Net and Twine Company, the same company that contracted on Vinalhaven. The letters were addressed to “Dear Madam.” Although this does not confirm Mrs. Philbrook as the agent of the business, the account book also contains comments like “Statement of Twine sent Mrs. Thomas Philbrook, September 15th, 1873.”¹⁷ Confusion concerning the identity of the agent comes with certain letters addressed to “Madam” having the name P. D. Hatch written over them in pencil, as though Hatch was practicing his signature. By 1875 the letters from the American Net and Twine Company were addressed to Mr. P. D. Hatch, and also to Mrs. P. D. Hatch. After 1875 all the letters were addressed to Mrs. Hatch, and by the end of the decade all

traces of Mrs. Philbrook are lost. Her entries into the ledger do last until 1877, judging from the handwriting, but the business correspondence with Mrs. Hatch suggests that Philbrook may have been simply the bookkeeper at that time. Perhaps the Hatches purchased the business from Philbrook, or perhaps she had been employed by them all along.¹⁸

Subsequent netting records, scribbled in pencil by the Hatches, are much less legible than Lura Philbrook's precise entries. Pyam D. Hatch, the ostensible owner of this business, was listed in the 1870, 1880, and 1900 censuses as a farmer, and his wife as keeping house. Yet they operated a business for thirty-five years that provided a major source of income for the people of Islesboro. After Hatch's death his wife Myra [Aunt Emma] Hatch was listed in the 1910 Census as agent for the American Net & Twine Co. She had actually managed the daily business for years, dealing with many more companies than just the American Net and Twine Company. According to the Islesboro town history, at one time there were fourteen companies seeking Islesboro net workers.¹⁹

The netting records left by Lura Philbrook provide only the amounts of money expended for materials and offer no information about netters or their incomes. In 1878, for example, Philbrook recorded a "Statement of Checks" totaling \$1230.33 between January 21 and October 19. By the end of the decade the Hatches were using a different system to record their business, including names of netters, an occasional comment about the quality of their work, and limited information about the orders. Even the names appear to have been incomplete, with many informal forms of address for close friends and family. The Hatches had large orders and many netters working for them, and they managed large amounts of money, taking a 5 percent commission.

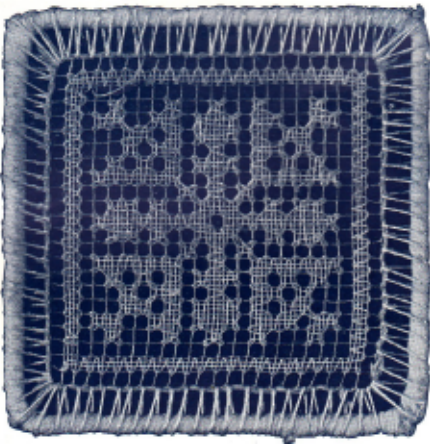
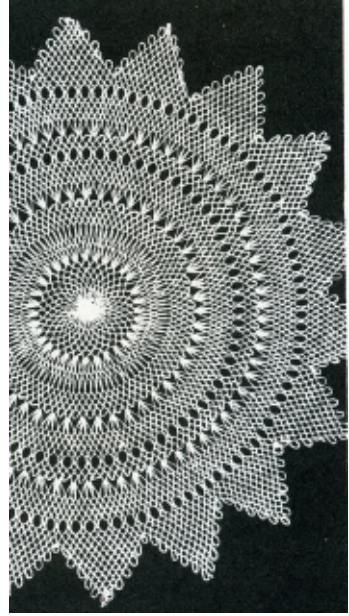
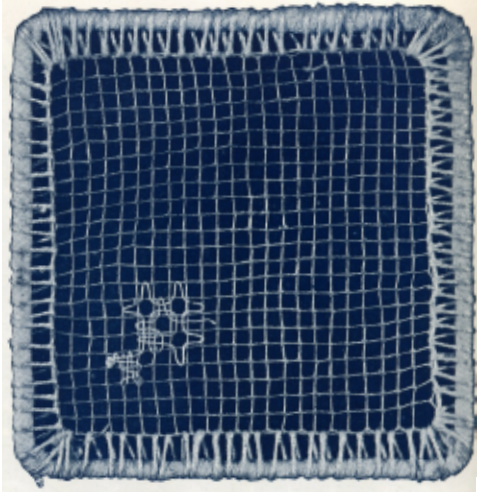
Evolution of a new business would not be complete without some competition. A ledger called the "E. G. C. Acct. Book", held by the Historical Society, begins in 1885 and mentions two orders placed in November for crab nets.²⁰ The account book is believed to belong to Mr. E. G. Coombs, a young man who ran a grocery store located on the northern end of Islesboro. His accounts were with U.S. Net and Twine Company of New York, a different company than that used by the Hatches, Mrs. Philbrook, and the Vinalhaven agents. The ledger book is large, carefully preserved, and of good quality paper, all suggesting an optimistic businessman. Coombs kept precise records, leaving information on types of nets, sizes, materials, and net-makers. He also included the amount of money paid to each maker and other expenses, along with his 10 percent commission. Coombs's business did not survive for more



Like Georgianna Philbrook, Roxy Parker knitted a variety of marketable products. In this case, she uses a chair back to keep tension on her net. Agents for the American Net and Twine Company provided her materials; the first known twine agent's ledger for Islesboro is dated 1873, and this business was later subsumed by P. D. Hatch, who eventually employed around a hundred island people. When the 1938 Federal Minimum Wage and Hour law passed, the Hatches could no longer afford to pay their knitters, and the business folded. Photo courtesy Islesboro Historical Society.

than a few years, judging from the account book. As there is no extant island memory of Coombs as an agent for netters, it is possible that he served as a sub-agent on the north end of the island for a few years until the Hatches figured out how to manage the whole island themselves. On the other hand, since Coombs used a competitor to American Net & Twine, it is more likely that he was competing for island labor. Fortunately, both the Hatch and Coombs records are quite complete for the year 1886, and by combining them, it is possible to see the number of Islesboro people making nets, to learn who they were, and with a little more research to discover their ages, occupations, and other information. Undoubtedly there were other netters on the island, but the large number of entries in the two ledgers expose patterns.

Attitudes about net making were curious; netters generally considered their labor as unworthy of reporting to census-takers, as the reports for 1880 show only one Islesboro woman employed in the industry. In 1900 none reported netting as their occupation. The state's Manufacturing and Industry census recorded no such activities on Islesboro for



The island knitting industry embraced a variety of household and industrial items. Filet lace, a form of Italian fancy work, was based on a net square netted or crocheted into elaborate designs for table cloths, doilies, furniture protectors, and clothing lace. Featured here is a mesh doily made by Lura Hatch of Islesboro, courtesy of Islesboro Historical Society, and two squares with net foundation for Italian crochet filet lace, courtesy of *Variety*, Book No. 1, *Italian Cut Work and Filet Lace* (Boston: Carmela Testa & Co., 1931).

1880 or 1900. No men reported themselves as netters in either Census. Perhaps women did not recognize the validity of their labor or consider it a job worthy of reporting. Netting would seem no different from trading eggs for children's shoes, which was never recognized as a form of income in public records or government inquiries. Women had not been asked about their work for purposes of government record-keeping until the 1860 census. Or perhaps the intermittent and seasonal nature of the industry explains the gaps in the census. If so, this highlights the independence of the island people who for generations had chosen how and where they would perform their labor rather than following the dictates of a regular employer.

Over 200 people are listed in the two sets of ledgers as making nets in 1886; Coombs employed 104 and Hatch, 115. There was some overlap between the two groups, and there were some who were not identifiable. In the end 180 individuals made nets with only 165 individuals specifically identifiable in official documents for the year, but they constituted about over 16 percent of the entire island population, not including the agents. Several regularly employed people were making nets on the side. Almost six times as many women and girls netted as men and boys. Girls under the age of sixteen made up almost one-fifth of all female netters. Boys under the age of sixteen made up almost one-third of the male netters. In all, there were 457 transactions with the netting agents in 1886, with the number per netter ranging from a single transaction to nine transactions over the course of the year. A transaction might consist of a ten-year old girl making a single lobster head and receiving fifteen cents; for more diligent netters, a transaction might represent payment for three dozen ear tips, and it might be one of seven over the course of the year.

Sidney Winslow's *Fish Scales and Stone Chips* explains that in 1886 a minnow net 20 inches long, made of 30/6 thread with a 1-inch mesh, brought 8 cents; one 12 inches long, 4 cents. The E. G. Coombs ledger shows payments of five cents for little crab nets and 12 cents for minnow nets — still hardly a windfall. Winslow added that by today's standards, the prices paid the knitters seem ridiculously low; but when one considers that Mrs. Hatch's father, Alpheus Pendleton, a contractor who built many of the large summer cottages at Dark Harbor, paid his carpenters only \$2 to \$2.25 for a ten-hour day, the prices do not seem so far out of line for those times.²¹ Comparing carpentry to net making shows the pay difference for what was considered mostly women's work. In order for a woman to make \$2.25 a day netting, she would have to make

eighteen minnow nets in one day, which would take more than ten hours. While the task did not require physical strength, it did require training, nimble fingers, and skill.

Women netters in Islesboro in the late nineteenth century ranged in age from seven to seventy-seven, with a median age of thirty-six years. The seventeen most active women, making more than four transactions during the year, had a median age of thirty one, including young single women, women with young families, and a widow who also took in boarders to help support herself. For men, the ages ranged from nine to seventy-seven, with a median age of thirty-one — five years younger than the women, but also including a fair number of retired fishermen. Coombs used the word “diverse” to describe cooperative work on large nets, probably trawls for the large corporate fishing fleets of southern New England.

To summarize the character of the women and men in the ledgers, younger men and younger women did most of the netting, although the women’s median age was five years older than the men, and the women constituted 85 percent of the netters, making more transactions and earning more money in the process. This means of earning cash appears to have been well suited to the home-centered lives of young single women and young mothers, which helps explain its popularity among the younger women.

Netting also fit well with the other hidden source of cash income for island women: the wealthy urbanites from Philadelphia, New York, and Boston who were building elaborate summer homes on the southern end of the island. These summer residents wanted assistance in managing their households and counted on local women and men to help them, along with the household staff who accompanied them to the island. As netting could be seasonal, it did not interfere with this summer employment for local women. In addition younger males who were still attending school could earn money before they were old enough to take on a full-time occupation. The summer colony was a major source of employment for islanders of all ages, including year-round work for men as caretakers or in housing construction.

The kinds of nets made on Islesboro differed from Vinalhaven’s horse nets. While ear tip orders appear regularly, the full horse nets were not common in Islesboro. Various sized dip nets, crab nets, and lobster nets dominate the ledgers. There were also numerous orders for long, narrowing, round eel nozzles. Landing nets and bags, both square and round, were also ordered, and during Philbrook’s years there were orders

for hammocks. The Hatch and Philbrook records include directions for proper sizing and netting of specific net design:

Boston, March 13, 1874

Madam,

We send one case + one bale, case contains 170 funnels hammock netting same as last week. Will send more twine next week white + red — be sure and have the hammocks full length. The bale contains 108 lbs 22/3 Gilling twine for minnow dip nets make 25 dozen 12 inch balance 24-30-36-48 in part each. These sizes we are all out of want some immedately [sic] we sent last fall some 18/3 Gilling twine for minnow dip net howeverly [sic] where are they have heard nothing from them.²²

Boston, March 24, 1874

Madam,

We sent last Saturday steamer 218 lbs 12/24 soft for hammock you do not get the hammock quite long enough the coarse mesh wants to be a yard long on each end yourse [sic] are short one row of meshes on each end.²³

The precision and speed expected from the island netters shows how production of all kinds of goods was shaped by the demands of the machine age. Efficiency, consistency, and speed were the new operative expectations. Island life did not lend itself to such demands, but fortunately, enough people were contributing to the agents' inventory that independent ideas of how, when, and how much remained in the hands of the knitter.

No requests for fancy work appear in the records, but netting skills were expanded into more elaborate uses than just hammocks, eel nozzles, and horse nets. Filet lace, a form of Italian fancy work, was based on a net square, and then netted or crocheted in elaborate designs for table cloths and doilies, furniture protectors, and lace for clothing. Numerous patterns could be worked in a circular motif as well. Patterns for netting designs appeared in ladies' journals and magazines. Considered an accomplishment" for young ladies, such needlework was valued for its decorative assets in the Victorian and Edwardian eras. Examples of decorative work rarely show themselves these days because they were often sewn onto collars and cuffs or coats and hats, and have served their purpose. Pieces may have graced holiday tables over the years, and dining

takes its toll. The antimacassars on the backs of chairs and arms of sofas wore through, and were not replaced.

Net making was not a lucrative employment, but it helped pay the bills. Working for E. G. Coombs, Rose Adams was paid a total of \$7.72 for five transactions involving minnow, dip, and crab nets during a ten-month period. Adams was thirty-one years old and married to a farmer. Anna Cobb, age forty-six, whose husband was a mariner, made four transactions, earning a total of \$10.39 for her minnow dip nets and crab nets. Her daughter Annie, age eight, earned \$3.44 making minnow nets. Ethel Knowlton, whose father was a farmer, earned \$22.30, while her sister Lenora, age fourteen, earned \$28.26, and their mother Elzina earned \$7.22. A mariner's son, Lincoln Freeman, age nine, earned \$3.80 while his mother earned at least \$10.10. These small additions made an important difference in the household economy.

Newspapers from the mainland tell what the money earned by netting could buy. Most islanders grew some of their food, but they purchased certain staples along with other household needs. The *Rockland Free Press* showed dress gingham at eight cents a yard, with the ordinary dress taking between five and seven yards. Women's heavy grain button boots were \$1.50, and men's first quality candee rubber boots, "with extra thick tap" were \$3.00. Beef was ten cents a pound, cheese, twelve cents a pound, flour, \$6.00 a barrel, and corn, fifty-six cents a bushel. Winter apples were fifty cents a bushel, and choice butter, twenty cents a pound.²⁴ A net maker earning \$6.00 could purchase four tickets to the traveling minstrel show at twenty-five cents each, five pounds of beef, two dozen eggs, two pairs of shoes for daughters, and fabric for at least two dresses. The music store in Rockland had a secondhand piano for sale at \$35.00, an item worth working toward for some families. Fourteen-year-old Lenora, with her \$28.00 from netting, could make an excellent beginning on her hope chest contents. Belfast's *Republican Journal* reported slightly lower prices for farm products, perhaps because Belfast was the market town for the good farming country in the hills behind the town. Dry goods, however, remained about the same.²⁵ Netting provided many of the essentials for family well being, but it also made affordable some of the luxuries that helped take the edge off rural poverty.

Net makers were evenly distributed throughout the Islesboro population. In 1880 slightly over 58 percent of the working men were seamen or mariners, and in 1886, almost 58 percent of the households in which nets were made were headed by men who were seaman or mariners. The

same correlation existed for fishing and farming families. Farm families constituted just under 25 percent of the population in 1880, and in 1886, about 20 percent of the net makers came from households headed by farmers. These statistics suggest an island-wide need for additional funds, and the ability to net gave members from all island households an opportunity to contribute to the family income. Half of all the women who netted were married, with thirteen widows and the rest unmarried girls or women, again a relatively balanced distribution. Single men netted more than married men, but the disparity was slight, and it reflected the very young age of many of the males who knitted. Nor was netting work limited by age or marital status.

Of the thirteen women who were widows, twelve headed their own households, revealing another element of change in island life. Between 1850 and 1900 the number of older women on Islesboro who were heads of household increased by a factor of more than six, from eight to forty-three, even though the island population remained about the same; the widowed women netters were working to support themselves. In addition, family sizes dropped on the island and the number of three- or four-generation households declined. Due to the departure of so much of the population, there was available housing for these smaller, more separate households, and perhaps that is the reason why so many widows were living by themselves. Another possibility is that the population leaving the island did not include the older generation of a family, but consisted mostly of the younger members, who left grandparents behind. Either way, the elderly had to adapt to new conditions at an advanced age.

The various ages of female netters suggests different goals for the women. Georgianna Philbrook, who learned how to net for an agent earlier than most people from Islesboro, began when she was twenty-five years old, and she was still netting seventeen years later. Her life was relatively confined on the small island, which hosted at most ninety-five people, many of them relatives. She needed to contribute to the household income of her father's house. She left for the mainland for a few years, but returned to Acre Island by 1887. On April 14 of that year Philbrook, age forty-two, finished her "fourth lot dip nets, had 18, 30 at 45 cts.," and on April 20 began making ear tips: "take up 24 across 20 times. After the foundation is narrowed off, take up the ear 24 stiches [sic] round and net 20 times before narrowing."²⁶ Girls under the age of fourteen were making nets at the same time, and, in fact, single girls between fifteen years and thirty were among the highest producers on the



The insularity and solitude of island life put a premium on community interaction, particularly during periods of economic stress. It was common for women to join together in afternoon netting groups after their chores were completed, carrying their netting stands from one home to another. This sociability was an important source of community stability. Photo courtesy of the author.

island; they may well have been putting the money aside in anticipation of marriage. The highest producers, however, were married women with families, looking for a way to help with family expenses.

A Netting Community

When communities undergo stress, their local institutions take on increased importance. On Islesboro, the Baptist Church Sewing Circle, located at the southern part of the island provided a forum in which women socialized, shared their news, and kept in touch with their community. Work for the Circle benefited the church and the island as a whole, providing charitable support for indigent families and for island-wide projects. Since netting was a multigenerational activity shared widely across the island, it was common for women to join afternoon netting groups as well, after daily chores were completed. Netting stands were easily carried from one place to another, and they could accommodate four netters each. This sociability was an important source of community stability at a time when economic and social stresses were impinging on island families. As community members left for the mainland, those who stayed behind found these informal gatherings an

important means of sharing feelings and negotiating changes. In the end, however, island netting and island women could not hold the community together in the old way. Despite the growing summer community, limited year round employment opportunities and lack of diversity in the local economy made remaining on Islesboro difficult for most people. Both men and women continued to depart the island in large numbers, and in the early twentieth century, only about 350 people remained, down from its peak of 1,260 in 1860. In 2007 the population had rebounded to about 700 people.

Netting in Retrospect

Netting was a learned skill, but it was grounded in the traditional women's labor of sewing and clothing production. Netting was also grounded in the tradition of women's productive gatherings, such as working quilts or winding webs for weaving. As change accelerated on the islands in the Penobscot Bay, women became netters, some serving also as netting agents for distant twine companies. Women were skilled managers as well as producers, and they often worked within a network of similarly skilled women. The educational systems on Vinalhaven and Islesboro were more than sufficient for the arithmetic and the writing that such business management required, and women met with little difficulty as business agents. Women had been similarly successful in the millinery trade for centuries, so moving into the management of net making was not surprising. Official documents did not credit women with these responsibilities; nor did the women themselves take credit until the 1910 census reported Mrs. Hatch as "agent for American Net & Twine Co." However, the importance of their work and the overall importance of netting cannot be disguised by its absence from the public record.

The netting industry provided a means for island people of all ages to contribute to the well being of their households, but it was particularly welcome among women, who had limited employment opportunities available to them. Netting offered women a way to "take up the slack" in their household economies in the absence of a strong sea-going economy to employ their husbands. Unfortunately, the earning power of women was not sufficient to maintain family living standards, and island women, just like island men, eventually departed, seeking opportunities elsewhere.

Today netting is viewed as a skill from the past, something to be exhibited, and it serves as a reminder of the hard times that Penobscot Bay

people experienced at the end of the nineteenth century. The skill is fast disappearing, so in order to preserve that knowledge both the Vinalhaven and Islesboro Historical Societies provide information for those interested in knowing more about it. Vinalhaven Historical Society has an informative exhibit panel on the netting industry on permanent display, including both text and photographs. During summer 2006 the Islesboro Historical Society arranged several exhibits and gave demonstrations of traditional techniques.

And what of Georgie Philbrook? She stayed on the her island to care for her aging parents, and then, like so many others, she found it necessary to leave Islesboro in search of new opportunities. She died in the early twentieth century and is buried in Waldo County. Philbrook was not an astute practitioner on the cutting edge of the island economy, but she was certainly in the vanguard of individuals who adapted to changes and did their best to maintain a way of life distinctive to Penobscot Bay and the coast of Maine.

NOTES

1. Georgiana Philbrook, Diary for 1870, Islesboro Historical Society, Islesboro, Maine.
2. Nancy Payne Alexander, "Keeping house": The Hidden Economy of Maine Coastal Women, 1850-1900, Ph.d. dissertation, University of Maine, 2006.
3. Geospatial & Statistical Data Center, University of Virginia, <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus>, accessed October 28, 2006.
4. Maria Philbrook to Ambrose Philbrook, June 15, 1856, Dear Ambrose Letters, Special Collections Department, Fogler Library, University of Maine, Orono, Maine.
5. Alexander, "Keeping house."
6. Helen Campbell, *Prisoners of Poverty* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1887), p. 115.
7. Barbara M. Morton, *Down East Netting: A History and How-to of Netmaking* (Camden, Maine: Down East Books, 1988), p. 3. Figures given for net makers in the Islesboro and Vinalhaven town histories suggest 1880 to 1900 were the peak years.
8. Islesboro Historical Society, *History of Islesboro, Maine, 1893-1983* (Portland, ME: Seavey Printers, 1984), p. 102-3.
9. Town of Vinalhaven, *A Brief Historical Sketch of the Town of Vinalhaven From Its Earliest Known Settlement, Prepared by Order of the Town on the Occasion of Its One Hundredth Anniversary* (Rockland, Maine: Free Press, 1889).
10. Morton, *Down East Netting*, p. 4.

11. Town of Vinalhaven, *Brief Historical Sketch*, p. 73.
12. Town of Vinalhaven, *Brief Historical Sketch*, p. 81.
13. Caroline Smith Rittenhouse, *An Island Woman: Salome Sylvester Seller, Deer Isle, Maine, 1800-1909* (Peg Mitten Press: Stonington, Maine, 1998[?]); *Industrial Journal*, January 18, 1895, in W.H. Bunting, *A Day's Work: A Sampler of Historic Maine Photographs, 1860-1920* (Portland: Tilbury House, 1997).
14. Philbrook Diary, November 16, 1870.
15. Philbrook Diary for 1870, December 5, 1870. Her \$55 earnings converts to \$973 in year 2005 dollars.
16. United States Census Office, United States Census, 1870 [microform], Knox County, Maine.
17. Netting Ledger, Hatch Family Papers, Accession no. 677, Islesboro Historical Society.
18. Islesboro Historical Society, *History of Islesboro*, p. 102, states that Pyam Hatch began the business in 1888, but that history was written before the archiving of the Hatch Papers and netting ledgers utilized here.
19. Islesboro Historical Society, *History of Islesboro*, p. 102. This converts to approximately \$26,346.87 in year 2005 dollars.
20. E. G. Coombs Account Book, "In Account with U.S. Net and Twine Co., Inc., NY," Accession No. 661, Islesboro Historical Society.
21. Sidney Winslow, *Fish Scales and Stone Chips* (Portland, Maine: Machigonne Press, 1952), p. 42-43.
22. American Net and Twine Co. to Madam, March 13, 1874, Hatch Family Papers.
23. American Net and Twine Co. to Madam, March 24, 1874, Hatch Family Papers.
24. Rockland *Free Press*, January 13 and January 20, 1886.
25. Belfast *Republican Journal*, January 14, 1886.
26. Philbrook Diary for 1887.