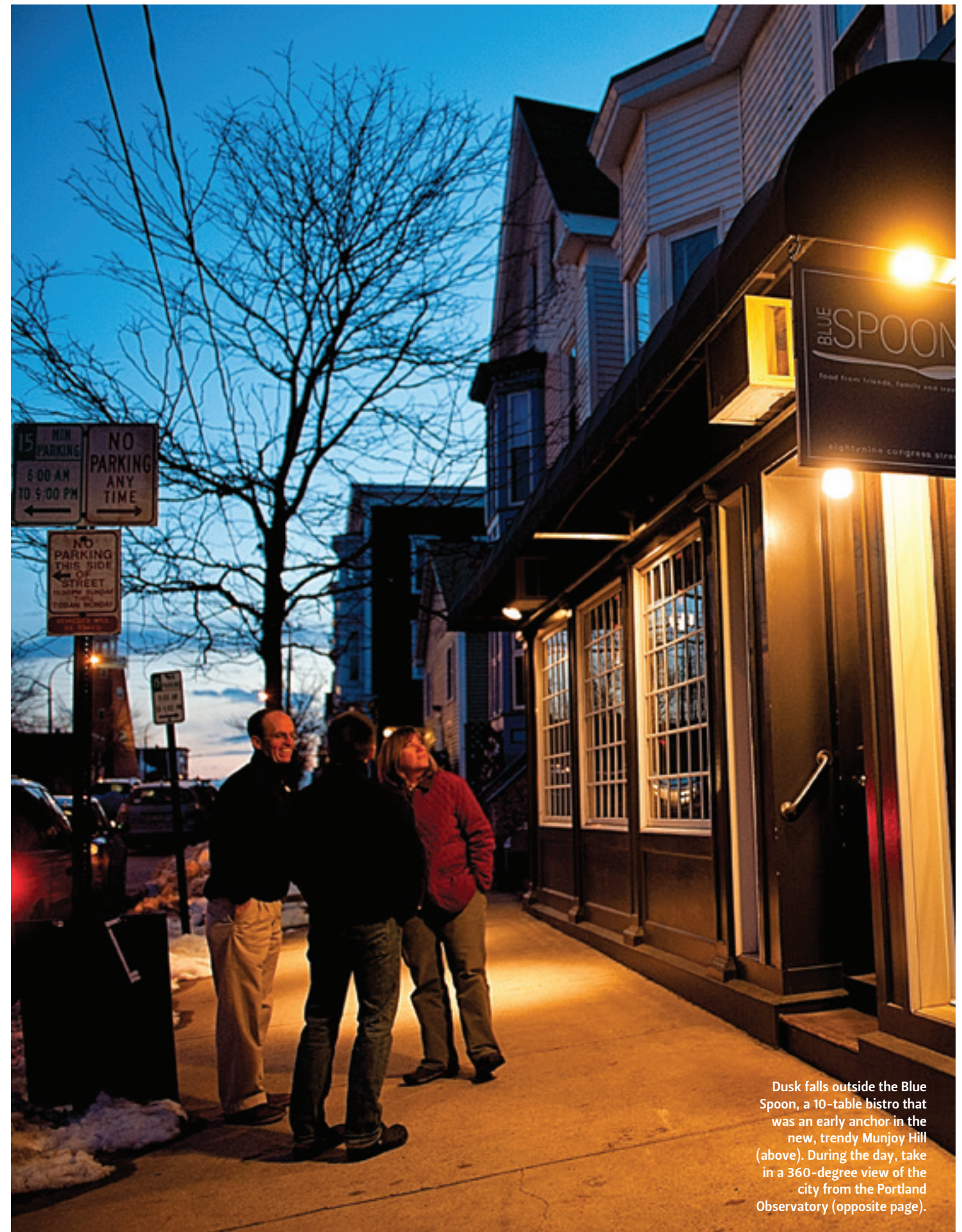




THE COOL ON THE HILL

ONCE TOUGH AND SCRUFFY, MUNJOY HILL IS NOW PORTLAND'S HIPPEST — AND MOST EXPENSIVE — NEIGHBORHOOD.

BY SARA ANNE DONNELLY
PHOTOGRAPHED BY TED AXELROD



Dusk falls outside the Blue Spoon, a 10-table bistro that was an early anchor in the new, trendy Munjoy Hill (above). During the day, take in a 360-degree view of the city from the Portland Observatory (opposite page).



C

aptain Lemuel Moody was one of Munjoy Hill's first prospectors. At the turn of the 19th century, the aging Moody quit his work as a sea captain after he was kidnapped and held briefly by pirates, bought a large tract of land about halfway up Munjoy Hill, and relocated his family there. Few back then would have braved the stink from the docks or the odor of the cow pastures blanketing the Hill. And it wasn't exactly the safest spot to wander around after dark, given its nearness to the rowdy waterfront. But Moody saw nothing but opportunity.

In 1807, he capitalized on the Hill's panoramic view by building what would become one of Portland's most iconic landmarks – the 82-foot Portland Observatory tower at Congress and North streets. Three times a day, Moody would tromp up the 103 stairs to the lantern to peer at the ocean with his telescope suspended from the ceiling. Merchants paid Moody to keep an eye on the horizon for incoming boats so they could gather the men necessary to unload when they docked. For a fee, Moody would raise a merchant's flag atop the Observatory when he saw one of their ships.

The business was lucrative, so Moody launched a couple of spin-off ventures. On his property at the base of the tower, locals could visit a dance hall or a bowling alley. And if they

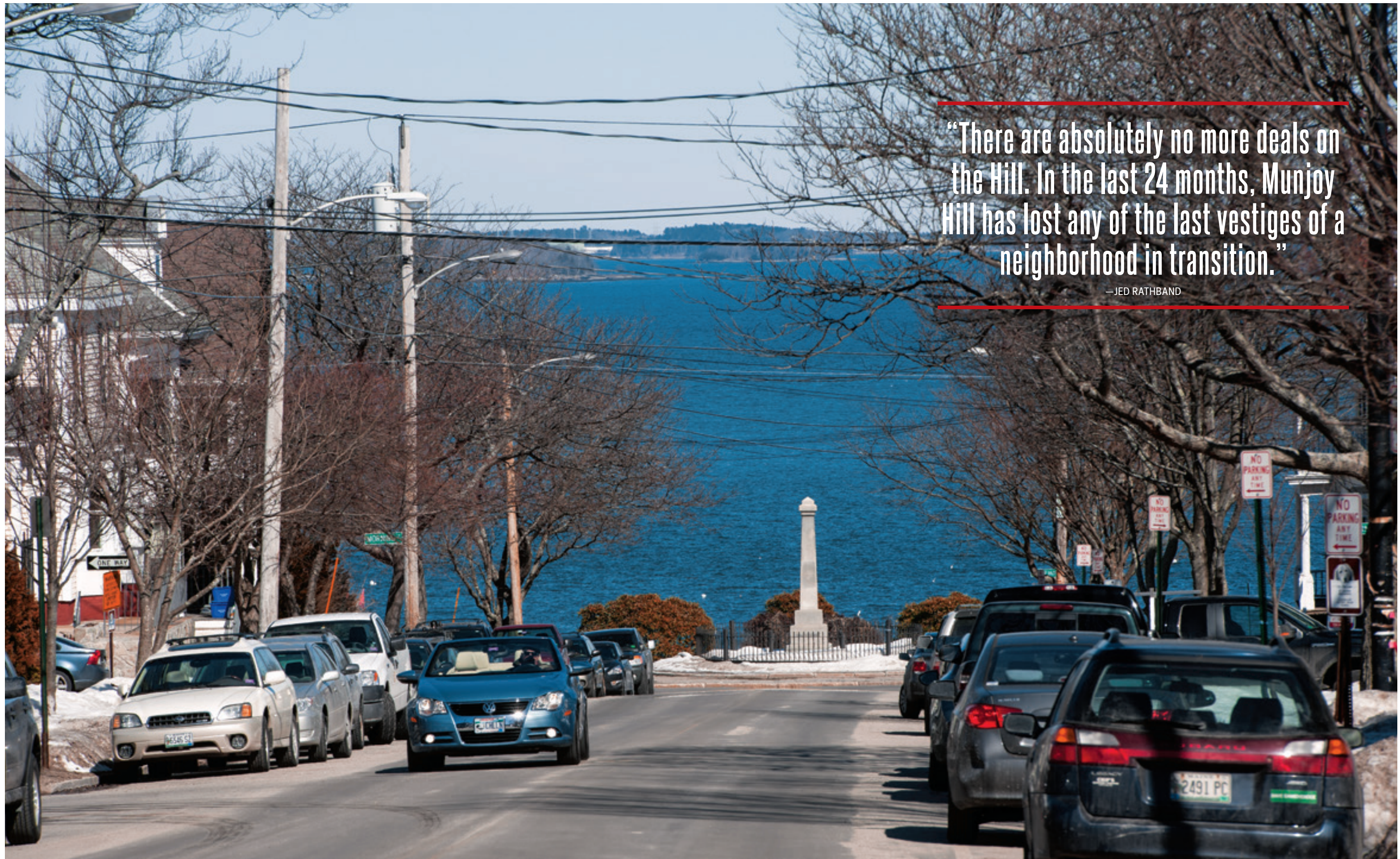


For much of the 20th century, Munjoy Hill was a working-class neighborhood with a somewhat unsavory reputation, but over the last 15 years it has undergone a dramatic transformation. First came the house flippers, who bought and renovated the modest old houses and tenements and resold them to white-collar professionals, who in turn attracted restaurants, coffee shops, bakeries, and markets. Now, well-heeled retirees, many of them from out of state, have discovered the Hill, with its new posh condominiums and glorious views of Casco Bay. Realtors say Munjoy Hill has surpassed the tony West End as Portland's most desirable neighborhood.



“There are absolutely no more deals on the Hill. In the last 24 months, Munjoy Hill has lost any of the last vestiges of a neighborhood in transition.”

— JED RATHBAND





“Twenty years ago, the West End was the place to be. Today it is Munjoy Hill.”

—TONY MANCINI

wanted a trip up the tower, Moody would accommodate them – for a fee. “A charge of 15 cents is made for the privilege of viewing the harbor and surrounding country,” wrote Moody contemporary John Neal, “and no person who has made the investment has reason to regret it. There is no point in Maine where the view of sea or land is more delightful.”

The view from Moody’s tower, now owned by the city and managed as a historic attraction by Greater Portland Landmarks, is no less delightful today, though the fee is somewhat steeper. On a recent icy afternoon, Observatory docent, Hill resident, and self-proclaimed lover of Portland Jeanne Bull peers at the Fore River, cloudy and dark with cold, through a clear spot in a frosted tower window. Bull likes to come up here and look at every angle of the view she can. It relaxes her. Mount Washington to the north, the Fore to the south, Casco Bay to the east. Her attention this day is closer to home. She presses one gloved fingertip to the glass.

“Can you see that green house there?” she says, pointing toward Atlantic Street, where she has lived since 1991. “That was a little two-story home. An older gentleman lived there. He was a widower,

raised his children, whatever. And when he passed away a couple of years ago, his family jumped on that like white on rice. They totally rebuilt that house, popped the roof off, put that third story on.” Bull pauses. “And then . . .” she scrutinizes the dense block of tenements and houses in her neighborhood below, “and then . . . they sold his driveway! So now there’s, like, eight units there, where before it was one little house!”

Bull shakes her head. “Honest to god,” she says, “when we first came up here in 1982, you couldn’t pay people to move here. It’s funny how perceptions change. How you didn’t want to be here and now everybody wants to be here.”

Bull, like Moody, always knew the Hill was great. Lately, it seems like everyone else has finally figured it out, too. She says Realtors frequently send her fliers, and a few months ago a stranger mailed her a handwritten note asking if she might want to sell. (She doesn’t, for the record.)

Bull believes this Hill love was sparked by people like her, people like Moody, people from away who saw the Hill’s potential while locals turned up their noses.

“Sometimes I think it takes people from away to

For what to see, what to do, and where to eat on Munjoy Hill, see page 88.

Hill residents shop daily in the European style at Rosemont Market & Bakery (top left and right), beloved for fresh bread, local produce, and other gourmet treats. Chef Harding Lee Smith’s The Front Room (top right) draws diners from all over the city and beyond.





Peter Donatelli presses a shirt at Liliana's Laundry, owned by his family along with the neighboring Donatelli's Custom Tailor Shop on Congress Street. A pastor, he is known for engaging his customers in spirited debate and for telling jokes.

come in and appreciate what you have," she says. "We still get people who come into the Observatory and say, 'I've lived here so many years but I've never been in this building.' And I say, 'It's always been here, but you never looked up.' Sort of like the Hill. It's always been here, but you just didn't notice it."

The Portland peninsula dips and rises like a saddle, with the horn at its highest peak, Bramhall Hill on the West End, and the cante at Munjoy Hill on the East. The Hill reaches its highest elevation in Fort Sumner Park on North Street, 172 feet above sea level, just short of Bramhall Hill. But the view from Bramhall has nothing on Munjoy Hill. Bordered on three sides by Casco Bay and the Fore River, plenty of houses on the Hill have a water view. And if you can't see the water from your home, you're no more than a few blocks away from the Eastern Promenade overlooking Casco Bay and beyond. Even poet Henry

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Wadsworth Longfellow wrote of taking “a long walk along round Munjoy” while gazing at “the harbor . . . full of white sails coming and departing.”

Munjoy Hill technically begins at Washington Avenue and Mountfort Street, though some Hillers claim you’re not really Hillside until you reach the Observatory. Antique maps sometimes refer to the Hill as Mount Joy, but it was, in fact, named for George Munjoy, who came from the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1659 to settle the land on the eastern point of the peninsula that his father-in-law had bought from one of Portland’s founders, George Cleeve.

For more than a century, Munjoy Hill was used primarily as pasture for residents’ cattle. The densest development in the neighborhood during these early years was the tent city hastily erected after the Great

Reaching 172 feet above sea level, the Hill has spectacular water views on three sides.

Fire of 1866 displaced hundreds of Portlanders. But those residents only stayed long enough to rebuild their houses, in brick or stone, usually on the posh West End.

Portland’s port grew around the turn of the 20th century, attracting working-class blacks, Jews, and immigrants from France, Scandinavia, Eastern Europe, Canada, and, in particular, Ireland, who built the single-family homes and three-story tenements that make up most of the modern-day housing stock. These dockworkers and merchants lived in close-knit boroughs often divided by ethnicity. The Hill developed a reputation for toughness and inter-Hill loyalties among these residents, who lived in

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houses so close together that clotheslines were strung between them.

“It was a peculiar place,” says Howard Reiche, Jr., who wrote about his childhood on the Hill in the 2002 book *Closeness*, so that his grandchildren could understand the unique community there in the 1930s and ’40s. “I don’t know of another neighborhood like it. When you think about it, nobody goes through Munjoy Hill. If you’re going to East Deering or Lewiston or Gray, you turn off at Washington Avenue or 295. Nobody went up onto the Hill unless you had business there.”

Historian Maureen Elgersman Lee notes a similar sentiment in the book *Creating Portland*. “[I]t was a wonderful neighborhood, although we probably didn’t realize it at the time,” Hiller Beverly Dodge is quoted as saying in Elgersman’s essay on black Portlanders. Dodge grew up on the Hill during the 1930s. “Both my mother and father worked, so the neighbors used to

The Hill developed a reputation for toughness and inter-Hill loyalties among ethnic groups.

watch us. And I used to say we had Irish grandparents because you had to behave no matter what . . . We were a very close neighborhood.”

The Hill declined along with the city beginning in the 1960s, as urban sprawl paralyzed the downtown. Except for the Eastern Promenade, the Hill had never been a fashionable place to live, but now it was dismissed as downright seedy. Boarded-up houses and absent landlords were common, and drug-related crime made walking the streets at night dangerous.

In 1979, a group of Hill lawyers, including husband and wife Ned



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Chester and Barbara Vestal, formed the Munjoy Hill Neighborhood Organization to apply for city grants to improve the neighborhood. With the money raised, the early MHNO built two playgrounds, established a neighborhood Fourth of July festival, and created parent-teacher organizations at the schools. Soon a critical mass of artists had migrated east, attracted to the Hill's sunlight and affordable rents. The Eastern Promenade Trail, completed in 1995, added to the improving vibe by establishing a safe walking path along some of the Hill's most scenic assets. And in 2000, the St. Lawrence, a crumbling Queen-Anne-style former church, was converted into the St. Lawrence Arts Center, a theater and community hub for the creative, eclectic neighborhood that by this time Munjoy Hill had comfortably become.

Today, the neighborhood that has been known as a rough outpost for most of its life is now one of the safest and most popular spots in the city. According to Census data, the Hill's population has increased by 5 percent from 2000 to 2011, dwarfing the city average of 1 percent. Among

“When we first came up here in 1982, you couldn't pay people to move here.”

—JEANNE BULL

those residents are many more artists, self-employed professionals, and singles than the city average. People walk or bike to work more than is typical in the rest of the city. And crime has declined dramatically since the police established a community outreach center in 1995.

But there is worrisome news, too. Though plenty are talking about money lately on the Hill, that wealth

appears to be held by a small fraction of residents. From 2000 to 2011, the median income on the Hill didn't budge much above \$33,000, well below the city's median income of about \$45,000. Property values during the same period doubled, on average, making them unaffordable for lots of Hill residents. And the asking prices seem to be only going up. Whoever is buying on the Hill probably isn't from there.

The Hill's dive of note is Mama's Crowbar, a shoe-box-size, beer-only, cash-only joint just above Washington Avenue. Inside the Crowbar one recent Saturday night, among the hipsters and hippies sipping a decidedly un-divey selection of area microbrews, a smartly dressed couple old enough to be the parents of most of the clientele played cribbage at the bar. Severin Beliveau, 75, and his wife Cynthia Murray-Beliveau, 65, had recently moved to the Hill from Hallowell, an Augusta suburb where they had lived for 22 years. Severin, a partner at the Preti Flaherty law firm in downtown Portland, wanted to shorten his hour-long commute. Cynthia wanted to be close to the excitement in Maine's largest city. When they started looking for a new home, they knew exactly where to go. “Portland is a great place to live, that's why we moved here,” says Cynthia. “And Munjoy Hill is the best place in town.”

Over the summer, the Beliveaus found an \$800,000, 2,500-square-foot luxury condominium on Sheridan Street with decks overlooking Back Cove and the cityscape. But clinching the property wasn't easy. Cynthia says the day they went to look at the condo they met other interested couples “coming and going.” They decided to act fast, but got into a bidding war with another cash buyer with the same strategy. The Beliveaus eventually won. Less than a week after the condo was put up for sale, they had it under contract.

The whole ordeal still has them

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shaking their heads. The Beliveaus expected the Hill to be trendier than Hallowell, where they're still trying to sell their house even after three price cuts, but *this* trendy? "This is an economically different area," Severin says. "I knew that, but I didn't think it was this dramatic."

The CliffsNotes on Munjoy Hill real estate is if you sold property here before the neighborhood really heated up in 2009, you're probably kicking yourself right now.

"There are absolutely no more deals on the Hill," says Jed Rathband, a real estate agent for Keller Williams Realty who specializes in East End property. Rathband says the already popular market started becoming especially cutthroat in the spring of 2013. Cash deals, off-market sales, and bidding

"The lifelong resident of Munjoy Hill is an endangered species."

—KEVIN DONOGHUE

wars that are rare in this city became common on Munjoy Hill. "In the last 24 months, Munjoy Hill has lost any of the last vestiges of a neighborhood in transition," Rathband says. "It is almost fully realized."

Those tenement buildings and single-family wood frames built for the working class will now run you at least \$650,000, Rathband says, between purchase price and renovation costs. That's nearly three times the median price on the rest of the Portland peninsula. Most of Rathband's clients looking at the Hill are baby boomers, about half from large cities outside of Maine, like Boston and New York, who are attracted to the vibrancy on the Hill, Rathband says, as "a fountain of youth."

In addition, because the Hill is

not restricted by building codes that dictate how historic properties can be upgraded, it's a popular spot for progressive, energy-efficient condominium developments commanding some of the highest square-foot prices in the city. These planned developments include Munjoy Heights, a luxury building with elevators for the retirees expected to buy the units, which are priced between \$540,000 and upwards of \$700,000, and 118 on Munjoy Hill, a similarly priced, elevator-equipped luxury condo development near the shops and restaurants at the crest of Congress Street. There are also new or planned projects billed as affordable. These include a redevelopment of the former Adams Elementary School on Monument Street with units starting at \$235,000 for 997 square feet and the four-story Marquis Lofts on Lafayette Street with similarly sized condominiums starting at around \$325,000.

The Hill's affordable options are outpaced by the market-rate developments on the Hill, worries City Councilor Kevin Donoghue. Donoghue believes the Hill's working-class personality could be overwhelmed by a preciousness encouraged by the Hill's influx of wealthy retirees from away.

"Working families, renters, they know they cannot buy here," said Donoghue, who is himself a parent and a renter priced out of the Hill market. "So if you're renting in this neighborhood, you're here temporarily. Which means there will be very few children who grow up on Munjoy Hill. Presuming that, when able, people will move into home ownership, then the lifelong resident of Munjoy Hill is an endangered species."

As chair of the Munjoy Hill Neighborhood Organization's Safe and Livable Communities committee, Sam Cohen has been working with Donoghue on ways to encourage more affordable housing to keep Munjoy Hill livable for all income levels. He, like Donoghue, has a vested interest in the outcome. At 26, Cohen, a native of Delaware who has lived on the Hill since 2010, wants to buy property and settle in.

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But he's not finding much in his price range, which maxes out at \$350,000.

"The things that I find that are available now are on the edge of what I could reasonably pay for," he says. "And it sort of is forcing me to look more in East Bayside and even South Portland, which I really don't want to do at all. I want to stay here as long as I can."

At Donatelli's Custom Tailor Shop, the saying is, "Espresso in the morning, espresso with Sambuca in the afternoon." On one such recent Sambuca-and-espresso afternoon in the sewing room known as "The Brains of the Operation," owner Evangelista Donatelli, his son Faustino, and their friend Tony Mancini launched into all the reasons Munjoy Hill is, as Mancini raved, "100,000 percent better" than it used to be.

"Twenty years ago, the West End was the place to be," says Mancini, a 70-something electrician with a blunt Italian accent. "Today it is Munjoy Hill. What else can I tell you? I used to get robbed every week."

Mancini and Evangelista Donatelli grew up together in Abruzzi before Mancini's parents immigrated to the Hill in the 1950s. Evangelista followed in 1966 with his wife, Liliana. In 1972, he opened the tailor shop and Laundromat at Congress and Lafayette streets.

Evangelista says that back in the 1980s there was a 24-hour convenience store across the street, lots of drinking and drugs in the neighborhood, and his store window would get smashed almost every night. That convenience store closed in 1985, and since then things have just gotten better and better around here. And why not? Evangelista asks. You can walk 200 feet to the beautiful ocean view on the Eastern Promenade, and if you work in Portland you can just walk or bike to your job. What's not to like?

"It's nothing but great news," Faustino says as he sits at an antique

Brother sewing machine facing his father's own. While Evangelista is soft spoken and tidy in a cashmere sweater and gray slacks, his son Faustino is all American brash. Taller and louder than his father, Faustino works in jeans and a flannel shirt and speaks with an urgent clip. The only bad news, he says, and this kills him, is that his father 30 years ago sold a three-unit building with water views on St. Lawrence Street for a song.

"Like a dingdong, he sold this beautiful property," Faustino grumbles. And now, he says, the property's worth six or more times the \$89,000 Evangelista sold it for. And Faustino had seen it coming! He had offered to buy it!

"Yesterday's yesterday," Evangelista says, shrugging. "It's unfortunate."

Peter, Faustino's younger brother, runs the Laundromat next door and has designs on building an apartment over the Laundromat so he and his wife can move back to the Hill. But Faustino, who also now lives off the Hill, doesn't limit his daydreams to residential. Between the tailor shop, the Laundromat, an apartment building next door, and

If you sold property here before 2009, you're probably kicking yourself right now.

the parking lot out back, Evangelista owns about 10,000 square feet of prime Munjoy Hill space, for restaurants, condos, whatever. Faustino says the family could, say, put 10 units on their property. If they wanted to develop. Which they don't. And probably on the Hill they'll approve it in two seconds, Faustino says, snapping his fingers. Just like that.

"People would die if we put up

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this building,” he says of the tailor shop. He hooks a thumb toward the Laundromat. “And next door? Next door you could put something in so big it would probably blow your brains out.”

Faustino pushes the hem of a satin wedding dress under the bobbing needle of his sewing machine. A last-minute hem. Someone’s big day. Still, his thoughts circle the Hill. All the things it could be. All the things it will be. Soon he’ll go on about it some more, while his father, bored with the conversation, wanders away to iron some shirts. ☺

Sara Anne Donnelly is a freelance writer and author of *Insiders’ Guide to Portland, Maine*.

IF YOU GO

The Blue Spoon, 89 Congress Street. If you can score a seat in this tiny American bistro, do so. Owned by chef David Lovino, the food here is creative, farm-to-table, and always delicious. They also take their wine very seriously. Monday–Thursday 11:30 A.M. to 3 P.M. and 5 to 9 P.M., Friday and Saturday 5 to 9:30 P.M., Saturday brunch 9 A.M. to 3 P.M. bluespoonme.com. 207-773-1116.

The Eastern Promenade. This public park dating to 1836 includes a view of the ocean, a killer sledding hill (watch out for the gully), and access to a dog-friendly beach at the bottom. Thanks to the mercurial weather in these parts, the view always seems to change, which is why Munjoy Hill Neighborhood Organization president Andrea Myhaver compares the Eastern Prom to an ever-evolving neighbor. Free.

Fort Allen Park, Fore Street and the Eastern Promenade. Munjoy Hill’s view of the harbor made it a strategic base for soldiers all the way back to the American Revolution, and Fort Allen Park is a testament to this history. Check out the Civil War monument here and the mast of the USS *Portland*, a heavy navy cruiser built in 1933. Or just take in the view of Casco Bay. Free.

The Front Room, 73 Congress Street. One of several city restaurants owned by chef Harding Lee Smith, the Front Room was

one of the first enterprises to put the new Munjoy Hill on the map. Stop here for a cozy drink at the bar, dinner, or one of the best brunches in town. Open Monday–Saturday 5 to 10 P.M., Sunday 4 to 9 P.M. and every day for brunch 8 A.M. to 2:30 P.M. thefrontroomrestaurant.com. 207-773-3366.

Katie Made Bakery, 181 Congress Street. Warning: Just looking at Katie Made’s website will make your mouth water. The former East Bayside sugar queen last year migrated up the Hill to set up shop in a former tattoo parlor on Congress Street. Try the muffins. And the cookies. And the sandwiches. You get the picture. Tuesday–Thursday 7:30 A.M. to 4:30 P.M., Friday 7:30 A.M. to 6 P.M., Saturday 8 A.M. to 3 P.M., and Sunday 8 A.M. to noon. Closed Monday. katiemadebakery.com. 207-771-0994.

Hilltop Coffee Shop, 90 Congress Street. Hilltop is set to move a few doors down to the former Bar Lola space and may evolve beyond its current status as go-to coffee shop on the Hill. Stay tuned. barlola.net/htcweb. 207-780-0025.

Homegrown Herb & Tea, 195 Congress Street. Rumor is that Sarah Richards, owner of Homegrown Herb & Tea, takes just a few moments to eyeball the blend of Ayurvedic tea that you desperately, desperately need. True or not, this is a unique teashop that emphasizes the power of the drink to restore a healthful balance. Open Tuesday–Friday 12 to 5 P.M. and Saturday if it rains. homegrownherbandtea.com. 207-774-3484.

The Portland Observatory, 138 Congress Street. Built by Lemuel Moody in 1807, the red maritime tower is known for its 360-degree view of the city. Be sure to check out the centuries-old graffiti on the tower’s interior, too. The Observatory is open daily, May 24–October 13, 2014, 10 A.M. to 5 P.M. The 45-minute tours are guided and the last tour begins at 4:30 P.M. Adults, \$9; seniors, students, and AAA members, \$8; children 6–16, \$5. Discount for Portland residents. Contact Greater Portland Landmarks for more information. portlandlandmarks.org/observatory/visit-the-tower. 207-774-5561.

St Lawrence Arts Center, 76 Congress Street. Host to everything from live acoustic shows to the raunchy *Nutcracker Burlesque*, this local arts bastion is currently raising money to add a second theater to its space. Check out the upcoming shows at stlawrencearts.org or at the website for the resident professional theater troupe, Good Theater, at goodtheater.com. 207-775-5568.



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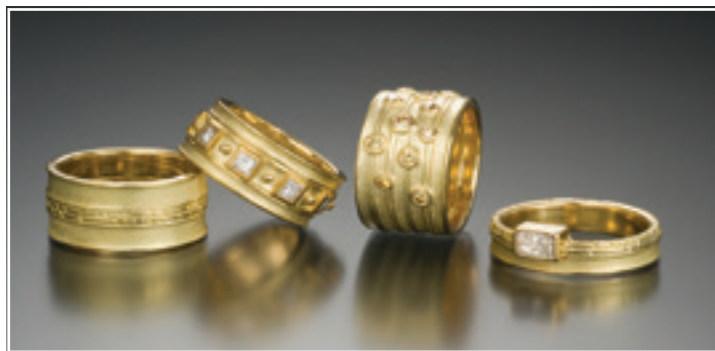
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