

Eagle Island

Admiral Peary's Nest on Casco Bay

THE WEATHER couldn't make up its mind: clouds, followed by blue sky, then rain, sun, and fog. But it would take more than that to keep us from visiting Eagle Island, former summer home of U.S. Navy Rear Admiral Robert Edwin Peary. The famed Arctic explorer had mushed across tundra and ice in his quest for the North Pole. We could handle slightly unsettled conditions on Casco Bay.

Our destination lay just offshore from Harpswell. Given to the state of Maine by Peary's descendants in 1968, Eagle Island is a Maine Historic Site and a National Historic Landmark. Throughout the season, it welcomes day visitors arriving on tour boats from Harpswell, Freeport, and Bailey Island as well as by kayak and private craft. The Maine Bureau of Parks and Lands maintains free moorings, available on a first-come, first-served basis. A ranger can advise on anchoring, as well as ferry visitors ashore.

We boarded our friends' 34-foot Joel White-built lobster yacht in Merriman Cove and steamed down Harpswell Sound into Merriconeag Sound. Bearing southwest, we rounded Haskell Island where, in the mid-1870s, Peary camped with Bowdoin College classmates. It's said he looked over at Eagle Island and vowed he'd own it. He bought the 17-acre jewel for \$200 in 1881, and began building his home in 1904.

From then until his death in 1920, the island was Peary's anchor. After every Arctic expedition, he returned to Eagle Island to plan his next trip. In 1909, when he declared, "The Pole is mine at last," he came here to compile data documenting his success.

Whether Peary actually reached 90 degrees north—the geographical North Pole—is still debated. Inconsistent calculations in his log suggest he may have missed by about 30 miles. Even if that's true, considering he used little more than a compass and sextant, his



Arctic explorer Admiral Robert Edwin Peary designed the profile of his house on Eagle Island to look like a ship. Visitors can reach the island by private boat or through different tour-boat services.

accomplishments are amazing.

A billowy haze over the water thinned as we approached the island's northern tip, where a dock reaches out at 90 degrees to the house. It's the perfect vantage for noting how Peary designed the home's profile to resemble a ship: A rounded stone wall atop a promontory indicates the bow; the front porch represents the pilothouse; low stone towers to either side suggest bridge wings; and narrow porches flanking the house indicate side decks.

In the small welcome center, we watched a 12-minute film and picked up an audio-tour wand filled with facts and anecdotes. It told us, for example, that Peary kept 50 sledge dogs on Flag Island, across from Eagle. When the dogs howled, he'd shout at them through the large megaphone that still stands on the porch.

The simple, wood-paneled interior's focal point is a central fireplace with several sides, each made from a different type of rock from the island. Displayed on its mantels and throughout the house are intriguing artifacts, preserved news clippings, and birds mounted by Peary, an amateur taxidermist. One exhibit explains how the explorer was guided by the motto: *Invenium viam aut facium* ("Find a way or make one").

We lingered longest in Peary's library-office in one of the stone towers. I pictured him gazing at the sea through the diamond-shaped windowpanes or stroking his mustache as he plotted his next expedition.

It had begun to rain, quashing my desire to walk the island trails. We boarded the boat and high-tailed it toward the mainland as the downpour intensified. Soon, clearing skies revealed bright sunshine, but fog quickly closed in. As we navigated from buoy to buoy in near-zero visibility, the words "Find a way or make one" echoed in my mind. Perhaps, I mused, Peary's motto applied to Maine boating as well as to Arctic exploration. ★

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Eagle Island is open daily 10 a.m.-5 p.m. from June 15 through Labor Day. Because the island is a bird nesting sanctuary, the trails are open only after July 15 and NO dogs are allowed. Fees range from \$1 for children aged 5-11 to \$4.50 for non-resident adults, \$3 for residents. The non-profit Friends of Peary's Eagle Island operates a web site with information about the island and the different boat services that offer rides out and back. <http://www.pearyeagleisland.org>.