Community Profile for South Thomaston, Maine

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January 2013

It is difficult to compile accurate U.S. Census Bureau (USCB) data on the demographics and economics of the port of Spruce Head. Spruce Head is a village and a port bisected by two different municipalities, South Thomaston and St. George and is served by two post offices, with different postal zip codes. Zip code specific USCB census data for Spruce Head is available under two zip codes 04858 (South Thomaston) and 04859 (Spruce Head). However, USCB data for the 04859 zip code includes undifferentiated information on the port of Wheeler Bay and part of the port of Tenants Harbor as well as data on a section of Spruce Head. The information presented in this profile is based on:

• Personal interviews with fishermen
• U.S. Census Bureau online data for zip codes 04859 and 04858
• The 2010 South Thomaston Comprehensive Plan (uses USCB data)
• The “Community Profile for the town of South Thomaston. Prepared under the auspices of the National Marine Fisheries Service, Northeast Fisheries Science Center.”

Background:

One of the major commercial fishing ports in Knox County and in Maine, Spruce Head is located primarily in the town of South Thomaston on the western shores of Penobscot Bay. The town is two miles southwest of Rockland, the regional urban center and county seat. South Thomaston shares borders on the north with the towns of Thomaston and Owls Head and with the town of St. George on the south west. The town has two villages – “the Keag” at the northern end of the Wassaweskeag River and Spruce Head, at the southwest end of town. Nearly all Spruce Head’s commercial fishing infrastructure is located on Spruce Head Island within South Thomaston and connected to the mainland by a short bridge. A residential section of Spruce Head village on the mainland is actually within St. George and residents of that town are served by the Spruce Head Post Office near the town line. The Knox County Regional
Airport is located a few miles north of town in Owl’s Head and offers commuter service to Boston.

For much of the town’s four hundred years of recorded history, fish landings included a diversity of commercial species such as herring, groundfish, shrimp, sea urchins and sea scallops. A statewide decline in natural populations of these species has forced commercial fishermen in Spruce Head to rely primarily on the lobster fishery. Lobster landings in Maine have steadily increased during the last thirty years, reflecting both a growing population of lobsters and an increase in fishing effort – more fishermen catching more lobsters. During the late 1990’s and until about 2005, Spruce Head had some of the highest landings of lobster in Maine. The former William Atwood Lobster Company in Spruce Head, purchased in 2011 by Illinois based Mazzetta Co., is the largest live lobster shipping facility in Maine with a holding capacity of 200,000 pounds. The Spruce Head Fishermen’s Co-op is one of the largest commercial fishing cooperatives in Maine with about fifty members some of whom actually live in surrounding towns. Mc Cloon’s Wharf, the Maine Coast Seafood facility as well as several small family wharves also serve additional Spruce Head fishermen.

Spruce Head also benefits from the close geographic proximity of the Muscle Ridge Islands just east of the village in Penobscot Bay. Although privately owned and not within the governance of South Thomaston, these fifteen or more small islands offer significant summer lobster fishing territories to local fishermen who land most of their catch in Spruce Head. These islands also offer one of the region’s most popular kayaking destinations.

**Town History and Importance of Fishing**

South Thomaston’s recorded history has been tied directly to the natural resources that drove the local and regional economy. Fishing, farming, shipbuilding and granite quarrying have all been important industries in the town’s development. Fishing was the earliest commercial enterprise and persists today as one of the town’s largest employment sectors.

In 1605 the explorer George Weymouth sailed from England to the mouth of the Penobscot River. In 1614, John Smith of the Jamestown Colony fished and traded from Monhegan Island at the mouth of Penobscot Bay about twenty miles from South Thomaston.

Recorded European settlement of South Thomaston dates to about 1650 when Philip Swaden built a trading settlement on the east side of the high land between the Georges and Wessaweskeag rivers. Swaden traded goods with the native Penobscots and sixty or seventy itinerant European fishermen who were working the local shores and waters at that time. These earliest Anglo -European fishermen set up temporary
seasonal camps with protected anchorage for their vessels and selected locations on shore where they could build simple shelters, work on fishing gear and process their catch. Swaden was driven out of the area during the early years of French and Indian Wars which lasted nearly a century from the 1670’s until the 1760’s. This was a time of constant conflict fueled by a military rivalry between France and England for possession of land and resources in eastern North America. Native tribes were drawn into the conflict and alliances were unpredictable.

In 1698, another trading settlement was established in South Thomaston by Thomas Lefebvre from Quebec who received a grant of land from the King of France. This settlement lasted only a few years and ended when English militia captured Thomas and took him to Boston as a prisoner in 1704.

In 1749, an English fisherman Ebenezer Thorndike working along the coast, negotiated from the Penobscots a lease of land at the mouth of the Wassaweskeag River at Thorndike Point near Waterman’s Beach. The island where Ebenezer worked on his fishing gear is still known as Eben’s Island. Ebenezer built a house, small farm and trading business on another island close by. He was forced to leave during the long Indian War, but returned after the Revolution to claim his holdings.

The first permanent settlement in South Thomaston occurred in 1765 when Oliver Robbins and Samuel Brown built dwellings on the banks of the Georges River just south of the Thomaston town line. A fort built at Thomaston in 1719 and the end of the French and Indian Wars in 1763 may have provided increased security and opportunity for expanded settlement east along the western shores of Penobscot Bay. In 1767 Elisha Snow and John Mathews came with timber rights to the shore of the Wassweskeag River, built a saw mill, houses and a store near the stone bridge in South Thomaston village, known as the “Keag”. Shipbuilding began in Thomaston in 1787 and in South Thomaston in 1791 and employed many from the region for well over a century. A lime kiln was built on the Wassaweskeag River below the village in 1837. South Thomaston was incorporated in 1848. At the end of the Civil War granite quarrying in South Thomaston, Spruce Head and on the Muscle Ridge islands just offshore quickly grew into a prosperous industry. Many skilled stone cutters from Finland and Sweden moved into town to work in local quarries and assimilated into local communities. This industry declined between WW 1 and WWII as concrete replaced stone for construction.

South Thomaston is typical of many coastal towns with scenic waterfront properties owned by retirees and summer residents. Many residential waterfront properties are rented to vacationers during the summer and fall and this rental business has become increasingly important to the economy of south Thomaston/Spruce Head.

**Fishing Dependency and Trends**
South Thomaston/Spruce Head was the fifth top lobster port in Maine in 2011 and the eighth ranked Maine port for value of all seafood landings. In 2010 it was third top lobster port according to the Maine Department of Marine Resources. The 2011 landings were 3.8 million pounds of lobsters with a landed value of over $12 million. In 2010, 3.6 million pounds of lobsters were landed with a value of over $10 million.

Throughout South Thomaston’s recorded history, commercial fishing has endured and at times thrived as an important small business category characterized by small, home based family operations. The forty years following WWII were in many ways the golden age of commercial fishing in South Thomaston/Spruce Head. Continuous technological advances, first generated by the war effort, gave fishermen increased capacity to catch commercial species and markets for seafood were strong. Groundfish, lobster, herring, sea scallop, shrimp and sea urchin fisheries thrived during that period.

By the 1990’s all fisheries except lobster were in decline due to reduced stocks of traditional commercial species. Fishermen either left the local fishery or shifted to the lobster fishery adapting to its demanding social structure of fishing territories and strict behavioral rules. As other commercial species declined in numbers, lobster populations increased dramatically. Lobster landings and incomes soared in the decade between 1995 and 2005. South Thomaston/Spruce Head ranked among the top valued ports in Knox County and Knox County ranked first in the state and nation for lobster landings. Since 2005, the highest annual landings of lobster have shifted east to ports such as Vinalhaven and most recently Stonington. Although landings of lobster in South Thomaston/Spruce Head are below the record levels of 1995-2005, landings of other commercial species have disappeared from the port entirely. Small landings of sea scallops, Atlantic halibut (a species of groundfish) and shrimp were recorded in 2012 for south Thomaston/Spruce Head, but no landings of other groundfish, herring or sea urchins occurred. New efforts by fishermen and the Maine Department of Marine Resources to manage the state waters sea scallop fishery may increase scallop landings in South Thomaston/Spruce Head in 2013.

**Lobster Fishing Territories in South Thomaston/Spruce Head**

In Maine, lobster fishermen conduct their fishing businesses within a complex and dynamic set of social rules determining who can fish where and with what intensity. The town residency based fishing territory is the core fishing unit – where you live usually determines where you can set your traps. This arrangement is called a “privilege” and requires a granting agreement by the group and individuals in the group to each participating lobster fisherman. Not every fisherman is accepted into the group and must either gain acceptance in another territory and group or leave the lobster fishery entirely.
South Thomaston/Spruce Head lobster landings come from these lobster fishing territories:

• South Thomaston – abuts Owl’s Head territory on the north
• Keag River – small boats, fish the river and its mouth
• Spruce Head- abuts Wheeler Bay territory on the south
• Offshore – shared by many regional territories from Vinalhaven to Friendship, larger boats
• Muscle Ridge Islands- island specific, family centric
• Offshore Islands – Metinic, Vinalhaven, Matinicus and Criehaven

**Fishery Employment**

Using locally collected and USCB data, the 2010 South Thomaston Comprehensive Plan lists the top four employment sectors (highest at the top)

1. Educational, health and social services
2. Retail trade
3. Manufacturing

Employment in these three sectors occurs primarily in Rockland, Thomaston, Rockport (Penobscot Bay Medical Center) and Warren (Maine State Prison)

4. Fishing (includes farming and forest products)

Of these sectors, fishing employs the most people locally in South Thomaston and has the highest average weekly wage of $946. An estimated 100 boats regularly use the commercial fishing facilities in South Thomaston/Spruce Head. The captains of these boats employ an additional 100-150 crew. Shoreside wharves, transport and processing facilities employ 40-50 workers. Many of these workers are employed on a seasonal basis.

Lobster fishing is traditionally a male dominated enterprise in Maine and in South Thomaston/ Spruce Head. There are no female boat captains and less than six women crew. Female family members sometimes work as crew during the summer months. A few women do captain their own lobster boats in other Maine ports. Females hold a slight majority in the population of the town as a whole. The racial characteristics of the lobster fishing sector reflects the 99.1% white racial makeup of the town and region.

**Fishery Equipment**

Each lobster fisherman owns and operates a boat to set, haul and move traps. The boats average 36 feet in length and range from 16 feet to 45 feet. Boats have gotten
larger, faster and more expensive in the past twenty years. Larger, faster boats allow traps to be moved quickly and give fishermen increased access to offshore lobster grounds. Maine law allows a maximum of 800 traps to be fished by each lobster license holder. Identification tags are purchased annually by the fisherman and only tagged traps can be legally fished. One licensed owner/operator is the norm for each boat. Lobster fishermen often employ from one to three helpers or “sternmen” to help handle the catch and bait the traps. Traps are fished as “singles” “pairs” and “trawls” (3 or more per buoy.

**Town Governance** – from the 2010 Comprehensive Plan

“South Thomaston uses the “Town Meeting-Selectmen Form of Government”. The town meeting, serving as the legislative arm of the government meets one day in March. At that time the meeting passes any needed laws (ordinances) for the orderly governing of the town, approves a budget and levies the taxes. It also elects various town officers including the board of selectmen which serves in a part time capacity as the executive arm of the government, administering, enforcing and carrying out the decisions made by the town meeting. State laws grant the board some legislative powers as well when it comes to regulating vehicles, public ways and public property.”

South Thomaston has 1,217 registered voters with 350 Democrats, 375 Republicans, 62 Green Party and 442 Unenrolled in 2012.

**Demographics**

**Population** - from the 2010 Comprehensive Plan and USCB data(Wikipedia)

The year round resident population of South Thomastion has grown steadily over the past seventy years from a low in 1940 of about 550 residents to1,558 residents in 2010. This is still down from the peak population levels of the late1800’s. Most recent growth has resulted from people moving into South Thomaston rather than from an increase in births. Between 2005 and 2010, the year round population increased by 55 individuals. The median age of residents is increasing and is 47.4 years in 2010, up from 41.1 in 2000 and 37.4 in 1990. The size of the average household decreased from 2.47 in 1990 to 2.38 in 2000 and 2.31 in 2010. The number of households in South Thomaston is growing in a way that indicates more retirees are moving in to town. The summer seasonal population increases by about 500 persons and is predicted to grow in the next decade.

**Housing**

Housing in South Thomastion is primarily single family units and is increasing from 697 units in 1990, 804 units in 2000 and 940 units in 2010. Waterfront properties are
increasing in value faster than inland properties and most new housing is being built away from the waterfront.

**Education**

About 90% of residents over the age of 25 are high school graduates and about 20% have a Bachelors degree or higher.

**Race and Ethnicity**

96.8% of the South Thomaston residents are white, .3% African American, .4% Native American, .8% Asian, .6 % Latino and 1.7% two or more races.

26.7% are of English ancestry, 12.4% Irish, 11.6% American, 6.9% Finnish, 6.5% German and 5.2% Scottish

**Economics and Employment**

The South Thomaston median household income in 2010 was $43,294 and median family income was $55,000. Unemployment in 2010 was 2.9 %, lower than the state and county rates.

Key employers in the Knox County/midcoast region are listed in order of decreasing total number of employees from the region:

Penobscot Bay Medical Center, Maine State Prison, RSU 13(regional school unit for six towns including South Thomaston/Spruce Head), Samoset Resort, MSAD 28(Camden, Rockport schools), Lowe’s, Home Depot, Wal-Mart and Hannaford Bros.

As stated earlier, commercial fishing is the fourth largest employment sector for South Thomaston/Spruce Head residents and has the highest weekly income of all employment sectors. The relatively high incomes, the chance to be self-employed and to be in a business with a long community tradition continue to attract young men into commercial fishing in this town.

**Transportation**

Live lobsters from the Spruce Head Co-op, Maine Coast Seafood and Mc Loon’s Wharf are transported primarily by truck to processing and distribution centers out of town. The William Atwood Lobster Company continues to process lobsters at their Spruce Head facility and ship live lobsters by truck and air. Air shipments go from Portland International and Logan International air ports.
In order to grow lobsters regularly shed their exoskeletons or shells. Seventy to eighty percent of the lobsters landed in Spruce Head and in Maine are soft shell and cannot be shipped long distances or be in transit for more than a day. They do not survive air shipment well. Most of these soft shell lobsters are transported by truck to large processing facilities in Canada that produce frozen lobster tails and other frozen lobster products. In 2010 there are two small lobster processing facilities in Rockland and one new facility in St. George. The only other Maine lobster processor is in Portland. These small regional processing facilities currently lack the capacity to handle the volumes of live lobster landed in Spruce Head and other Knox County ports.

**Waterfront Access**

Fishermen in South Thomaston/Spruce Head and the region are concerned about the loss of local working waterfront access. Access is shrinking statewide as high-end residential development replaces commercial fishing use of the waterfront. Much of this change is regulated at the town level by town zoning and by decisions made on individual properties by town planning boards and tax assessors.

In 2005 Maine voters approved a $2 million bond to initiate the Working Waterfront Access Pilot Program administered by the Maine Department of Marine Resources and Coastal Enterprises in Wiscasset. This program provides money to applicants such as land trusts, municipalities, fishing co-ops and private commercial fishing businesses to permanently secure waterfront properties for commercial fishing businesses. Voters approved an additional $3 million in 2007.

In 2007, the Spruce Head Fishermen’s Co-op secured $475,000 from the Working Waterfront Access Program to help them purchase the wharf and facilities in Spruce Head that they had leased for over thirty years. In exchange the Co-op members signed an easement on the property assuring that it would permanently remain as working waterfront with commercial fishing access.

In Maine, town taxes on working waterfront property are assessed at “highest use” which in today’s real estate market means residential not commercial fishing. High municipal taxes can pressure working waterfront property owners to sell their property for residential use. This scenario usually removes working waterfront permanently reducing access for commercial fishermen. In 2006, Maine voters approved the Working Waterfront Current Use Tax Law which allows commercial fishermen with private wharves and working waterfront access facilities to apply for and receive tax abatements on the working waterfront part of their property. In 2012 six commercial fishermen with working waterfront property in South Thomaston/Spruce Head have received such abatements on their town taxes.
Local Infrastructure Supporting Fishing Business

Boat and engine service, installation and repair are provided by Art’s Marine Service in Owl’s Head, Clark Island Boatyard and Spruce Head Marine. J&H Marine located in Spruce Head village provides outboard motor sales and service. Billings Boatyard in Stonington as well as Journey’s End Marina in Rockland provide engine and hull repair. Drinkwater Boat Hauling and Journey’s End Marina provide boat haul out and storage services.

Fisheries Profile

In the past two decades, lobsters have replaced groundfish, herring, sea scallops, shrimp and sea urchins to become the single active commercial fishery in South Thomaston/ Spruce Head and the entire state. This dependence on a single species is historic and puts Maine fishermen at increased economic risk. If the lobster population collapses, our remaining commercial fishery will collapse. Any significant decline in the lobster population will hurt every fishing port in Maine.

Lobster fishing in Maine is permitted all year with conservation measures in place that protect the young and breeding stock. These regulations have been effective and lobster populations have increased dramatically in the Gulf of Maine since 1990. The increased bio-mass of lobsters have expanded their range up into embayments and rivers while also populating new habitat types in the Gulf. Large numbers of lobsters now live year round on extensive mud habitats that they did not inhabit twenty years ago. In addition lobsters are plentiful in rocky and mud habitats much farther off shore than previously. The expanded range, new habitats and much larger densities of lobster are reflected in increased landings. In the 1960’s and 1970’s Maine lobster landings averaged twenty to thirty million pounds each year. Today the annual catch is around one hundred million pounds. Similar increased landings have occurred in Canada which produces more lobsters annually than Maine. Knox County ports led the state with record landings during the period 1995 to 2005and South Thomaston was often the first or second top valued port in Maine during that period. Since 2005 the highest lobster landings have shifted to ports further east - Vinalhaven, Stonington and Jonesport.

This increase in landings has encouraged more fishermen to enter the lobster fishery increasing the crowding of fishing gear and intensifying conflicts between individuals and territorial groups. The increased landings are also straining the capacity of the lobster processing infrastructure to handle the volume of lobsters being landed in Maine and in Canada unless production is spread out during the year. This balance between volume of lobsters landed and time of landing traditionally helps set the price paid to the fishermen in both Maine and Canada. Processors and fishermen alike want to avoid a "glut" of lobsters that cannot be processed or sold live.
In the spring of 2012, historically warm water in the Gulf of Maine during the winter may have contributed to lobsters shedding their shells in March and April rather than in July or August as fishermen expected based on previous seasons. High volume catches of soft shell lobsters began to be landed in South Thomaston/Spruce Head and throughout Maine in the spring when Canada was also catching large numbers of lobsters. This produced a glut, prices plummeted and dealers could not sell lobsters being landed. Processors in Canada had plenty of Canadian lobster to work with or had not geared up for Maine production that early. The lobster industry in Maine and Canada was in crisis.

Prices paid to Maine fishermen remained low for the duration of the 2012 season although the glut was cleared and prices increased somewhat during the late summer and fall. Fishermen and processors are anxious to see what happens during the 2012-2013 winter and next spring. Many are hoping water temperatures return to lower, “more normal” levels and that lobsters shed later than in 2012.

**Fishing Support Organizations**

Founded in 1954, the Maine Lobstermen’s Association (MLA) is the oldest organization representing and advocating for commercial fishermen in Maine and on the entire east coast of the U.S. Long time leaders of this organization live and fish in South Thomaston/Spruce Head.

The chairman of the board of directors of the Gulf of Maine Lobster Foundation (GOMLF) is also the president of the Spruce Head Fishermen’s Co-op. This organization has been partnering with fishermen to record water temperature using recording sensors attached to lobster traps for more than ten years. They recently have raised funds to hire fishermen to remove derelict fishing gear from the Gulf.

Lobster fishermen from South Thomaston/Spruce Head are also represented on the Zone D Lobster Advisory Council, The Lobster Promotion Council and the Maine Lobster Advisory Council.

Scallop fishermen from South Thomaston/Spruce Head have also worked with the Maine Department of Marine Resources, Maine Sea grant and the Penobscot East Resource Center to improve local sea scallop management.

The Island Institute in nearby Rockland is also involved with fisheries outreach and support.

The annual Maine Fishermen’s Forum is held in March at the Samoset Resort in nearby Rockport. The forum provides seminars on fisheries management and other topics related to commercial fishing in Maine and New England
Figure 1

Town of South Thomaston including two villages and Fishing

Port on Spruce Head Island
Fig. 1 also Shows Muscle Ridge Islands in Penobscot Bay east of Spruce Head Island, Wassaweskeag River, Knox County Regional Airport and St. George River on the west

Figure 2

Spruce Head Island Fishing Port and Village
References:

1. South Thomaston Comprehensive Plan 2010
2. U.S. Census Bureau 2012 Census
3. “Community Profile of the Town of South Thomaston. Prepared under the auspices of the National Marine Fisheries Service, Northeast Fisheries Science Center. Contact Lisa.L.Colburn@noaa.gov.”
4. Google Earth