

# *Eliot, Borderlands, and Historiography*

By Paige Melin

## *Introduction*

Charles Eliot, son of the influential Charles W. Eliot, is perhaps best known as a landscape architect, and for good reason. He was an apprentice to Frederick Law Olmsted, whose illustrious list of public parks and design projects included the first and oldest public park system in the United States, in Buffalo, NY. Eliot eventually shared a firm with Olmsted<sup>1</sup> but accomplished a great deal on his own, including design of the Metropolitan Parks system of Greater Boston and Cushing Island, Maine. Eliot is also well known as the leader of the Champlain Society, the company of Harvard undergraduates whose explorations of Mount Desert Island from 1880 to 1894 ultimately led to the founding of a national park. However, to call Eliot a landscape architect or a visionary conservationist is to miss yet another part of his identity, for Eliot was also a historiographer. We see this in his unpublished “Notes on the History of the Eastern Coasts of Maine and the Island of Mt. Desert in Particular,” wherein he meticulously documented a history of this area by selecting, editing, and compiling vast amounts of source materials to tell a certain kind of story about these coasts and the interactions of their early European inhabitants. This manuscript, kept in storage boxes and largely inaccessible for the past 130 years, is currently being digitized and transcribed by me and Mount Desert Island Historical Society volunteers. The manuscript will eventually be made available publicly on [mdihistory.org](http://mdihistory.org) and [mainememory.net](http://mainememory.net). This article highlights just one example of the many exciting historical documents now accessible to scholars in the digital age.

Drawing on extensive excerpts from his manuscript, presented here for the first time for public examination, this article provides an initial, tentative understanding of Eliot as historiographer through an examination of his “Note VI: The English Explorers,” in which he explored the borderlands between early French fur traders and fisherman, early British explorers, and Native Americans.

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In this 1881 photograph of the Champlain Society, Charles Eliot is the young man wearing dark clothing seated in the back row on the right. *Mount Desert Island Historical Society*

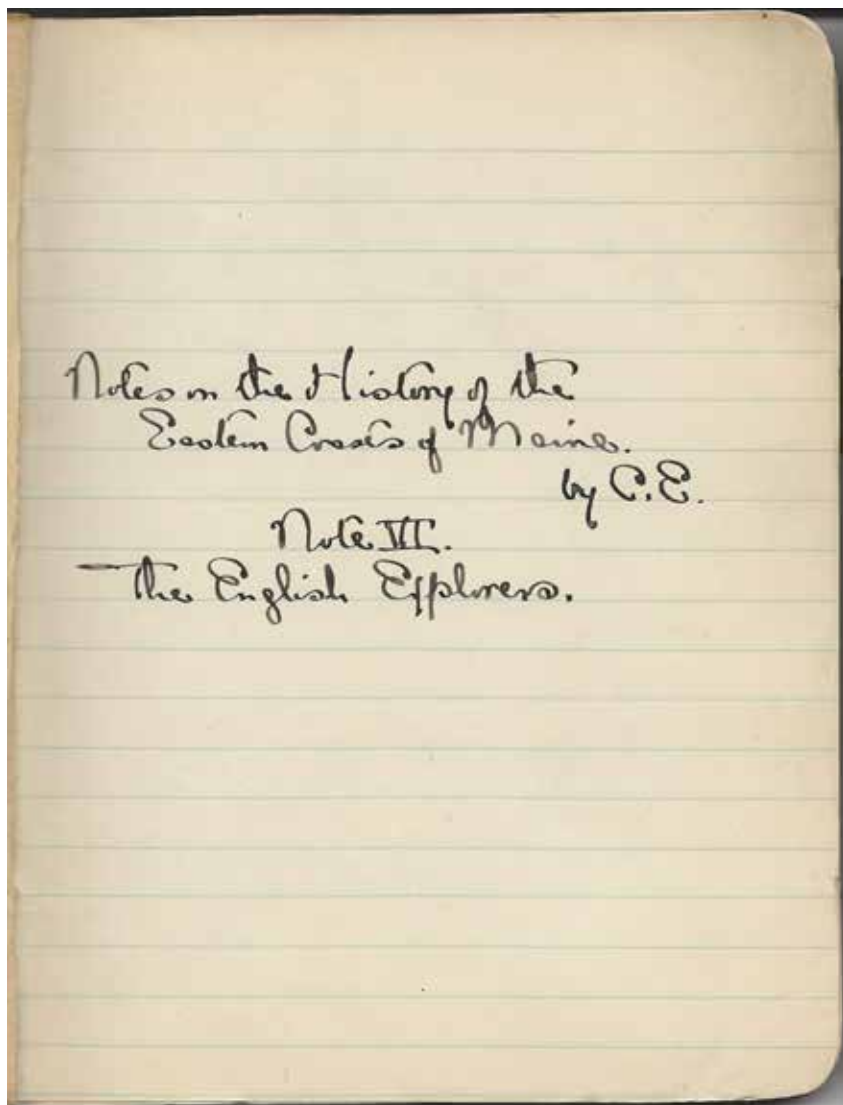
### *The Project of the Historiographer*

The Oxford English Dictionary defines “historiographer” as “a writer of history; a person who describes or gives a systematic account of some natural object or phenomenon;”<sup>2</sup> essentially, a historiographer writes her account of a historical event using whatever facts and information she chooses to include. Despite this simple definition, we know from contemporary feminist and

historical borderlands scholarship that the act of writing history is never as simple as committing supposedly objective facts to paper. Postcolonial feminist theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has declared, for instance, that “all historicizing is narrativizing,”<sup>3</sup> suggesting that any instance of writing history involves narrative elements—the desire to tell a certain story from a particular point of view. Because of this, objectivity in historiography becomes an impossible goal. In an attempt to take this storytelling into account, historians have taken up the concept of borderlands. Scholars like Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron have defined borderlands as “the contested boundaries between colonial domains,”<sup>4</sup> and others have understood that borderlands are “ambiguous and often-unstable realms where boundaries are also crossroads, peripheries are also central places, homelands are also passing-through places, and the end points of empire are also forks in the road.”<sup>5</sup> Yet this term, too, is contested; some borderlands scholars acknowledge that using the borderland as a theoretical concept may, in stressing the marginality of many borderlands, only reinforce centrist and dominant narratives and power distinctions.<sup>6</sup>

In examining Eliot as historiographer, I’d like to take up the concept of borderlands as both physical and ideological sites of intersection and interaction between peoples. While Eliot certainly would not have had the vocabulary of borderlands studies in his time, I believe there is evidence that he explored the borderlands in this way—as physical and ideological sites of interaction—in “Notes.” In fact, I would argue that most of Eliot’s practice of historiography, at least in “Note VI,” centered on borderlands.

In selecting the following excerpts from Eliot’s manuscript, I landed upon three primary sorts of borderlands that Eliot seems primarily to have stressed: the physical borderland of European (primarily English) explorers interacting with the Maine coasts, the ideological borderland of the interactions between French and English explorers, and the dual physical and ideological borderland in which European explorers interacted with Native peoples and their territories. Interpreting Eliot’s manuscript through the lens of these borderlands enables us to see that Eliot was trying to construct a certain kind of history of the Maine coast, to connect his reader to this history of this place and the interactions between peoples



Charles Eliot's "Notes on the History of the Eastern Coasts of Maine and the Island of Mt. Desert in Particular," a manuscript of more than 200 pages, was written in 1884 and 1885. Mount Desert Island Historical Society staff and volunteers are in the process of digitally scanning, transcribing, and preparing the material for publication on the society's webpage, [www.mdihistory.org](http://www.mdihistory.org) and on [www.mainememory.net](http://www.mainememory.net). *Mount Desert Island Historical Society*

that influenced what would become our understanding of the Maine coasts today. As you read these excerpts,<sup>7</sup> keep in mind the definition of borderlands as places of intersection and interaction, and think about how Eliot seems to envision those spaces. Keep in mind, too, that Eliot had his own cultural-historic point of view, which is revealed in the way he told this story. Please note that the footnotes labeled with roman numerals are Eliot's own notes to his text.

### *Introduction to "Note VI"*

In his opening section of "Note VI," it seems Eliot addressed all three of the borderlands outlined above. Notice the way that Eliot took on an English perspective by focusing on the English explorers who came to these coasts and by acknowledging that the English found the French already here, rather than taking a French perspective and describing the arrival of the English in a place where the French, primarily fur traders and *coureurs des bois*, were already living and working with the Native peoples. Notice also how subtly Eliot invoked the European's dependence on Native peoples by his reference to "Indian trails."

The continent of N. America was discovered by Cabot's English expedition in 1497, yet English vessels did not begin to frequent the coast until after the opening of the seventeenth century. The discovery that the new-found land was not Cathay<sup>8</sup> or India, but on the contrary, banned the way thither, had discouraged England's adventurers.

The only English voyages to "the new-foundland" that we now know of as having been accomplished previous to 1600 are those of John Rut (1527),<sup>9</sup> Ferdinando in the service of Walsingham (1579),<sup>10</sup> John Walker in the service of Sir Humphrey Gilbert (1580),<sup>11</sup> and Sir Humphrey's own disastrous undertaking of 1583;<sup>12</sup> and of these men John Walker alone presumably saw the coasts with which these notes have to deal. He is said to have sailed to the river of Norumbega where he found a country rich in furs and a silver mine to boot . . . .

Strange as it may appear, the first Englishman to set foot in this land of Norumbega (afterward Acadie and now Eastern New England Maine) came not by sea (he came earlier than John Walker) but overland. It was John Ingram,<sup>13</sup> one of 100 men landed by Capt. John Hawkins<sup>14</sup> on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico in 1568 because of a scarcity of provisions in his ships. He with two companions followed the Indian trails North Eastward thro' the continent, until in the river St. John they met with a French ship—the “Gargarine” of Capt. Champagne—which carried them back to civilization. Thus the very first Englishman to see our “Eastern Coast” found a Frenchman there before him—and indeed would never have been heard of again had he not. The later narratives to be quoted in this Note also bear further witness to the earlier presence on the coast of the long since forgotten French fishermen and traders.<sup>15</sup>

*Quotation from the Travel Narrative of Capt. Gabriel Archer<sup>16</sup>*

What follows is one of the longest quotations concerning Native Americans that Eliot included in “Note VI,” and the fact that he included it indicates that he considered the English explorer’s first impressions of the Native peoples important, though for what reason is not entirely clear. Perhaps Eliot simply found it interesting, or perhaps he was intrigued by the way the Native Americans were described as “savages” though they seemed to be nothing but peaceful and helpful, a conclusion supported by other passages he chose to include on Native Americans.<sup>17</sup> After quoting this detailed description of the Native peoples encountered by Archer and his comrades, Eliot went on to quote Archer’s descriptions of the land they encountered on their explorations of the Maine coasts. Notice how he focused on the English voyagers’ interactions with the physical geography of the Maine coasts in the way he included Archer’s descriptions of where “Savage Rock” is located, and then further clarified this positioning in his footnote. His selections and clarifications both indicate the importance of location to Eliot in his historiographic task and help him connect familiar coastal landmarks to the historical events that occurred there.

The 14th, about six in the morning, we descried land that lay north etc., the northerly part we called the north land, which to another rock upon the same lying twelve leagues West, that we called Savage Rock (because the savages first showed themselves there); five leagues towards the said rock is an outpoint, the trees thereof very high and straight, from the rock East North East.<sup>i</sup> From the said rock came towards us a Biscay shallop with sail and oars,<sup>ii</sup> having eight persons in it, whom we supposed at first to be Christians distressed. But approaching us nearer we perceived them to be savages. These coming within call hailed us and we answered. Then after signs of peace and a long speech by one of them made, they came boldly aboard us, being all naked, saving about their shoulders, certain loose deer skins, and near their waists seal skins tied fast like to Irish dimmie trousers. One that seemed to be their commander wore a waistcoat of black work, a pair of breeches, cloth stockings, shoes, hat and band: one or two more had also a few things made by some Christians: these with a piece of chalk described the coast thereabouts, and could name Placentia of the Newfoundland: they spoke divers Christian words and seemed to understand much more than we for want of language could comprehend.<sup>18</sup> These people are in color swart, their hair long, uptied with a knot in the part behind the head. They paint their bodies, which are strong and well-proportioned. These much desired our longer stay, but finding ourselves short of our purposed place, we set sail Westward, leaving them and their coast.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>i</sup> This landfall is not very accurately described. It was within a night's sail of Cape Cod—or Savage Rock was. Probably “the northland” was our Cape Elizabeth or the massed islands between it and Cape Small—“Savage Rock” our Cape Neddick, Knubble—and the “outpoint” E.N.E. there of either the swell of coast marked by our Cape Porpoise and Wood Island lighthouses on Cape Elizabeth itself. If Savage Rock is the Knubble, the two Islands mentioned further on must be Boom Island and the Isles of Shoals.

<sup>ii</sup> This the savages must have obtained from some Basque fisherman.

### *Commentary on Martin Pring's Travel Narrative*<sup>20</sup>

The following brief editorial commentary on Pring's travel narrative provided by Eliot shows his concern with the precise mapping and explanation of the geographical borderland that existed between the Europeans and their interactions with physical space and with each other. Rather than simply giving the name Plymouth, which would be recognized by most readers, he outlined the changing references to the same place and even gave an explanation for one—"Whitson Harbor for the merchant mayor of Bristol." It is interesting that despite his careful mapping, however, he deliberately did not provide or simply did not know the Native American name(s) for what is now Plymouth.

The port was named Whitson Harbor for the merchant mayor of Bristol. It almost certainly was the same as that called the Port of Cape St. Louis by Champlain two years later, and Plymouth by "the Pilgrims" seventeen years later.<sup>21</sup>

### *Allusion to French and English Tensions*

While Eliot understandably favored English travel narratives and perspectives in "Note VI"—it is, after all, titled, "The English Explorers"—he did include some information on French explorers, particularly Champlain. In his commentary contextualizing the period of time shortly following Pring's narrative, he noted,

In the summer of 1605, Champlain again embarking from Ste. Croix, sailed all along the shore to the outside of "le cap blanc" (Cape Cod)—and on his return heard from the Kenebec river Indians that an English ship had just left the coast. The Englishman, Capt. George Waymouth,<sup>22</sup> had sailed for England in the middle of June; Champlain passed his anchorage in July. Had they met, the history of our coast might have been something very different from what it is.<sup>23</sup>

This commentary is ambiguous in its sentiments toward the French and English explorers. When Eliot noted that Champlain and

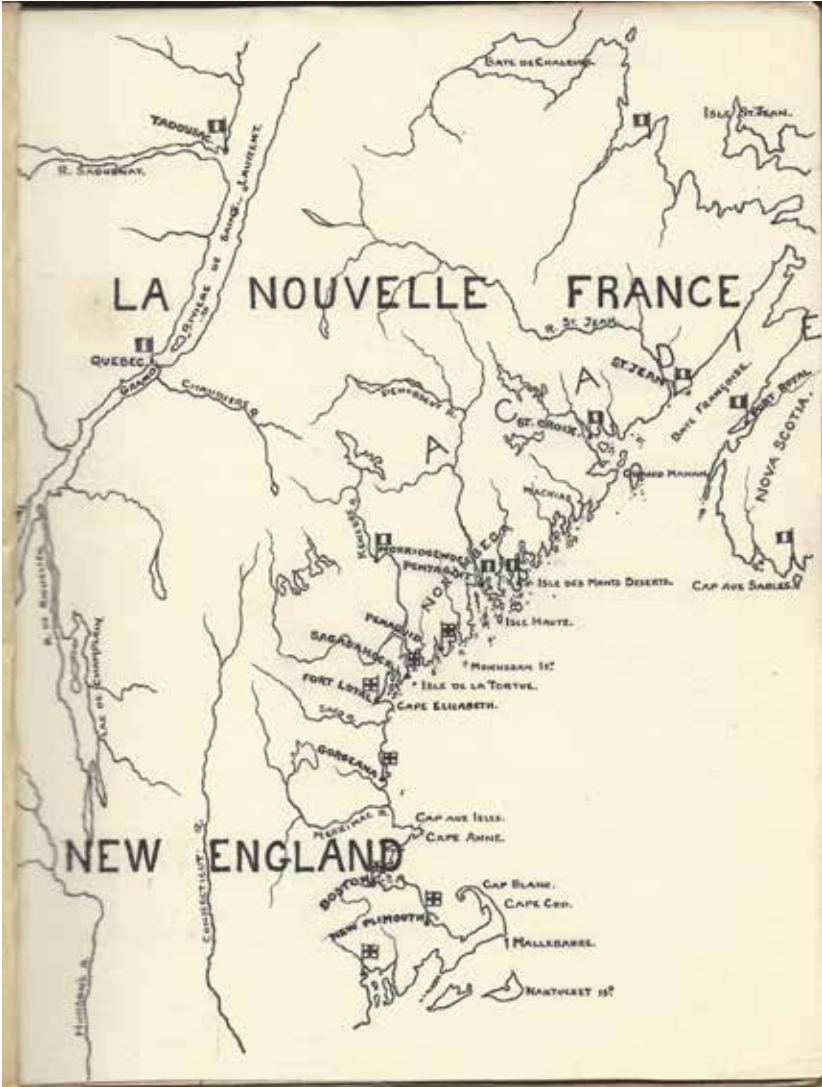


Weymouth narrowly missed each other, he did not pass judgment on whether a “very different” history would have been a good or bad thing; rather, he stated its truth as a fact. This passage is important, for it indicates a desire to remain an objective historiographer, though of course, we know this is an impossible task.

*Commentary on James Rosier's Narrative Concerning Native Americans*<sup>24</sup>

In another long quotation concerning Native Americans that Eliot took from James Rosier, Eliot inserted his own, sympathetic opinion into Rosier's narrative. Eliot's own comments are italicized.

The next day, ... I traded with the savages all the forenoon upon the shore, where were eight and twenty of them... where for knives and other trifles to the value of 4 or 5 shillings, we had forty good beaver skins, other skins, sables, and other small skins which we knew not how to call. Our trade being ended, many of them came aboard us, and did eat by our fire, and would be very merry and bold, in regard of our kind usage of them. Towards night, our captain went on shore and dragged for fish with a net to have a draught with the seine or net. And we carried two of them with us, who marvelled to see us catch fish with a net. Most of that we caught we gave them and their company. ... Our captain had two of them at supper with him in his cabin to see their demeanor, and had them in presence of service; who behaved themselves very civilly, neither laughing nor talking all the time, and at supper fed not like men of rude education, neither would they eat or drink like men who more than seemed to content nature. ... In the evening, when we came onshore, they gave us the best welcome they could, spreading fallow deer's skins for us to sit on the ground by their fire, and gave us of their tobacco: and when we were ready to come away, they showed us great cups made very wittily of bark, in form almost square, full of a red berry about the bigness of a bullis, which they did eat and gave us by handfulls; of which (tho' I liked not the taste) yet I kept some, because I would by no means but accept their kindness, They showed



This map by an unnamed cartographer is found in Charles Eliot's manuscript. The map shows many of the places Eliot describes in his historiography. *Mount Desert Island Historical Society*

me likewise a kind of great scaly fish, broiled on the coals, much like white salmon, which the Frenchmen call aloza.

This was certainly friendly enough living, but before long the English grew suspicious of treachery. “Wherefor,” says Rosier, “after good advice taken, we determined, as soon as we could, to take some of them, least (being suspicious we had discovered their plots) they should absent themselves from us.” So three, who came on board the ship one day, were forcibly detained as prisoners, and two of their friends were caught and brought on board from the shore ... “and we would have been very loath to have done them any hurt, which of necessity we had been constrained to have done if we had attempted them in a multitude, which we must and would, rather than have wanted them, being a matter of great importance for the full accomplishment of our voyage.<sup>i</sup> The names of the five savages are these Tahánedo—a sagamore or commander, Amóret, Skicowáros,<sup>ii</sup> Maneddo. Gentlemen. Saffacomit, a servant.” *These men, the first of a long line of Eastern Coast Indians kidnapped by Englishmen, created great stir and interest in England, and thro’ the kindness of Sir Ferdinand Gorges, were afterwards returned to their country.*<sup>25</sup> *Their tribes thought they had been killed and told Champlain so when he was at Quinebeq later in the same summer.*<sup>26</sup>

<sup>i</sup>Apparently they were instructed to bring some of the natives to England.

<sup>ii</sup>These too are mentioned in the narrative of the Popham expedition: Of these Indians Sir F. Gorges wrote that they were the means “under God of putting on foot and giving life to all our plantations.” What he (the Governor Plymouth, where they were landed) learned from them, encouraged him to use his influence with Sir John Popham; and finally, through their joint efforts, were obtained the royal patents establishing the London and Plymouth Companies.

The information that Eliot chose to include in his quotation from Rosier is notable—he could have chosen simply to summarize Rosier’s account of the “friendly enough living” they enjoyed with the Native Americans, but instead he quoted Rosier’s narrative at

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In this page from his manuscript, Charles Eliot combined his historiographical commentary with James Rosier's 1605 narrative, "True Relation of Waymouth's Voyage." *Mount Desert Island Historical Society*

length, thus placing importance on the friendly co-existence that Rosier and his comrades initially experienced with the Native peoples. Then, in his own commentary, it seems Eliot painted what happened to the Native peoples in this instance as something of a tragedy: they were “forcibly detained as prisoners” and “the first of a long line of Eastern Coast Indians kidnapped by Englishmen,” phrases which in their tone and vocabulary indicate remorse rather than triumph. While Eliot never explicitly showed sympathy towards the Native Americans in “Note VI,” his inclusion of several lengthy descriptions of them and his narrative comments here seems to indicate some level of awareness of the tragedy faced by the Native Americans when the Europeans began to invade their territories and interrupt their ways of life.

### *Conclusions*

These excerpts from Eliot’s “Note VI: The English Explorers”—themselves only a small part of a larger, much richer text—help us to think about Eliot’s role as a historiographer and the influence his writing contributes to our present-day understanding of these coasts. His emphasis on examining the borderlands between the various groups to whom these coasts were important—the French, the English, and Native American tribes such as the Abenaki, the Passamaquoddy, and the Penobscot—helps us to envision the history of the Maine coasts not as a stable narrative, but as a fluid series of interactions between peoples and places. Considering Eliot’s manuscript and his role as a historiographer through the lens of borderlands leads us to questions like these: What goals, prejudices, and cultural-historic pressures influence the historiographer’s selection and analysis of source materials? What does an examination of the borderlands between old and new inhabitants, French and English explorers, and various English explorers’ accounts reveal about this landscape and its history? And how did Eliot’s own historiographic sensitivities influence the creation of Lafayette (later Acadia) National Park? These are questions to keep in mind once Eliot’s full manuscript becomes available.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles William Eliot, *Charles Eliot: Landscape Architect* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1902), 418.

<sup>2</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, n. “historiographer,” accessed December 7, 2015, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/87316?redirectedFrom=historiographer>.

<sup>3</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (London: Routledge, 2008), 318.

<sup>4</sup> Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, “From Borderlands to Border: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in Between in North American History,” *American Historical Review* 104, no. 3 (June 1999): 816.

<sup>5</sup> Pekka Hämäläinen and Samuel Truett, “On Borderlands,” *Journal of American History* 98, no. 2 (September 2011): 338–361.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> These excerpts have been edited for clarity.

<sup>8</sup> An alternative, anglicized name for China.

<sup>9</sup> John Rut (1512–1228), an English explorer who was commissioned by King Henry VIII to command an expedition to America in 1527.

<sup>10</sup> Simon Fernandes (alternatively Ferdinando or Fernando; 1538–1590), an Anglo-Portuguese explorer whose expedition to America was backed by Sir Francis Walsingham (1532–1590), secretary of state to Queen Elizabeth I.

<sup>11</sup> John Walker (dates unknown), an English explorer who traveled up the Penobscot in 1580, and Sir Humphrey Gilbert (1539–1583), half-brother to Sir Walter Raleigh and an English explorer and politician under Queen Elizabeth I.

<sup>12</sup> Eliot’s calling Gilbert’s second voyage to America a “disastrous expedition” refers to the fact that Gilbert’s expedition failed in its goal of establishing a colony in America.

<sup>13</sup> David Ingram (dates unknown; incorrectly named as John by Eliot), an English explorer who walked to Maine from Florida after his expedition with Sir John Hawkins (see below) after their ship was defeated by the Spanish off the Gulf of Mexico.

<sup>14</sup> Sir John Hawkins (1532–1595), an English naval commander under Queen Elizabeth I.

<sup>15</sup> Eliot, “Note VI: The English Explorers,” in “Notes on the History of the Eastern Coasts of Maine and the Island of Mt. Desert in Particular,” (unpublished manuscript) 1–3. Mount Desert Island Historical Society, Mount Desert, ME.

<sup>16</sup> Captain Gabriel Archer (1574–1610), an English explorer who, with Bartholomew Gosnold, explored Cape Cod in 1602.

<sup>17</sup> For example, shortly after, still quoting from Archer, Eliot included the mention of an encounter with a Native who “showed a willingness to help us in our occasions,” 9. See also the example from Rosier beginning on page 7.

<sup>18</sup> For more information on how the Wabanaki tribes adapted European fishing vessels for their own purposes, see Colin Woodward, “Commentary: When Indians Ruled Maine’s Seas,” *Portland Press Herald*, December 14, 2014.

<sup>19</sup> Eliot, “Note VI,” 6–8.

<sup>20</sup> Captain Martin Pring (1580–1626), an English explorer who travelled and mapped Maine and other northeastern states.

<sup>21</sup> Eliot, “Note VI,” 13.

<sup>22</sup> Captain George Weymouth (c.1585–c. 1612), an English explorer who explored the coasts of Maine.

<sup>23</sup> Eliot, “Note VI,” 14.

<sup>24</sup> James Rosier (1573–1609), an English explorer well-known for his detailed accounts of the Native peoples and landscapes of New England.

<sup>25</sup> Sir Ferdinand Gorges (1565–1647), an English entrepreneur and the founder of the Province of Maine (1622).

<sup>26</sup> “Quinebeq” is likely an alternative spelling for the Kennebec River; Eliot, “Note VI,” 24–28.