

## NEW HAMPSHIRE HISTORIC PROPERTY DOCUMENTATION

### LaCAVA'S WHARF

NH State No. 566

**LOCATION:** 95 Mechanic Street, Portsmouth, Rockingham County, New Hampshire.  
USGS Kittery ME Quadrangle, 1995. UTM Coordinates: 19.357537.4770648  
State Plane Coordinates (NAD 83 feet): x 1,229,186.64 y 210,960.28

**DATE BUILT:** 1949

**BUILDER/  
CONTRACTOR:** Daniel LaCava & Sons

**OWNER/USE:** City of Portsmouth, NH / Not in use, formerly private fishing wharf.

**SIGNIFICANCE:** LaCava's Wharf is a vernacular and rudimentary example of a wood pile wharf or dock structure of the type built along protected shorelines for access and berthing of small recreational and commercial boats and support of their associated activities - in this case near-shore fishing and lobstering. Built, rebuilt and maintained prior to building codes, it is an assemblage of differing construction materials and methods representing a product of thrift but also ingenuity in effecting construction between tidal cycles. The buildings on the wharf supported the fishing operations but do not possess significant architectural or specialized characteristics. The property is historically significant as an example of the once common mom-and-pop fishing operations found in most harbors of the country with a near-shore fishery. Such properties and their fishing businesses are disappearing due to increased waterfront property values, diminished fishery yield, and conflicted codes, permitting and licensing regulations. In 2016, LaCava Wharf was determined to be a contributing property within the Portsmouth Downtown Historic District.

### PROJECT

**INFORMATION:** The LaCava's Wharf property was documented in accordance with the standards of the New Hampshire Division of Historical Resources (NHDHR) and the Historic American Engineering Record in January 2017 by Historic Documentation Company Inc. (HDC), Portsmouth, RI, for the City of Portsmouth, NH. The documentation fulfills the recommendations of the NHDHR pursuant to the Request for Project Review # 8083, dated 2 December 2016. The report was written and compiled by Richard M. Casella, Engineering Historian, Historic Documentation Company. Rob Tucher Photographic Documentation, High Bridge, NJ, conducted the large-format black and white film photography.

## **DESCRIPTION:**

LaCava's Wharf consists of a wood deck structure of stringer and plank construction supported on timber pilings and posts. Three wood frame buildings are built on top of the wharf deck. The deck structure measures roughly 84 feet by 45 feet overall. LaCava's Wharf is located east of the intersection of Mechanic and Gates Streets, on a point of land that projects east into the channel of the Piscataqua River between Peirce Island and the mainland (Figures 1, 2). It occupies the east half of tax parcel 103/29 with the address of 95 Mechanic Street (Figures 3, 4). On the west half of the parcel, fronting Mechanic Street and set back from the shoreline and the wharf about 20 feet, is a vacant two-story, four-unit residential building. Abutting the property to the north is a small vacant parcel owned by the City of Portsmouth (City) adjoining the Peirce Island Bridge. Abutting to the south is a solid fill wharf with cut granite retaining walls, measuring about 30 feet wide and projecting east into the channel about 85 feet (Figure 5). This solid (fill) wharf is also City property and originally served as the approach to the first Peirce Island Bridge, built by the City in 1924. Southwest of LaCava's Wharf is the City's Mechanic Street Wastewater Pump Station (Figure 3, 5).

The LaCava's Wharf structures are designated A-D on the Site Plan (Figure 3) and described below; additional information is found on the project Demolition Plan (Figure 4).

### **A. Market, Office, Shop**

This building was built in 1949 as a seafood market, office and work shop to replace a smaller building previously used for roughly the same purposes. It is a one story, wood frame, front gable building with clapboard siding and asphalt shingle roofing. The building measures approximately 17' wide x 40' deep. Two shed-roof additions A-1, A-2, are attached to the north side and described below. A modern metal entrance door is centered on the front, flanked by single 1/1 wood windows. A 6/1 wood window is mounted in the gable. A 1/1 window is located on the south side; simple plywood double doors are centered on the back opening onto the wharf deck at the first floor and attic level. The interior is divided into a front room, evidently used for retail sales of lobster and other seafood and as an office, and a larger back room evidently used for product and equipment storage and as a workshop. Rudimentary, winding stairs access an attic evidently used for storage.

### **A-1. Lobster Pound.**

This is a shed-roof addition to the north side of the main building that measures 14' wide x 40' deep (the full depth of the main building). It has clapboard siding and asphalt sheet roofing. There is no exterior door on the front; a solid plywood door opens onto the wharf at the rear. A small square fixed window is located on the front. Inside the building are four shallow saltwater lobster tanks, evidently home built with standard framing lumber and lined with sheet metal. The roof, walls and floor are collapsing, preventing further investigation. The clapboard siding on the north side is falling off.

### **A-2. Storeroom**

This is a shed-roof addition to the north side of the Lobster Pound that measures 12' wide x 14' deep. A solid plank door on the front is the only access. It has sheet fiberboard siding of the Homosote type and asphalt sheet roofing. The roof, walls and floor are collapsing preventing any access to the interior, but it appears to have been used for storage.

### B. North Storage Shed

This is a one story, wood frame, front gable, utility building with clapboard siding and asphalt shingle roofing. It measures 12' wide by 20' deep and is equipped with window openings on each side (boarded-over with plywood) and in the front gable, and solid plywood doors on the front (hinged) and rear (rolling). The building is reportedly insulated and may have been refrigerated for cold bait storage.<sup>1</sup>

### C. South Storage Shed

This is a one story, wood frame, utility building with a shed-roof. It has clapboard siding on the front and sides and plywood siding on the back. The roofing is asphalt sheet. It measures 10' wide by 15' deep and is equipped with a solid plywood door on the front. The building does not have windows and is reportedly insulated. It may have been used for cold bait storage and live bait storage based on a plastic saltwater intake pipe extending out the floor to below water level.<sup>2</sup>

### D. Timber Wharf<sup>3</sup>

The wharf is entirely of wood construction and exhibits what is evidently decades of repairs as reflected in the many different sizes and types of lumber and materials used, their configuration and methods of construction. In general, repairs were effected cheaply and probably as quickly as could be done in one cycle of low tide when the mud below the wharf is largely exposed (Figure 6). The oldest structural members reflect the typical materials and methods used for lightweight rudimentary dock construction. The piles vary in size and in species, including pine, oak and possibly cedar. The piles are both treated and untreated. Posts, bearing on rudimentary footings of concrete blocks or stones, were evidently installed as repairs and also vary widely in material including older salvaged utility poles to modern pressure-treated timbers. Pile caps vary from oak logs to both rough-sawn and milled dimensional lumber, treated and untreated, as single beams and in built-up, laminated and sistered configurations. Stringers are likewise a mix of rough sawn and milled lumber of varying size and spacing, both treated and untreated, indicating many repairs and replacements.

The structural evaluation of the wharf conducted by Waterfront Engineers for the City in 2014 found 45% of the supporting pilings and posts to have minimal to no load bearing capacity and pedestrian access has been prohibited since.

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<sup>1</sup> Waterfront Engineers LLC. "95 Mechanic Street Waterfront Structures Assessment." Report prepared for Portsmouth Dept. of Public Works, October 17, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Description of the Wharf structure is based on the findings of the structural inspection report prepared by Waterfront Engineers LLC., previously cited.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:

LaCava's Wharf as it exists today was largely constructed in 1949 by Daniel LaCava as a fish market, lobster pound and dock for his fishing and lobstering boats and business. LaCava established the fishing and seafood business at the site under the name Dan Cava & Sons in 1934. In 1949 Dan and his sons Salvatore (Samuel or Sammy) and Antonio (Tony) reconstructed the existing wharf and added a new section, 20 feet wide, doubling its overall width. The main building housing the seafood market, office and shop was built on the new and expanded section of the wharf; the additions to the main building, and other storage sheds were added later.

Historic mapping indicates that a wharf in some form and a building on shore was present on the 95 Mechanic Street parcel by 1892. The Sanborn fire insurance map for that year depicts a building labeled "Repair Shop" with a wharf extending from the rear, occupying approximately the same footprint as the present structures.<sup>4</sup> On the 1910 Sanborn map, the repair shop is now a "grocery" and the wharf is identified as a "plank wharf" on which a small building is shown labeled "gasoline storage." The present tenement building occupies the same footprint as the grocery and earlier repair shop, so it is possible that it represents a remodeling of the earlier structures.

In 1926 the property was advertised for sale following the death of its owner Robert R. Lear. Lear had bought the property in 1908 and there operated a "community store together with [a] gasoline and boatmen's supply building."<sup>5</sup> The advertisement (see Figure 8) further describes the property and notes its desirable location adjacent to the Portsmouth Yacht Club, which coincide with the conditions shown on the 1910 and 1920 Sanborn maps. The advertisement also mentions its location adjacent to the bridge to Peirce Island that was built in 1924 following the purchase of the island by the City the year before.

The Sanborn map of 1956 shows LaCava's wharf at that time and the location of the original Peirce Island Bridge which had not yet been replaced (Figure 9). In June 1927, Sam Tawbe bought the property from Anna L. Lear and resold it five months later to Hector Priestly. The property was described as "a certain parcel of land with the buildings thereon... with the wharf thereon and the water privileges appurtenant thereto."<sup>6</sup>

Daniel LaCava was born in 1895 in Messina, Italy and immigrated through the Port of Boston in 1911 with other members of his family. He married Grace Galvagno in 1918 in Lawrence, Massachusetts and moved to Portsmouth, New Hampshire in 1921.<sup>7</sup> By 1930, Daniel and Grace were settled in the tenement house at 95 Mechanic Street with four children, Antonio, Salvatore, Frank and Bessie. Daniel's profession was listed as "fisherman" in the city directory that year but it could not be determined in what capacity his work was associated with the wharf attached to the property. It is not known if he owned a fishing boat and berthed it there, or leased the wharf and the commercial fishing operation that had been operating there for many years, or was a fisherman working on other fisherman's boats. He soon became well known in the community as notable

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<sup>4</sup> The earlier 1887 Sanborn map does not include the subject property.

<sup>5</sup> *Portsmouth Herald*. "Community Store and Gasoline Boat Supply Station." October 11, 1926, p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> Deed. Book 822, page 89, November 10, 1927. Rockingham County Registry of Deeds. The 1927 deed cited above is the earliest examined by the title search conducted April 9, 2014 by the City of Portsmouth relative to the purchase of the property.

<sup>7</sup> Obituary, Daniel LaCava, *Portsmouth Herald*, January 18, 1971, p. 3.

catches by the City's fishermen where regularly reported in the newspaper. In 1930 the *Portsmouth Herald* reported that LaCava caught a 45 pound catfish, and in 1932 caught a seal weighing about 100 pounds while hauling his trawl over the Isle of Shoals, and in 1936 netted an eighteen pound sturgeon off Wallis Island.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the Depression, by 1934 the LaCava's economic situation allowed them to purchase the property at 95 Mechanic Street from Hector Priestly for one dollar plus assumption of the outstanding mortgage on the property of \$1000.<sup>9</sup> The title was put in Grace LaCava's name, a practice not uncommon among fishermen to simplify financial matters should her husband fail to return from the sea. Grace then leased the "wharf, dock, and water rights" for the sum of 70 dollars per month, to her husband and sons, for the purpose of "fishing, lobstering and conducting fishing parties."<sup>10</sup>

Thus marked the official beginning of what would be over a seventy-year run of the Dan LaCava & Sons fishing and lobster business, operated out of the 95 Mechanic Street Wharf. A sign, just recently removed from the front of the main building on the wharf, reads "LaCava's Wharf, Est. 1934" (Figure 10). LaCava soon began regularly running ads in the *Portsmouth Herald* announcing special deals on fish, crabs and lobsters, freshly caught (Figure 11). Grace LaCava operated a grocery out of the front of the the tenement until 1939 when she and Daniel moved to 122 Mechanic Street where they lived for the next 30 years

On April 4, 1943, Dan and Grace LaCava received word from the Navy that their youngest son, Frank, age 17, was missing in action. Frank had enlisted in May 1942, two days after his seventeenth birthday.<sup>11</sup> A human interest article in the *Portsmouth Herald* in 1946 told the story of the LaCava's lobstering business, and how Edwin Capone, a WWII veteran employed by the LaCava's, was realizing his dream to be a lobsterman after the war.<sup>12</sup> The *Herald* reporter, Paul Marsten, rode along with Salvatore "Sammy" LaCava and Capone as they made the rounds to their traps and hauled the catch (see Figures 12, 13). Marston notes that "Sammy is one of the 100 or so lobster fishermen along the 20 mile stretch of New Hampshire shore line, who wrest a living from the sea."

LaCava's fishing and lobstering business grew during the post war years. Twice Dan LaCava approached the City with an offer to purchase the "mud flats at the foot of Gates Street" in order to enlarge the wharf and erect a new fish market building on it. The City Council opposed selling the land but in 1947 agreed to lease a strip 20 feet in width along the south side of LaCava's property for a term of 99 years.<sup>13</sup>

LaCava drove additional pilings to essentially double the width of the wharf. A new building to house a fish market, office, lobster tanks (also called a lobster pound) and work room was constructed at the shore (west) end of the wharf. LaCava ran ads in the newspaper during

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<sup>8</sup> See, respectively, *Portsmouth Herald*, May 8, 1930, p. 1; November 26, 1932, p. 1; May 28, 1936, p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Deed. Book 899, page 452, November 5, 1934. Rockingham County Registry of Deeds.

<sup>10</sup> Lease. Book 938, page 73, December 11, 1937. Rockingham County Registry of Deeds.

<sup>11</sup> *Portsmouth Herald*. "Navy Reports Frank LaCava as Missing." April 5, 1943.

<sup>12</sup> *Portsmouth Herald*. "War Veteran Realizes Dream Lobstering Off N.H. Coast." July 24, 1946.

<sup>13</sup> Lease. City of Portsmouth to Grace LaCava, April 10, 1947. On file at Portsmouth Department of Public Works.

December 1949 and January 1950 announcing the new market was "opening soon" and "now open" which occurred on January 11, 1950 (Figure 14).

In 1958 a new bridge to Peirce Island was built by the City in its present location north of the LaCava property. The old bridge was torn down the following year (Figure 15). In 1961 the City removed the stone abutments and reconstructed the stone retaining walls around the solid-fill City Pier into their present configuration. In 1963-64, the City constructed the Mechanic Street Pump Station on the City Pier property immediately south of LaCava Wharf. Local sewer lines were rerouted to the station which then pumped the sewerage to the new Peirce Island Sewage Treatment Plant (see Figure 4).

During the 1950s, brothers Sammy and Tony LaCava lived in the tenement at 95 Mechanic Street according to city directory listings. They listed their occupations as fishermen and continued to operate the lobster business as Dan LaCava and Sons. In October 1968, Dan and Grace LaCava celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary at a large party given by their children attended by over 300 guests (Figure 16). Dan LaCava died January 17, 1971; Grace LaCava died in 1990.

The two brothers continued commercial operations at the wharf into the 21<sup>st</sup> century; the sign on the former fish market (Figure 10) reads "LaCava Wharf Crafters," suggesting that dock construction services were being offered there. Following the the death of their Antonio LaCava in 2013, the City bought the property from his estate.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY:**

Bell, Tom. "So you want to be a lobsterman." *Portsmouth Herald Press*, August 14, 2014.  
Accessed online at [http://www.pressherald.com/2011/08/14/so-you-want-to-be-a-lobsterman\\_2011-08-14](http://www.pressherald.com/2011/08/14/so-you-want-to-be-a-lobsterman_2011-08-14).

Hanssmann, Caren. "The Changing Face of Peirce Island." (2008) Accessed online at  
<http://www.cityofportsmouth.com/peirce-island/history.html>.

"Massachusetts, Boston Passenger Lists, 1891-1943,"  
(<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:23XQ-WJT> : 4 December 2014), Dousuiter La Cava, 1911.

Portsmouth (City of) Department of Public Works. Files pertaining to 95 Mechanic Street property including title search associated with 2014 purchase, tax assessment records, and engineering reports. On file at Portsmouth Department of Public Works.

### *Portsmouth Herald*

———. Brighton, Ray. "City Bought Island in 1923." January 3, 1959, p. 4.

———. "City Takes Ownership on August 9, 1923."

———. Column Advertisement. "Community Store and Gasoline Boat Supply Station." October 11, 1926, p. 8.

———. "Married 50 Years." October 26, 1968, p. 8.

———. "Much Money to be Saved by City." 16 February 1924, p. 1

- . "Navy Reports Frank LaCava as Missing." April 5, 1943, p. 1.
- . Obituary, Daniel LaCava, January 18, 1971, p. 3.
- . "Peirce Island Acquired in 1923." November 1, 1958, p. 4.
- . "Peirce Island Gets Final Stamp as Site for Treatment Plant." June, 20, 1961 p. 1.
- . "The Old and the New." July 13, 1959, p. 1.
- . "War Veteran Realizes Dream Lobstering Off N.H. Coast." July 24, 1946.

Waterfront Engineers, LLC. "95 Mechanic Street Waterfront Structures Assessment."  
Engineering report, dated 17 October 2014, prepared for Portsmouth Department of  
Public Works. Waterfront Engineers, LLC, Stratham, NH.

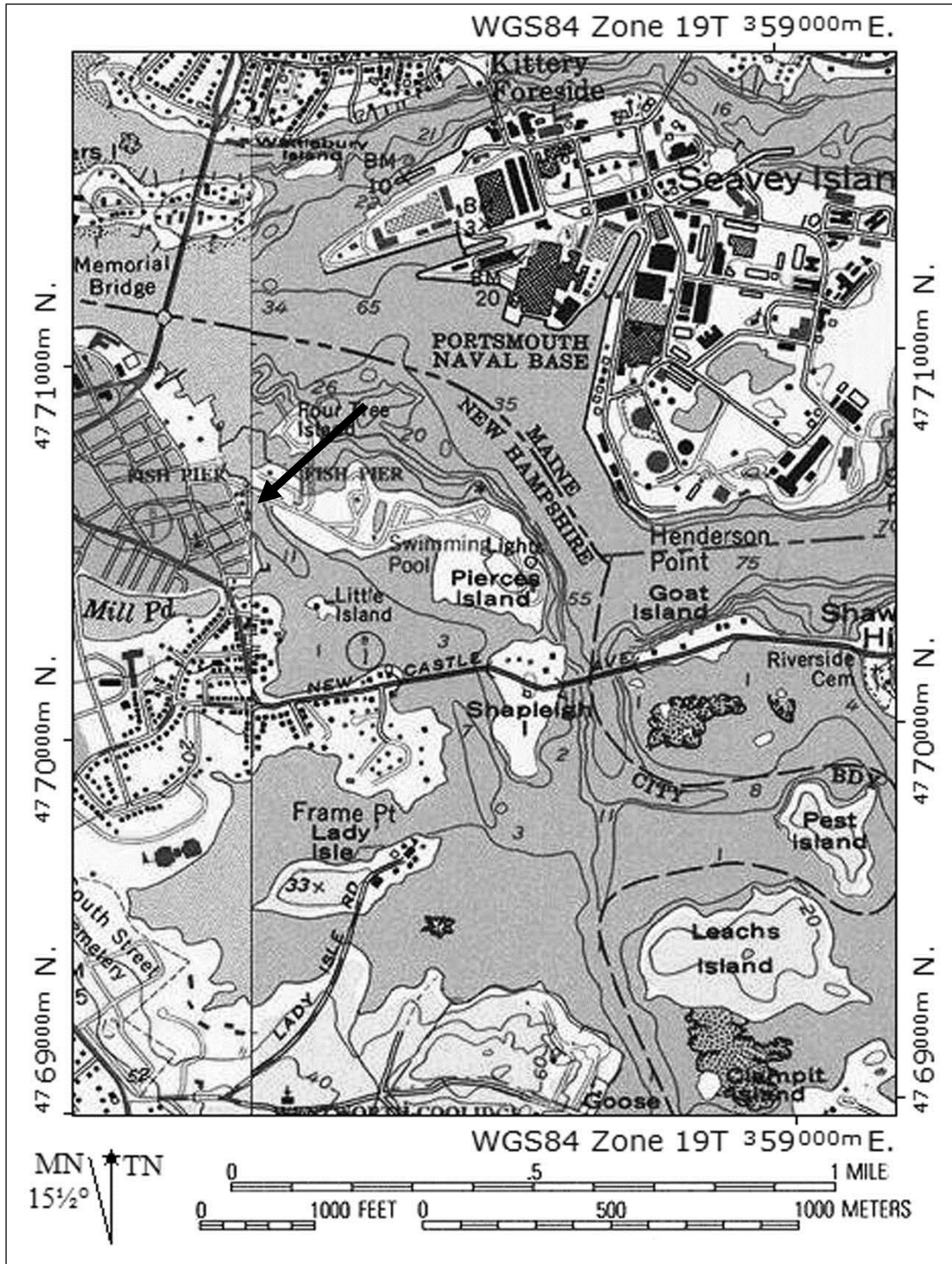


FIGURE 1: Location Map. Arrow locates LaCava's Wharf (USGS Kittery ME Quadrangle, 1995).



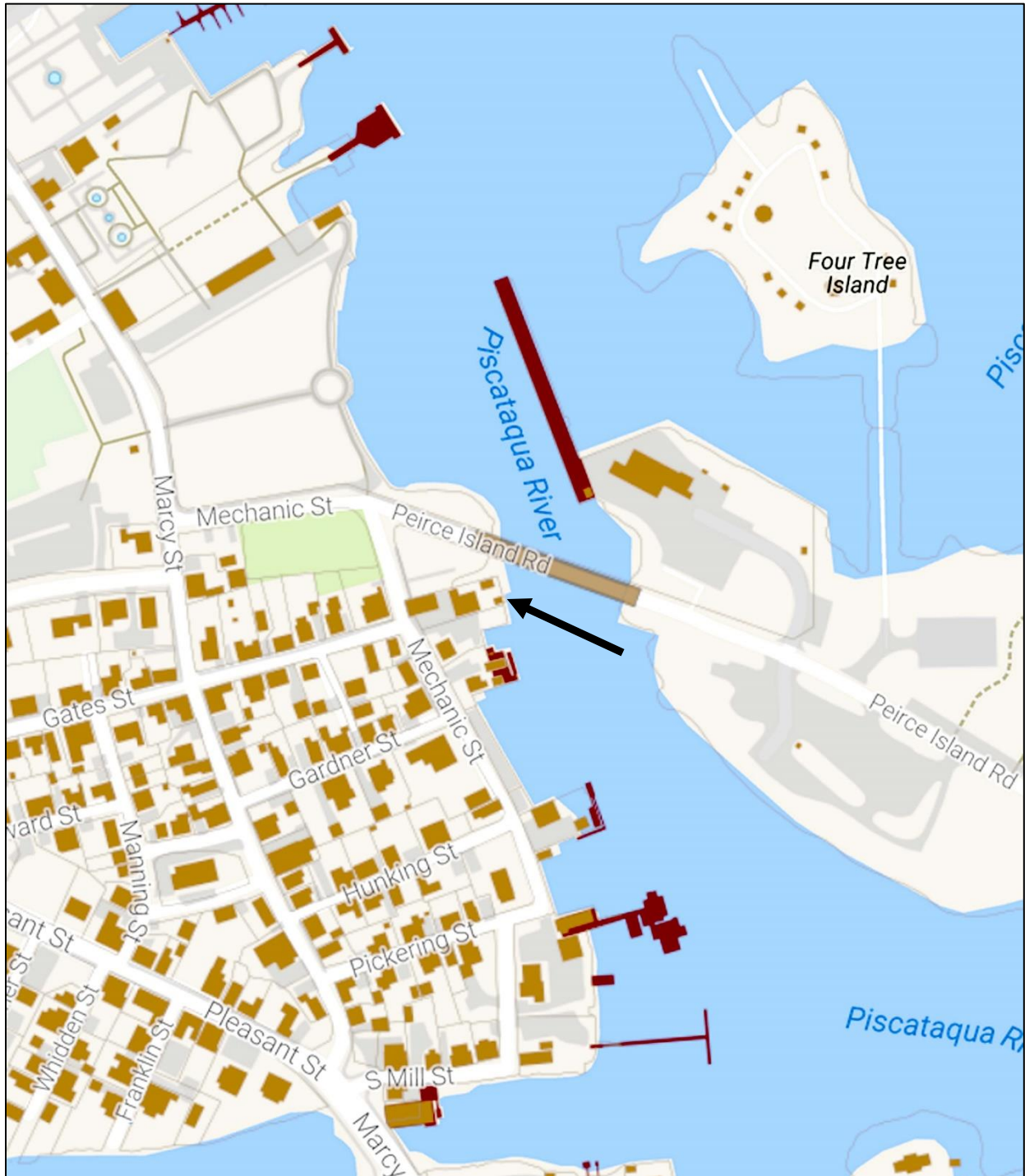


FIGURE 2: Location Map Detail. Arrow locates LaCava's Wharf, 95 Mechanic Street. Note other light commercial wharf and pier structures along waterfront south of subject property (Portsmouth NH GIS Tax map).

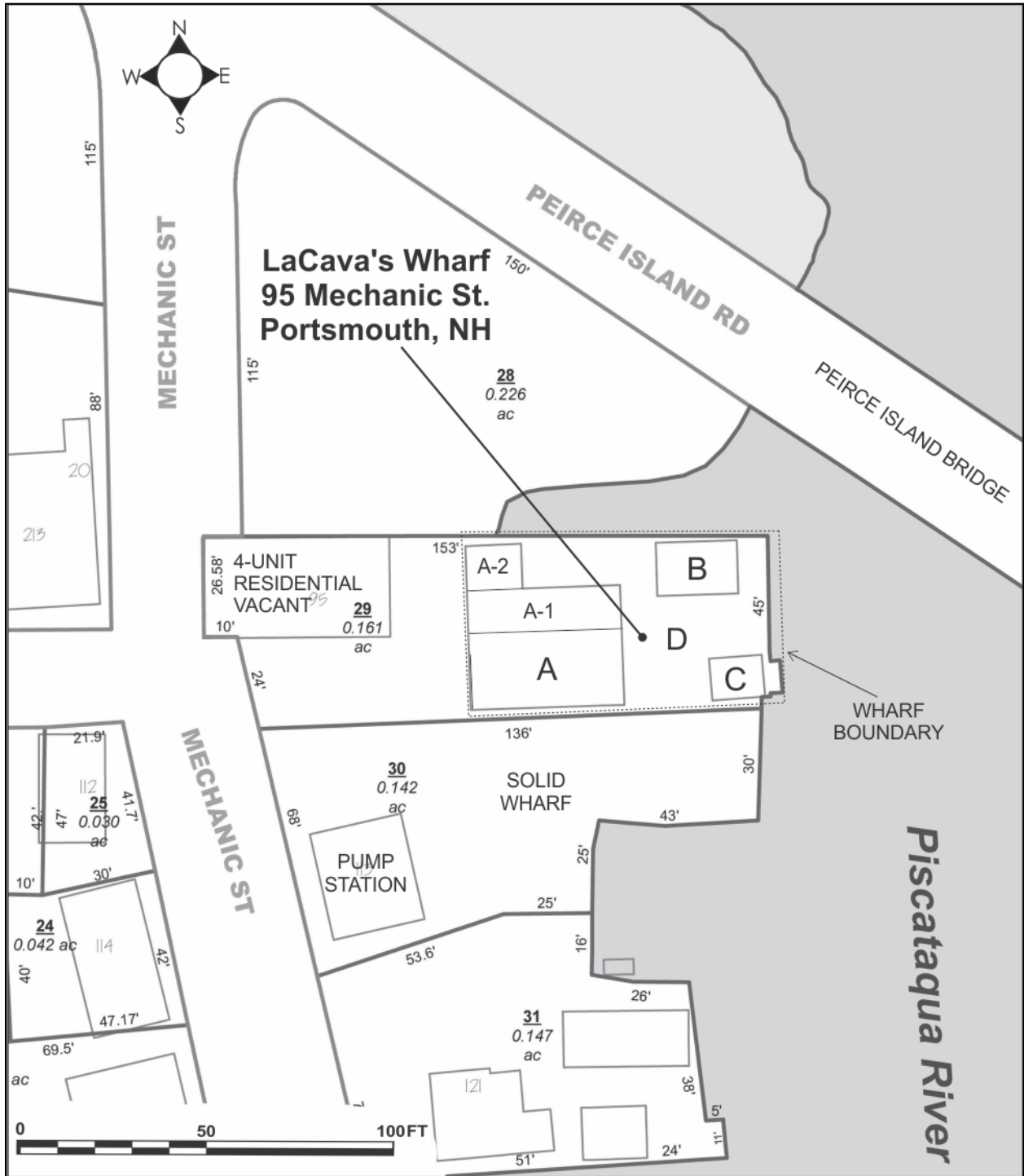


FIGURE 3: LaCava's Wharf site plan (Portsmouth NH Tax Map # 103).

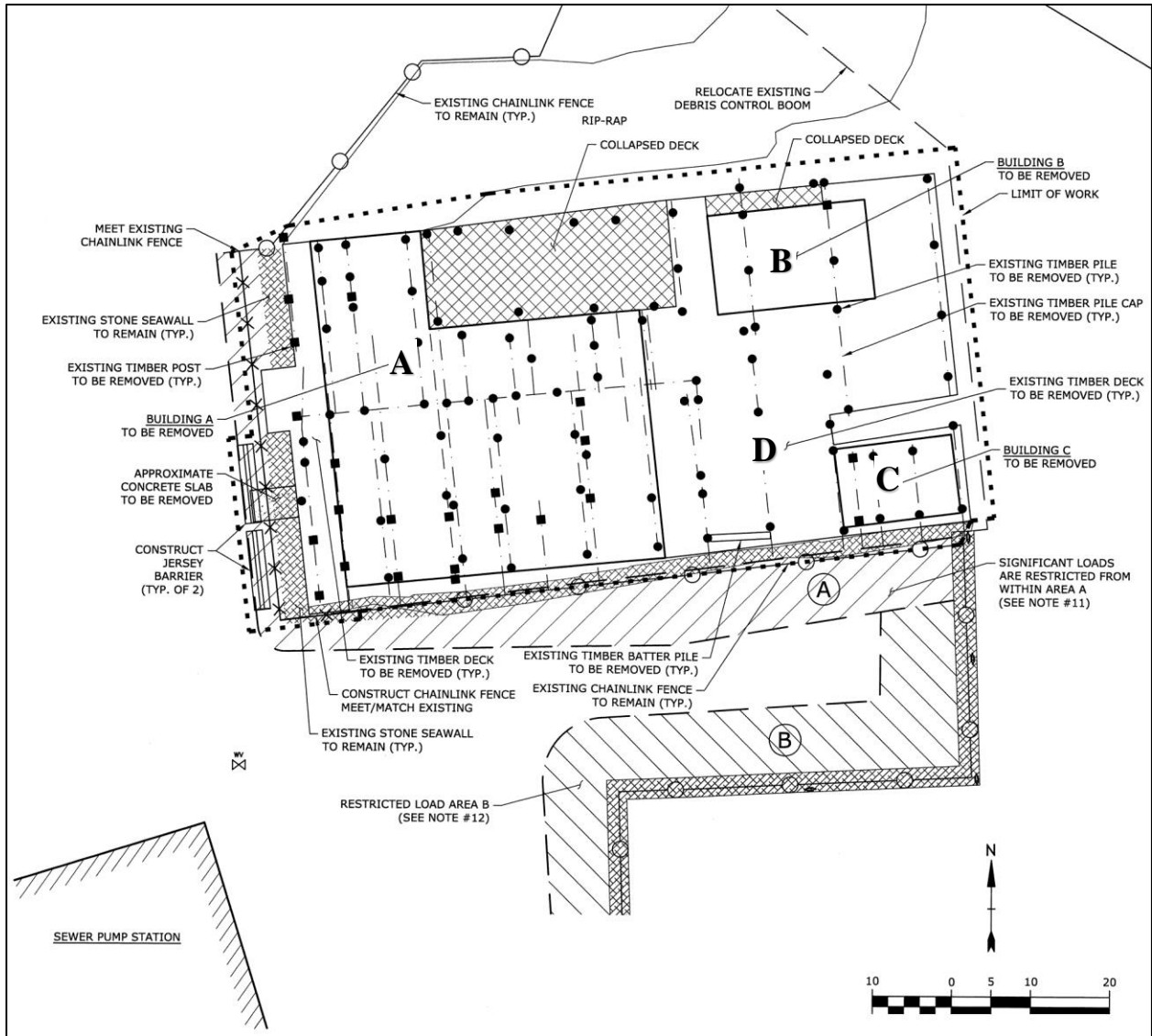


FIGURE 4: LaCava's Wharf project Demolition Plan showing Buildings A, B and C, wharf deck structure (D) and location and type of timber piling and posts supporting deck structure (Source: City of Portsmouth Public Works; plan prepared for City by Tighe & Bond Engineers, Portsmouth, NH).

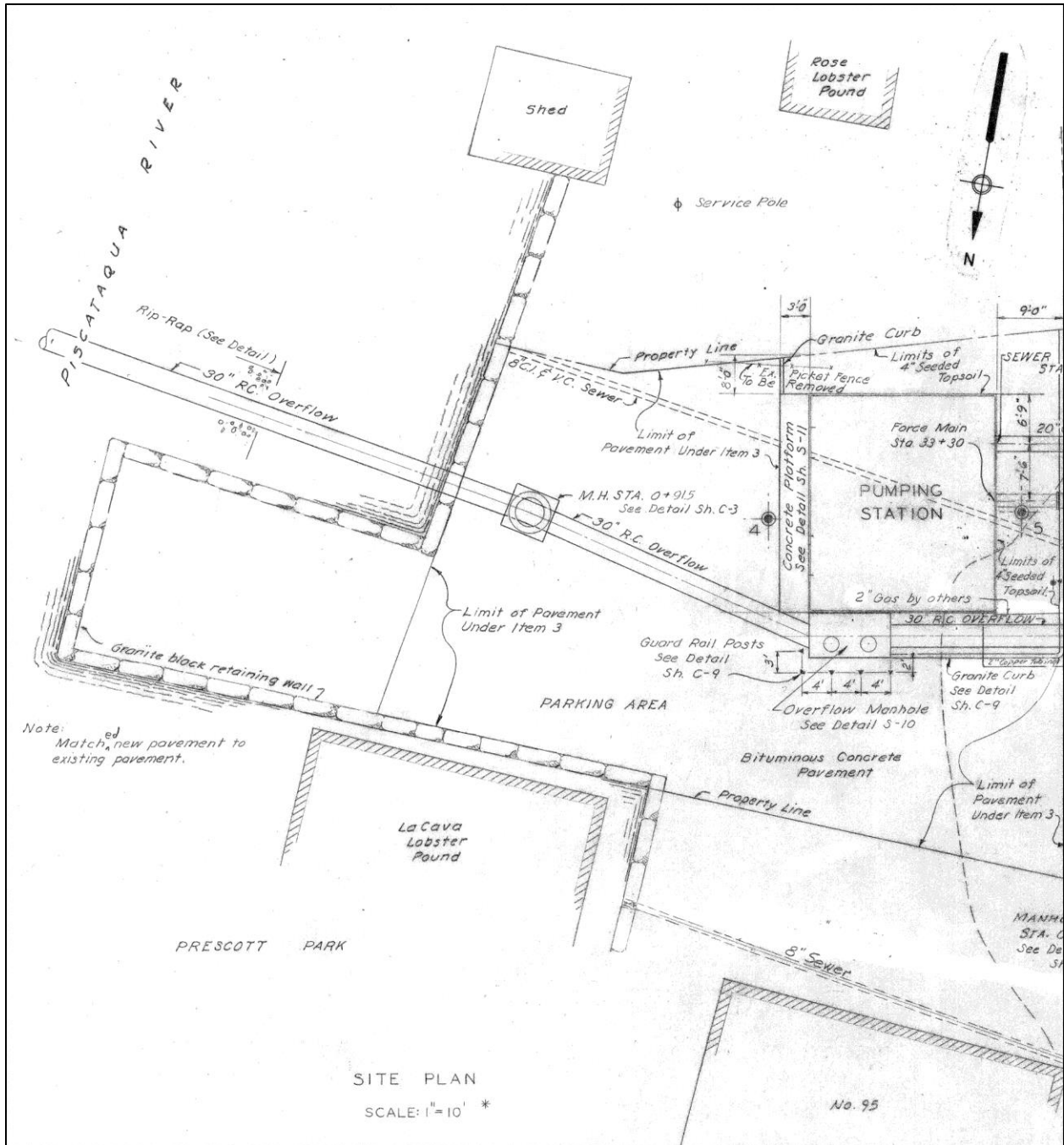


FIGURE 5: Record drawing of Portsmouth Sewage Treatment Plant, Mechanic Street Pump Station, March 1963, showing "LaCava Lobster Pound" prior to extension of wharf out to line of granite retaining wall. Note 8" sewer outfall discharging out stone bulkhead at lobster pound. Plans show this line was capped and connected to new 30" trunk feeding the pump station. Clip from sheet C-11, "Pumping Station, Gates and Mechanic Street Site Plan & Overflow" (Metcalf & Eddy, 1963).



FIGURE 6: Photo of underside of wharf taken at low tide showing wood pilings and posts supporting deck and buildings above. Granite retaining wall of solid City Pier seen at left. (Source: Waterfront Engineers LLC, 2014).

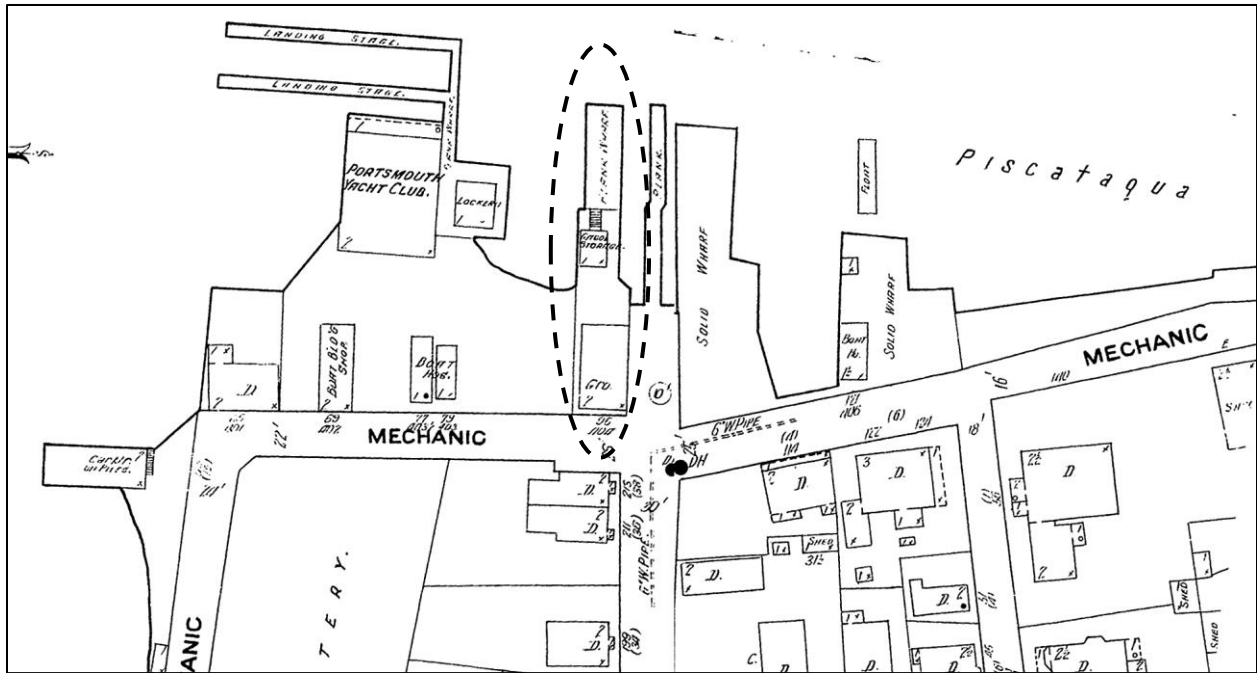


FIGURE 7: Sanborn map, 1910, showing the 95 Mechanic Street property within dashed outline, consisting of "Gro" (Grocery), represented by the present tenement building, a "plank wharf" and a small building on the wharf used for "gasoline storage." Note the "solid wharf" just south of the property that became the approach and abutment to the first Peirce Island Bridge in 1924 (see Figures 9 and 13).

**COMMUNITY STORE and  
GASOLINE BOAT  
SUPPLY STATION**

All the water-front real estate and the business formerly conducted by the late Robert R. Lear, is now offered for sale through this office. The real estate consists of the large and well built community store, together with the gasoline and boatmen's supply building next to the Yacht Club. The business connected with the real estate to be included, taking in all store and gasoline supply fixtures, together with all stock. The float, barge, and all boats also included. This desirable property adjoins the bridge at Boynton Park (formerly Pierce Island) and it's the only water-front property not owned by the city in this vicinity below the Yacht Club. Everything goes for the low price of \$3800.

**HARRY I. CASWELL**  
(Caswell Agency)  
Over Colonial Market  
Tel. 243. 4 Congress St.

FIGURE 8: Newspaper advertisement for sale of 95 Mechanic Street property (*Portsmouth Herald* October 11, 1926, p. 8).

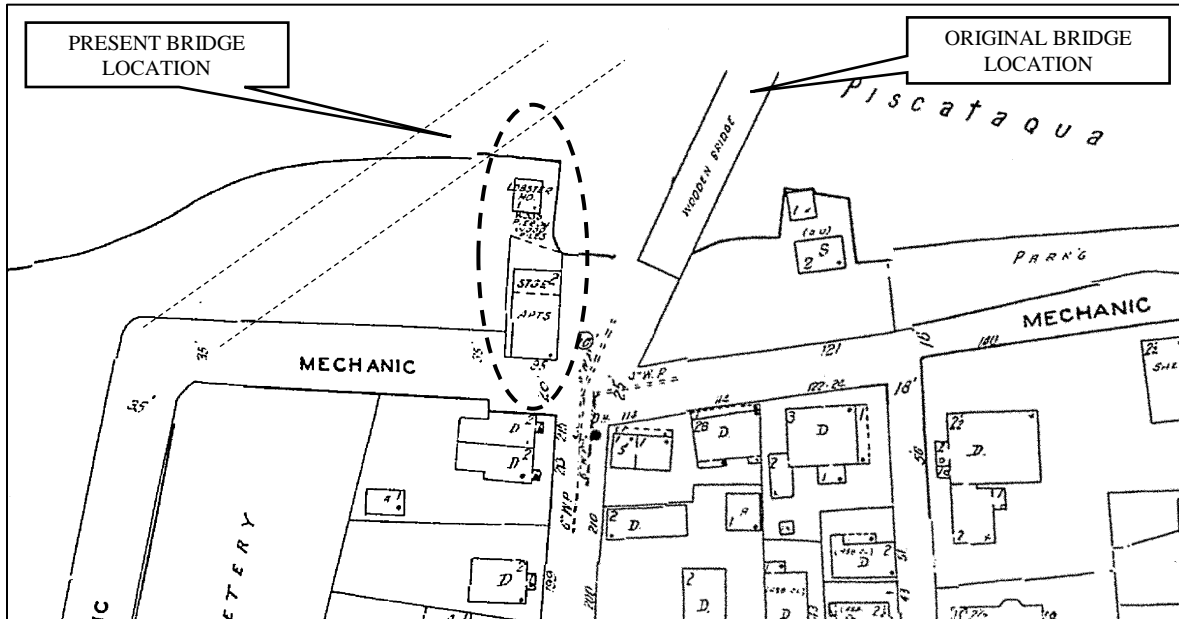


FIGURE 9: Sanborn map, 1956, showing the 95 Mechanic Street property within dashed outline, the first Peirce Island Bridge, built 1924, abutted to former City Pier solid wharf that was shortened and reconstructed with stone retaining walls, using cut granite blocks salvaged by the Public Works Department from the City reservoir on Madison Street and foundations of buildings on the former City farm.

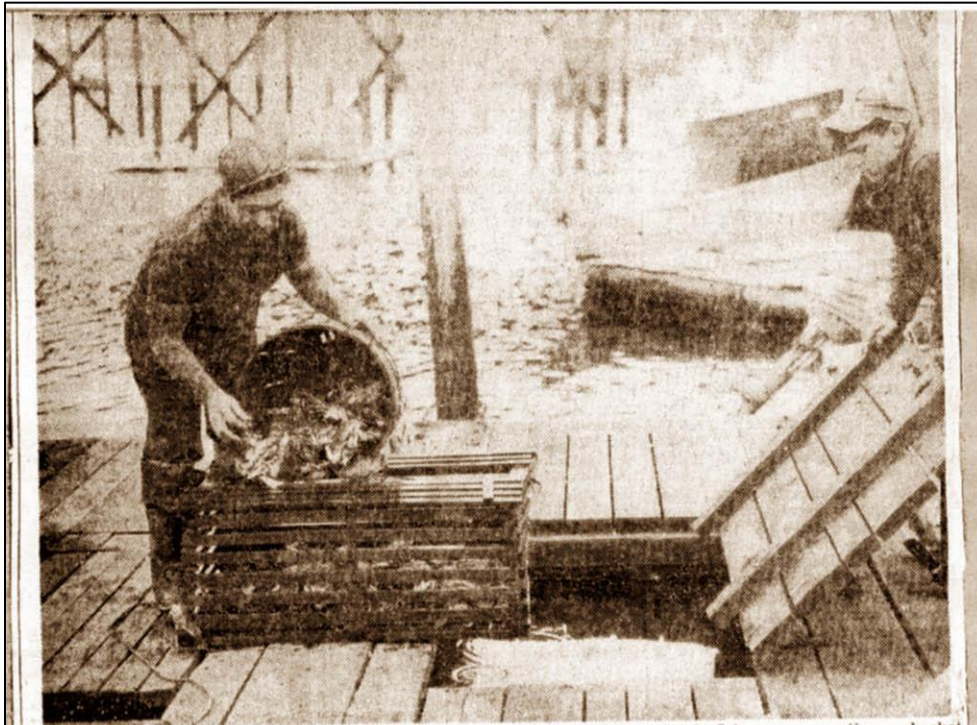


FIGURE 10: Sign on front of Fish Market/Office circa 2014, now removed, reads LaCava's Wharf Est. 1934.

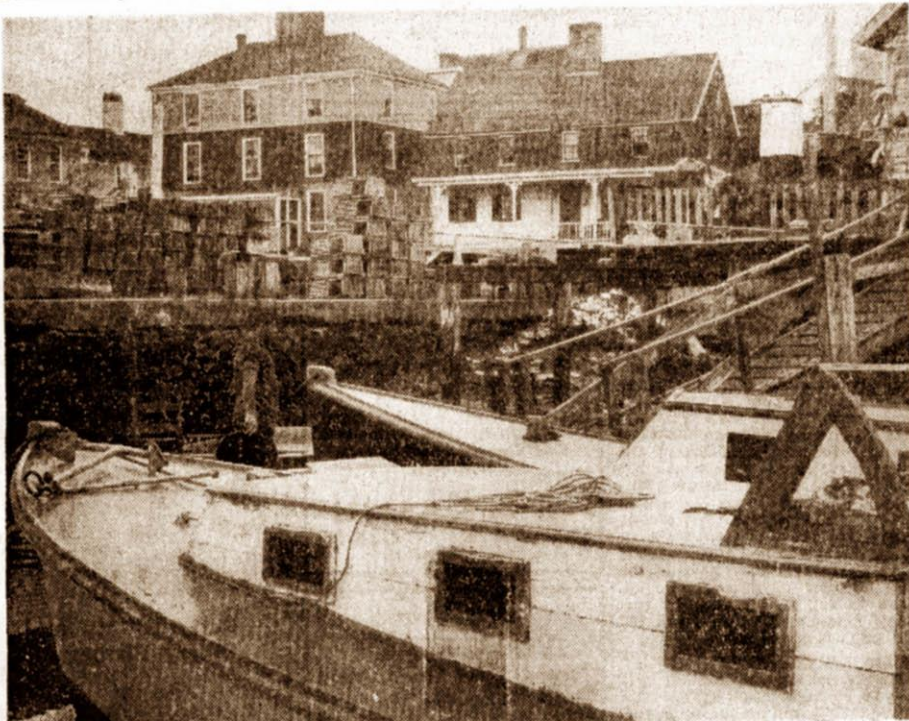


FIGURE 11: Advertisement in the *Portsmouth Herald*, October 11, 1938.





**CRAB HAUL**—Salvatore "Sammy" LaCava, Portsmouth lobster and crab fisherman, empties a basket of soft shelled crabs into a trap, before lowering them into the lobster car where the salt water will keep them alive and in good condition till they are used. Edwin Capone, LaCava's helper, holds the trap door open. These lobster cars resemble a float and are designed so the ocean water flows through them unhindered. (Portsmouth Herald photo).



**HOMeward BOUND**—Salvatore LaCava, Portsmouth lobster fisherman, heads for home after nearly seven hours of hard work hauling lobster pots. In the foreground are couple of lobster boats. In the background are spare lobster pots stacked on the dockside, awaiting their turn for service. This dock is on Mechanic street. (Portsmouth Herald photo).

FIGURE 12: Photos of operations at LaCava's Wharf, 1946, that accompany a feature article in the *Portsmouth Herald*, July, 14, 1946. Note the Peirce Island Bridge in the background of the upper photo and the LaCava lobster boats in the lower photo, also shown in Figure 13.



FIGURE 13: Peirce Island Bridge, shown in photo dated 1940. This was the first bridge to the island, built by the City of Portsmouth in 1924, one year after it purchased the island. Note LaCava lobstering and fishing boats tied to floating docks attached by wood ramp to the wharf (Portsmouth Athenaeum photograph collection).



FIGURE 14: Advertisement in *Portsmouth Herald*, January 12, 1950.

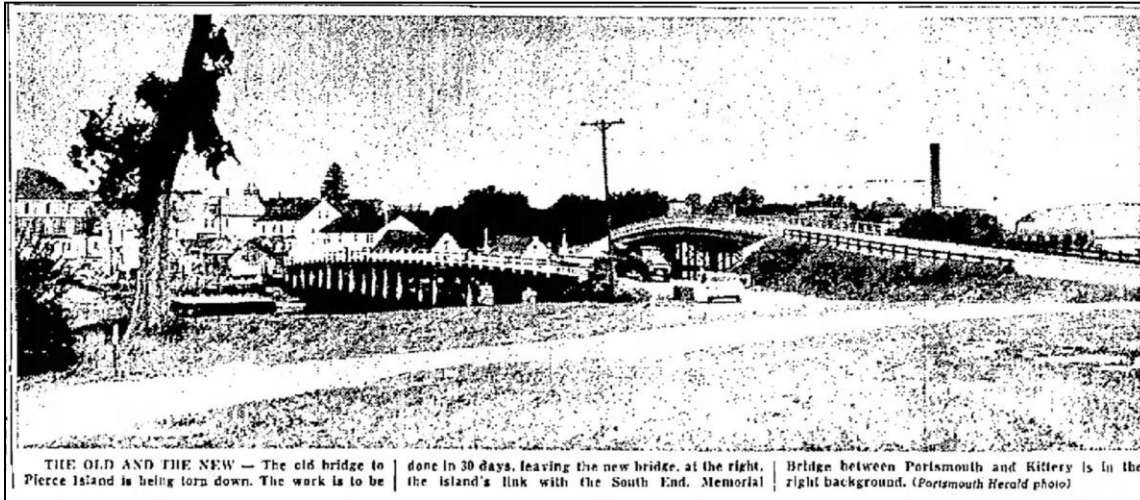


FIGURE 15: View from Peirce Island showing the first Peirce Island Bridge, left, before being demolished in 1959 and present Peirce Island Bridge, right, built in 1958. LaCava's Wharf is located on the mainland between the two bridges (*Portsmouth Herald*, July 13, 1959).



FIGURE 16: Dan and Grace LaCava 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary celebration announcement in the *Portsmouth Herald*, October 26, 1968.

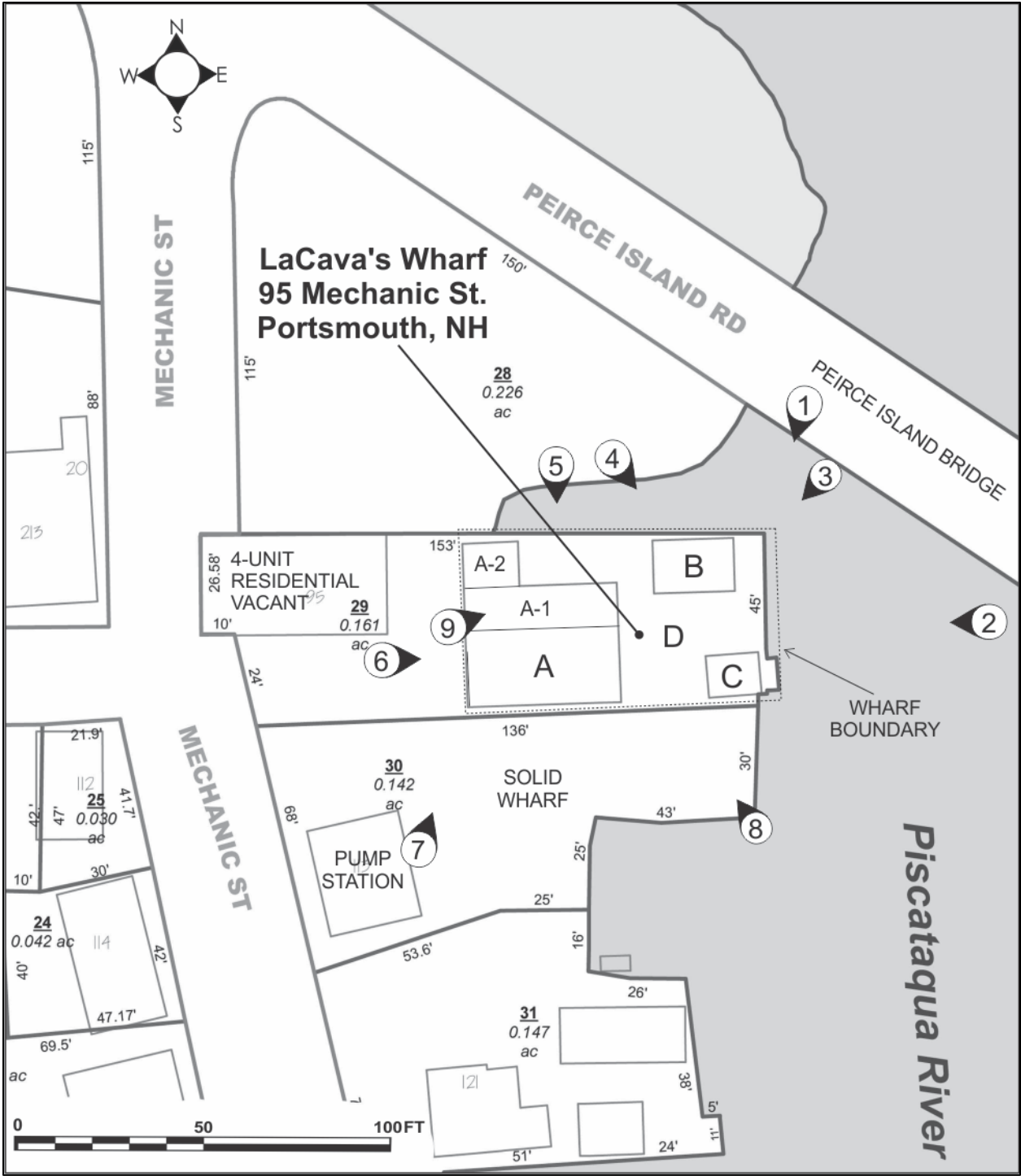
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95 Mechanic Street, Portsmouth  
Rockingham County, New Hampshire.  
New Hampshire State No. 566  
Photographer: Rob Tucher  
January 2017

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CHURCH STREET PUMP HOUSE  
NH STATE No. 743  
KEY TO PHOTOGRAPHS





NH-566-1: Context view of property (right) taken from Peirce Island Bridge, showing other light commercial wharf and pier structures along waterfront south of subject property and extending into distance (left). Looking south.



NH-566-2: View of east (water front) side of property taken from Peirce Island Bridge. Looking west.



NH-566-3: View, showing north and east side of property taken from Peirce Island Bridge. Looking southwest.





NH-566-4: North Storage Shed (B), north and west sides. Note rotted and collapsing wharf deck. Looking southeast.



NH-566-5: North elevation of Market, Office & Shop (A), showing shed-roof additions, Lobster Pound (A-1) and Storeroom (A-2). Looking south.



NH-566-6: Front (west) elevation of Market, Office & Shop (A), showing shed-roof additions to left, Lobster Pound (A-1) and Storeroom (A-2). Looking east.



NH-566-7: South elevation of Market, Office & Shop (A) and west and south elevations of South Storage Shed (C). Looking northeast.



NH-566-8: South and east elevation of Market, Office & Shop (A) and west elevation of South Storage Shed (C). Looking northwest.



NH-566-9: Interior of Lobster Pound (A-1) showing four lobster tanks.  
Looking east.