

Maine Town & City

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Where In Maine?

Wiscasset!



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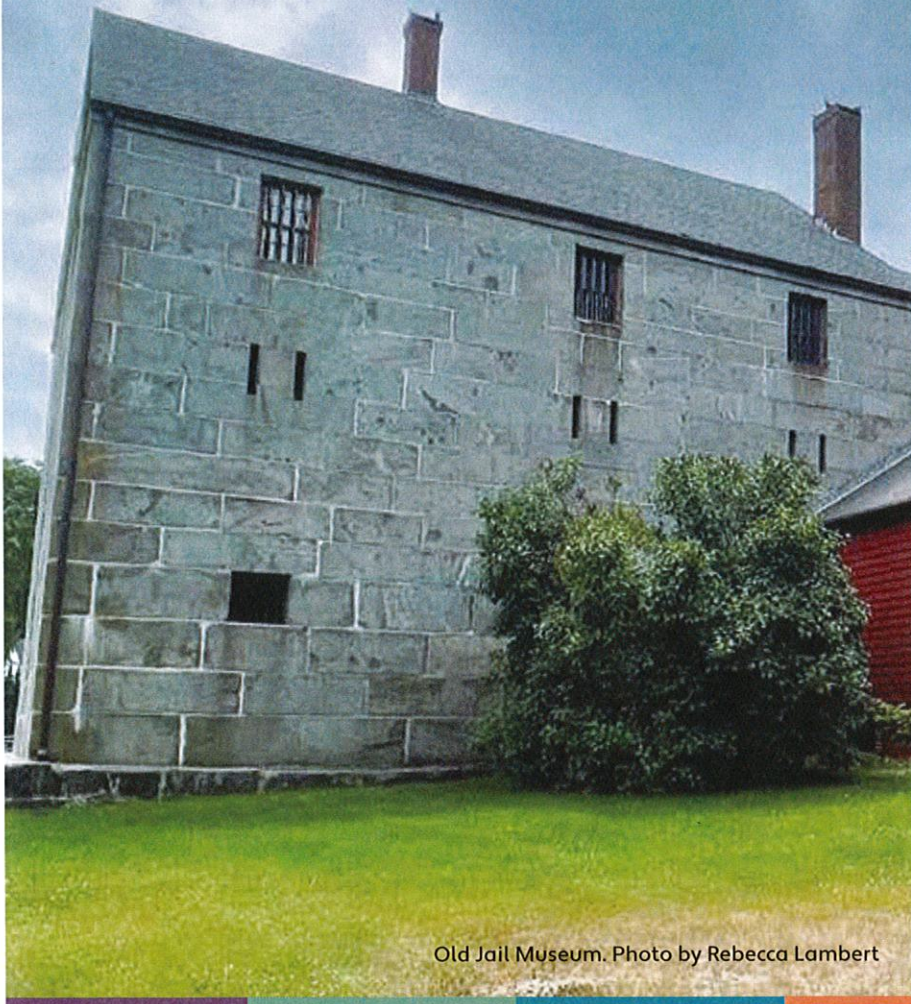
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WHERE *in* MAINE?

By Rebecca Lambert / Municipal Issues Specialist



Old Jail Museum. Photo by Rebecca Lambert

The “Where in Maine?” series will showcase the more whimsical sides of our communities. Municipalities in Maine will be explored with a focus on their vibrant downtowns, historic landmarks as well as the things that make each Maine town or city unique.

Photos in this series by Rebecca Lambert, MMA

Wiscasset.

The worm capital of the world.

In the midcoast region, nestled on the banks of the Sheepscot River, Wiscasset is a quintessential New England village, steeped in history and brimming with character. Weaved throughout the picturesque views is a rich colonial heritage and a vibrant, community-centric culture, making it a fascinating destination for historians, tourists, and residents alike.

The story of how Wiscasset came to be what it is today begins long before European settlers arrived. Initially, the Wabenaki people inhabited the region in the mid-1660s. Residents overcame numerous conflicts and disruptions during the colonial period, particularly during King Philip’s War and subsequent Native American and French hostilities, which eventually led to the incorporation of Wiscasset in 1760.

Much like the rest of Maine in the early years, the economy was primarily based on shipbuilding, fishing, and lumbering. Its deep, ice-free harbor made Wiscasset an ideal location for maritime activities, propelling it to become one of New England’s most significant ports by the late 18th century. As such, by the 19th century the port was a bustling hub for trade and shipbuilding.

During this period, many grand Federal-style homes were built, some of which remain today as architectural landmarks. Notable among these is the Nickels-Sortwell House, built in 1807 by shipping magnate Captain William Nickels, as a symbol of his wealth and status. This mansion, now a museum, exemplifies the opulence of the era and offers a window into the lifestyle of Wiscasset’s elite during its maritime peak.

Interestingly, the same year Nickels built the home, President Thomas Jefferson’s Embargo of 1807 took effect and prohibited international trade which devastated the economy on the East Coast. When Nickels died in 1815, he unfortunately had nothing but debt. The lavish



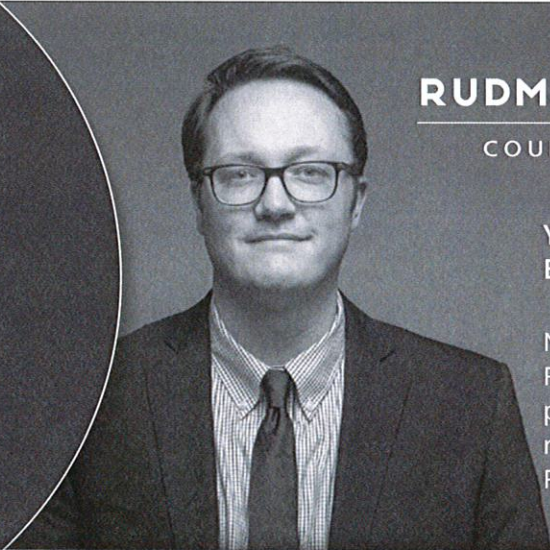
home was then turned into a hotel for 44 years before being sold to industrialist Alvin Sortwell as a family summer home, who restored it over time.

Today, the home is used as a vacation rental, and when not in use, is available for tours. It is furnished in traditional period décor with modern conveniences to give you a peek into what it was like to live in a turn of the century coastal home.

Shipping was not the only industry attracted to the region; a thriving ice trade also blossomed. The town's strategic location allowed for the harvesting of ice from local rivers and ponds, which was then shipped to warmer climates. This industry held up Wiscasset's economy until the advent of modern refrigeration.

The rise of larger ports and the decline of wooden shipbuilding led to economic downturns, but the town's scenic beauty and historical significance continued to attract artists, writers, and preservationists. Efforts have been made to preserve Wiscasset's historical architecture and promote its cultural heritage and sites like the Castle Tucker, the Lincoln County Courthouse, and the Old Jail Museum, reflect this period of reinvention.

Castle Tucker, built in 1807 and purchased by the Tucker family in 1858, is eclectic and picturesque, reflecting the Tuckers' wealth and their penchant to display contemporary tastes and social status. Today, it stands as a meticulously preserved historic house museum



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offering guided tours that recount the life and times of its former inhabitants. Much of the furnishings are original, providing an authentic representation of the Tucker family.

The Lincoln County Courthouse preservation renovations included ensuring its structural stability and functionality, while keeping an eye on preserving the historic and architectural elements that define the building. Today, the courthouse continues to serve as the administrative and judicial center of Lincoln County. It houses the Superior and District Courts, the Probate Court, and various county offices, seamlessly blending its historic legacy with modern judicial functions. The courthouse's archives, containing records dating back to the 18th century, are an invaluable resource for his-

torians and genealogists, and provide insights into the region's legal and social history.

Another culinary treasure is the Water Street Kitchen & Bar, which is nestled along the banks of the Sheepscot River. This hot spot was a well-known restaurant, Le Garage, for 40 years before transforming into the gem it is today. Most notably on the menu is the chef's featured and favorite dish—paella—made from scratch upon order, the reason the dish requires a 40-minute lead time.

Since 1981, the Sea Basket restaurant has been serving up fresh Maine seafood on the busy Route 1 strip. They are known for their generous portions and homemade sides and never use frozen lobster meat, even in



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torians and genealogists, and provide insights into the region's legal and social history.

Built in 1811, the Old Jail Museum is housed in a stone building with the window bars still visible. It provides a stark glimpse into early penal practices and local history, with exhibits detailing the lives of inmates and jailers. Managed by the Lincoln County Historical Association, visitors to the jail can explore its original cells and the jailers' quarters. Its closure in 1953 marked the end of an era and the transition to more modern approaches to incarceration and criminal justice.

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Since 1981, the Sea Basket restaurant has been serving up fresh Maine seafood on the busy Route 1 strip. They are known for their generous portions and homemade sides and never use frozen lobster meat, even in

their stews. Once you've had your fill of the Sea Basket, you can head across the street to Sweetz & More, New England's largest candy store, for dessert. There you can enjoy ice cream or freshly made fudge while perusing their 8,100 square foot retail space that carries more than 7,500 products. You are sure to leave there in a proper sugar rush.

Recreational opportunities are endless in this region and include an abundance of maritime activities—like sea kayaking, whale watches, and fishing, just to name a few. There is also a three-level ropes course, zip line, and adventure park, Monkey C Monkey Do, located on Route 1. Those with a need for speed can head over to the Wiscasset Speedway to take in the local races on a Saturday night in the summer.

If camping or hiking is your thing, five miles of hiking trails, with more being constructed, and camping are located on the Chewonki Foundation property. The Cushman Preserve is a 147-acre property with trails throughout and the West Woods and Morris Farm trails link more than 200 acres of woods and fields on three properties: the Sortwell Memorial Forest, the Wiscasset Town Forest, and the Morris Farm.

The Morris Farm is more than just a farm with hiking trails, it is also a working farm and an educational resource for communities in the midcoast region. Having been designated as a "forever farm" by the Maine

Farmland Trust, the Morris Farm's mission is to "promote the values of sustainable agriculture and stewardship of the earth through education, demonstration and community involvement, while enhancing food security in the greater midcoast area."

While they conduct classes and programming of their own creation, other community groups are welcome to use their facility for meetings or educational programs. The Dam Jam Fiddlers and the Sheepscot Spinners have both used the learning center to meet, which is a wonderful way to connect with others. The Morris Farm learning center, barn and portions of the land are available to rent for a variety of events, including weddings.

As a testament to their mission to enhance food security, the farm recently opened a "take what you need" farm stand, in addition to their regular farm stand, that offers fresh, local produce for free. This generous farm stand is an asset to the community. It is open seven days a week and restocked five days a week.

Wiscasset's community spirit is evident in the variety of events held throughout the year. The annual Wiscasset Art Walk, from June to September, transforms the downtown area into a lively celebration of local artists and craftsmen. There are also seasonal events, such as the Christmas by the Sea festival, which brings festive cheer with parades, markets, and community gatherings or the Farmers' Market that operates in the town

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office parking lot every Friday from 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. during the summer months.

Approximately 20 years ago, National Geographic dubbed Wiscasset the “worm capital of the world,” due to an ample supply of bloodworms and sandworms in the region—a prized bait for anglers—the harvesting of which has been a local tradition for generations. To celebrate this claim to fame and to give a nod to history, in June the town hosts the Wiscasset Wormfest. This quirky day of celebration is one focusing on honoring the importance of Maine’s working waterfronts and is filled with food, fun, music and...well, worms!

As a sidenote, if you like cheeky t-shirts, go to the festival website and check out their official Wormfest t-shirt. You can thank me later (by the way, I wear a women’s medium).

Camping, inns, and bed and breakfasts as well as short-term rental options are available within Wiscasset. Though lodging is limited, there are several other lodging options close to Wiscasset.

Looking at Wiscasset’s artistic side, apart from the many art galleries to peruse, you will find it is also part of the Maine Art Museum Trail, a network of museums and galleries that celebrate Maine’s rich artistic heritage. The town’s commitment to arts and culture

is further highlighted by its support for music and theater, which draws both performers and audiences from across the region. At any time, you can see artisans set up with easels, painting or drawing, providing spectators with a glimpse into the beginning to end process of creating a work of art.

Held at the town common, the Wiscasset Parks & Recreation department and Wiscasset Area Chamber of Commerce present the “Alive on the Common” concert series on Thursday nights during July and August featuring a variety of music genres.

Overall, Wiscasset is a blend of historical significance and modern charm, offering a unique glimpse into the past while providing attractions and events that engage both young and old. Whether you’re wandering through its historic streets, noshing on local culinary delights, shopping along Main Street, or exploring its natural beauty, Wiscasset promises an enriching, educational, and memorable experience. As it continues to honor its heritage while embracing the future, Wiscasset stands as a testament to the enduring appeal of New England’s small towns. 🏡

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