

# HISTORY IN NEW HAMPSHIRE

## City of Portsmouth preserves, honors its past

By Steve Stephens  
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

**P**ORTSMOUTH, N.H. — The New Hampshire sea-coast is a tiny wedge of territory, like a piece of lobster stuck between the teeth of Massachusetts and Maine.

But it's a beautiful and historic wedge — 20 miles of rocky shores, colorful lobster pots, picturesque lighthouses and Revolutionary War sites.



And with direct flights on Skybus from Columbus to Portsmouth, the tourist-friendly port town on the border with Maine, this scenic sliver of New England is easier to visit than ever.

To orient myself, I first took a walking tour of downtown Portsmouth, leaving from Market Square in the shadow of the city's North Church. The church was constructed in 1854 to replace a 1713 meeting house. Its steeple, which rises high above the surrounding buildings and is lighted at night, makes a great landmark for a visitor to get his bearings anywhere in the city.

And what an interesting city it is. Founded in 1623, Portsmouth is one of the oldest settlements in the United States.

"It's an awful lot of history to tell you about in an hour," said our guide, Sylvia Baker.

The port was a trade hub from the earliest days and served as the capital of New Hampshire from 1679 until the Revolutionary War, when it was a hotbed of anti-British activity.

Later, Portsmouth became a

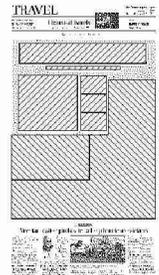
center for textiles and brewing. In 1800, the city added shipbuilding to its resume with the founding of the Portsmouth U.S. Naval Shipyard, still a big employer in the region (At one point during World War II, the shipyard was churning out an average of one submarine every 12 days.)

The port on the Piscataqua

River was always a favorite of sailors, which is probably why Portsmouth once boasted "the best red-light district on the Eastern Seaboard," Baker said.

The city also has a plethora of great house museums from the 1716 Warner House — the oldest

See **PORTSMOUTH** Page **F2**



brick urban mansion remaining in New England — to the 1758 house that was home to John Paul Jones and now serves as a museum in the naval hero's honor.

The 40-room Wentworth-Coolidge Mansion was the home of New Hampshire's first royal governor, Benning Wentworth. In 1860 a descendant opened the house to the public, making it one of the first historic houses in the country to be promoted as a tourist attraction.

Later, the house was sold to artist John Templeman Coolidge, who restored the home and grounds and added a wing while attempting to retain the architectural integrity. Today the house is furnished in the Colonial style, reflecting the aristocratic life in 18th-century New England.

A must-see for history buffs is the Strawberry Banke Museum.

Strawberry Banke is a kind of mini-Williamsburg, with 40 historic buildings covering 10 acres in one of the country's oldest continuously occupied neighborhoods. And unlike Williamsburg, Strawberry Banke has mostly original structures that have been restored. Guides and costumed re-enactors welcome visitors to buildings and streets once visited by George Washington, Paul Revere and John Hancock.

But to be honest, all that Portsmouth history soon began to run together in my head.

What really impressed me was the state of preservation and the liveliness of the downtown area, with dozens of great little shops, galleries, restaurants and taverns — none of them part of a chain — located in commercial storefronts dating from the 18th century. (Just close your eyes when strolling past the block containing the large federal building, which was built in an unfortunate urban-

renewal style in 1967 and replaced several historic buildings.

A shell collector or rock hound will find it difficult to leave Scallops Mineral & Shell Emporium in the old Customs Building on Penhallow Street.

Scallops is next door to the funky Ceres Street Bakery (it *used* to be on Ceres Street, OK?), which features great daily specials, scrumptious flatbread and a local, and colorful, customer base.

Nearby is Annabelle's Ice Cream, which thousands of New Englanders will argue is the world's best.

Celts, or those who love them, might want to stop at Celtic Crossing on Congress Street. The boutique has a large collection of high-quality goods from England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales, including a huge selection of authentic Guinness apparel.

For those who prefer their Guinness on the *inside*, Molly Malone's is a friendly little tavern in a historic corner brownstone on State Street near Strawberry Banke. I found the bar at Molly's a great place to engage the locals in political discussions — New Hampshire is the site of the first presidential primaries, after all.

And Portsmouth is not bereft of fine restaurants, from the lobster rolls of the Blue Claw on the Ceres Street waterfront to the more upscale seafood of Jumpin' Jay's Fish Cafe on Congress Street.

The boat tours offered by Portsmouth Harbor Cruises and Isles of Shoals Steamship Co. are another great way to see the city and its harbor. But save at least a little time to spend outside of town.

I made a point of driving the entire New Hampshire coast, which doesn't take long unless you stop, which you'll want to.

The town of Hampton near the border with Massachu-

setts, though quieter now, during summer offers up the kind of arcade and bar scene, infused throughout with the smell of tanning lotion, more associated with Florida hot spots.

But between Portsmouth and Hampton is a magnificent, scenic stretch of coastline that includes several state parks and wonderful ocean vistas. (The Seacoast Science Center at Odiorne Point State Park in Rye might be worth a visit if you're traveling with kids. Otherwise, I recommend skipping the center and just enjoying the view.)

The stretch includes several historic sites, including the small but lovely Fuller Gardens, commissioned by New Hampshire Gov. Alvan T. Fuller at the beginning of the last century, and well worth a visit.

The formal gardens, at what was Fuller's summer home, were designed by noted landscape architect Arthur Shurtleff in the 1920s. Today they include more than 2,000 rosebushes, a Japanese garden and a wildflower garden.

The conservatory is small but packed with interesting tropical plants, including an amazing variety of succulents and cactuses.

I had planned to limit my explorations to New Hampshire, but at the urging of Margot Doering, my hostess at the Martin Hill Inn, I made a short jaunt into Maine for lunch at the Chauncey Creek Lobster Pier.

Like all the rest of Doering's suggestions, the eatery on a lovely little creek a couple of miles up the coast from Portsmouth proved to be a winner. Patrons can watch the lobster boats from the outdoor waterfront tables.

The restaurant, just off Maine 103, offers lobsters, lobsters and more lobsters. The restaurant also stocks sodas, chips and a few side

dishes, but guests are encouraged to bring along their own extras not on the menu, including alcohol.

During my visit, I met patrons who had brought their own tablecloths, floral centerpieces, wine, and tomato and mozzarella salad.

The friends had driven an hour from Massachusetts for lunch.

"We come up two or three times a summer," said Susan Johansen, a travel agent in Lexington, Mass.

"I go other places for lobster rolls. But for whole lobsters, this is the place."

As a Midwesterner, I don't have much experience with crustaceans larger than crawdads, so my waiter tried to help with a few tips — crack that, pull there, suck here.

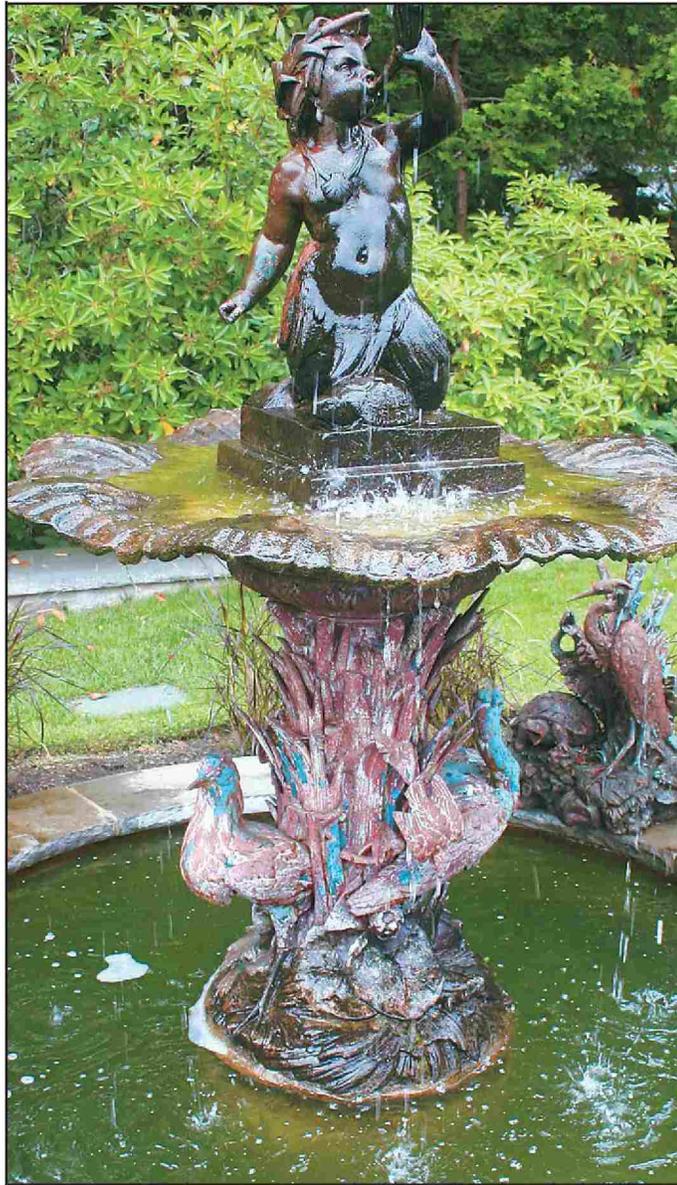
"That part's poisonous, they say," he finished, pointing somewhere near the head. "So don't eat that."

I don't know whether he was kidding or not, so I took no chances. But the rest of the beast was simply awesome and cost barely more than my Skybus ticket.

With such bargain-basement airfares available from Columbus, I'm tempted to go back ASAP, if only for lunch (or for the history or for the shopping or for the fall color or for the sea views or for — oh, well, you probably get the picture).

[sstephens@dispatch.com](mailto:sstephens@dispatch.com)

► For a video of Portsmouth, visit [Dispatch.com/multimedia](http://Dispatch.com/multimedia).



A fountain burbles in the serene confines of Fuller Gardens in New Hampton, just south of Portsmouth.

## If you go

### PORTSMOUTH, N.H.

Portsmouth, N.H., across the Piscataqua River from Maine, sits at the heart of the New England seacoast.

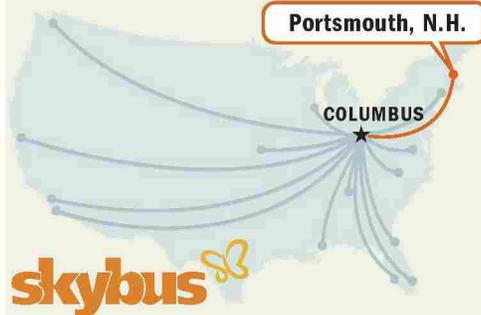
The working port town is also a great tourism destination with scenic ocean views, a historic downtown with intriguing local shops, galleries and restaurants; and many interesting historic sites including Strawberry Banke, a 10-acre living-history museum.

### GETTING THERE

Portsmouth is served by twice-daily Skybus flights from Port Columbus (the only scheduled commercial flight into Portsmouth's Pease Airport.) Look for the "Boston" flights on [www.skybus.com](http://www.skybus.com), although Portsmouth is actually 60 miles north of that city.

### STAYING THERE

Many major hotel chains have locations in or near Portsmouth. Also in the area are several inns and bed-and-breakfasts, including the Martin Hill Inn, which offers comfortable rooms, a convenient location and knowledgeable innkeeper Margot Doering. Visit [www.martinhillinn.com](http://www.martinhillinn.com).  
*Periodically, Travel will look at destinations to which budget carrier Skybus flies.*



Other highly recommended inns in the area include the Sise Inn, the Inn at Strawberry Banke and the Governor's House.

## SAILING THE HARBOR

Harbor tours — offered by the Isles of Shoals Steamship Co. and Portsmouth Harbor Cruises — are a great way to learn about the area and see the picturesque Piscataqua River where it meets the Atlantic Ocean.

► For information on Portsmouth Harbor Cruises, call 1-800-776-0915 or visit [www.portsmouthharbor.com](http://www.portsmouthharbor.com).

► For information on Isles of Shoals Steamship Co., call 1-800-441-4620 or visit [www.islesofshoals.com](http://www.islesofshoals.com).

## GOING BACK IN TIME

History buffs won't run out of places to visit in Portsmouth. Besides the many historic structures at Strawberry Banke, Portsmouth is home to eight different historic homes that are open to the public. (A few have limited hours and many close for the winter.)

► The John Paul Jones house, former home of the U.S. naval hero, is operated by the Portsmouth Historical Society. Call 603-436-8420 or visit [www.PortsmouthHistory.org](http://www.PortsmouthHistory.org).

► Several of the other homes are operated by the nonprofit Historic New England. For information, call 603-436-3205 or visit [www.historicnewengland.org](http://www.historicnewengland.org).

► Information on Strawberry Banke is available at [www.strawberrybanke.org](http://www.strawberrybanke.org) or call 603-433-1100.

► Portsmouth is also home to the USS Albacore, a U.S. Navy submarine built at the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard. The sub has been retired and is open as a museum in Albacore Park. Call 603-436-3680 or visit [www.ussalbacore.org](http://www.ussalbacore.org).

## LEARNING MORE

► Extensive information on the area, including a free "Guide to the Seacoast," is available through the Greater Portsmouth Chamber of Commerce. Call 603-436-3988 or visit [www.portsmouthchamber.org](http://www.portsmouthchamber.org).

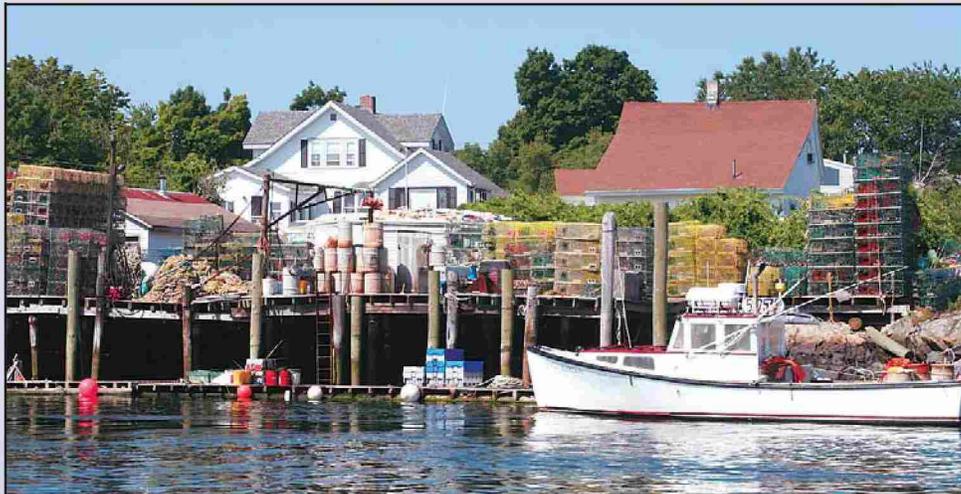
► Another Web site with information about the Portsmouth area, including sections on arts, travel, food and lodging, can be found at [www.seacoastnh.com](http://www.seacoastnh.com).

► Also check out [www.portsmouthnh.com](http://www.portsmouthnh.com) for more information.



Kayakers ply the waters of the harbor in front of the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard.

STEVE STEPHENS | DISPATCH PHOTOS



ABOVE: A lobster boat awaits its crew at a dock on the Piscataqua River.

STEVE STEPHENS | DISPATCH PHOTOS



RIGHT: The seacoast is dotted with lighthouses, including Whaleback Light on the approach to Portsmouth Harbor.