

# *Apples of Eden: Diversity and Change in Eastern Maine's Orchards, 1760–1930*

By Todd Little-Siebold

## *Introduction*

In the last week of October in 1897, the sixth annual Fair of the Eden Agricultural Society took place in Bar Harbor. On a fine late fall weekend, folks from around Hancock County and beyond had gathered to celebrate the agricultural bounty of the region, and like at the other fairs in the county, some of the highlights were the displays of animals, crops and home manufactures, which ranged from Devon oxen to doilies made by women from nearby towns. In each category, there were prizes—or “premiums” as they were known—for the best exemplar of grains, animals, fruits, and crafts.

Buried in the lists of premiums is evidence about the precise architecture of a rural economy, evidence that defines the local markets, consumption patterns, cultural expectations, and social fabric. We can discern which crops were grown and by whom. The names of the area’s best cattle, sheep and poultry farmers as judged by their peers emerge. A farm economy with diverse “heritage” breeds of animals and “heirloom” fruits and vegetables comes into clear view. These lists of premiums from local fairs and grange events across the county and throughout the state have proven invaluable in efforts to track down and identify the last living survivors of the nineteenth- (and even eighteenth-) century farms hereabouts. Those survivors are ancient apple trees. No other crop survived as long as apples, as the local agrarian economy slowly declined and all but disappeared. Because the trees can survive for over two hundred years, these last

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*This project would not have come to fruition had it not been for the efforts of the Friends of Island History to digitize local newspapers. I also would not have undertaken this project without the inspiration and friendship of John Bunker, who modeled this kind of work in his book Not Too Far from the Tree: A Brief History of the Apples and Orchards of Palermo Maine, 1804–2004, which he published in 2007. His ongoing work on the Maine Heritage Orchard has provided a place to conserve the varieties we are discovering in Down East Maine. Finally, my students have helped over the years with the legwork of probing the nooks and crannies of the area.*

remnants of that economy sit, waiting patiently for us to take note. This article seeks to highlight the radical diversity that characterized local residents' agrarian sense of place and to communicate how the last living connections to their world and the way they understood it are still standing and growing among us. Their identification and preservation are not a matter of mere historical interest, but rather should be an urgent task for us all.

Scattered across the landscape of Mount Desert Island and beyond are the last few relict orchards and solitary apple trees that survive from a time when hundreds of apple varieties were grown in each district. Some apples were only grown on one or two farms and only known locally, while others were planted widely across the country. At the time of the Eden Fair in 1897, probably between one and two thousand named varieties were being grown in the state of Maine. Across the country, tens of thousands of named varieties were being grown. Dan Bussey of Seedsavers Exchange of Decorah, Iowa, estimated that the number is above twenty thousand.<sup>1</sup>

Because of the efforts of the Eden Agricultural Society, the Maine Pomological Society, and other similar organizations in the late nineteenth century, we are able to catalog what was grown locally and to describe with real precision where it was grown.<sup>2</sup> In the search for old apple varieties, these kinds of sources are a gold mine. The reports of the Eden Fair from the 1890s onward give us a relatively comprehensive list of what was grown, including the names of varieties that do not appear to have been grown anywhere else in the country. The tally shows that the exhibitors at the fair displayed over sixty varieties, and of those, probably sixteen were either very rare varieties from other locales or simply local apples from Mount Desert Island. The fact that close to one-fourth of the apples reported were rare or only grown on a few local farms reflects the reality of orcharding all over the country.

The nineteenth century saw an explosion of new varieties as American farmers identified promising local seedlings, gave them names, and then helped spread them across the country as agriculture spread westward. Many Maine apples followed settlers who left the state in search of better opportunities after the Civil War, just as many Massachusetts apples had followed farmers moving into the region generations earlier. This time, however, the wide diversity that

emerged was a product of specific historical factors combined with the geographic expanse being settled and a new kind of democratic farming culture that characterized the period.

Apple varieties grown on Mount Desert Island, 1897–1924<sup>3</sup>

Alexander	Native Winter Apples*
American Blush*	Northern Spy
Astrachan, Red	Paragon
Baldwin	Peerless
Bellflower	Pewaukee
Ben Davis	Pippin
Bell's Early	Porter
Black Baldwin	Pretainger*
Black Oxford	Red Jewett/Nodhead
Crab apple	Red Winter Sweet
Crimson Beauty*	R.I. Greenings
Dudley	Rhode Island Sweet*
Duchess of Oldenburg	Roxbury Russet
Early Harvest	Royal Red*
Fameuse/Snow	Russetts
Franklin Sweet*	Russets, Golden
Green Sweet Apple*	Sweet Russet
Gravenstein	Seedling*
Greening	Stark
Haas	Strawberry
King of Tompkins County	Sunrise*
Jersey Sweet*	Sweet Apple*
Limbertwig	Tolman Sweet
Hyslop Crab	Wealthy
Leafless apple*	White Beauty*
McIntosh	Winter Banana
Mother	William's Favorite
Maiden Blush	Wolf River
Native Sweet	Yellow Transparent

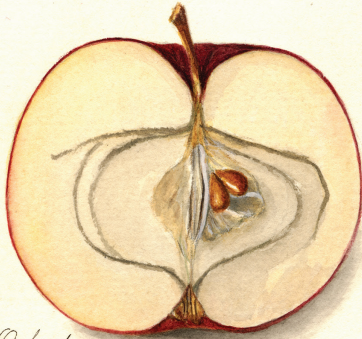
\*indicates local or extremely rare varieties



Dudley Winter apple. Courtesy of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Pomological Watercolor Collection, Rare and Special Collections, National Agricultural Library



Sweet Russet apple. Courtesy of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Pomological Watercolor Collection, Rare and Special Collections, National Agricultural Library



61850

Black Oxford  
E. H. Gould,  
Geo. E. Chadbourne,  
North Bridgton,  
Cumberland, Me.

A. A. Newton.

1-2-'13  
1-4-'13

Black Oxford apple. Courtesy of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Pomological Watercolor Collection, Rare and Special Collections, National Agricultural Library

### *Apples (and Fruit) in the Down East Farm Economy*

From the eighteenth-century settlement of the region until the growth of a major export market in England late in the nineteenth century, apples played a minor part in the regional economy but were highly valued by farmers, and fruit trees were a symbol of a productive and prosperous farm. Although most every farm would have had apple trees and other fruit trees, significant commercial production of fruit did not really develop Down East. While other regions, such as the Penobscot River valley, part of the highlands of Central Maine, and much of Oxford County, nurtured strong commercial orcharding traditions, farmers in this region along the farthest eastern coast of Maine prized the fruit for their own consumption and very small-scale local marketing. Apples were important to local farmers and farm families, but local farms were insignificant commercial producers in the grand scheme of things. Fruit as a whole provided one small part of a diverse farm economy focused mostly on field crops and animal husbandry. Throughout the nineteenth century, hay continued to be the most valuable crop in the county by far. Wool may have rivaled the value of hay in the 1820s and 1830s during the Merino wool boom, but in the late nineteenth century, Down East Maine's agricultural economy was rooted in small-scale and diverse farms that produced animal products for the market.

Hancock County agricultural crops by value, 1879<sup>4</sup>

Crop	Value
Hay	\$457,142
Butter	\$212,798
Slaughtered animals	\$130,845
Eggs	\$128,000
Potatoes	\$110,689
All grains, peas, and beans	\$86,190

The summary data on the value of farm products in the table on the facing page reveals that most production was a diversified mix of products where animals were really the primary cash crops. Their butter, eggs and meat were probably the most significant source of income from strictly agricultural products. Very few local folks lived solely off of the products of their farms. The farmers were carpenters, schooner crewmen, fishermen, and woods workers, and everyone except a wealthy few lived from the proceeds of a wide range of activities. These were not mostly subsistence farmers. The farm provided many of their staples, but the inhabitants of Down East Maine were mostly fishermen who farmed or folks who worked in the woods during the winter and farmed in the season. They needed the farms to provide for them, but their wealth sprang mostly from the sea or the forest. Local farmers ate most of what they grew, but they bought significant amounts of food and other products from their work outside of agriculture.

Apples did have a place in local consumption and the purely local exchange economy, and there was in all likelihood a market for hard cider and cider vinegar. Unlike in other areas where cider was a major product even as early as the 1780s, in Hancock County, there is little evidence of commercial production of alcoholic forms of cider. This was certainly produced and consumed locally, and Colonel John Black of Ellsworth may have had a cider mill in the early nineteenth century, as receipts from his shipping business show him bringing in “cider apples” in the early 1800s.<sup>5</sup> Anecdotal evidence suggests that the closest commercial cider mill was on the slopes of Heagan Mountain in Prospect, run by Hiram Simpson in the 1850s, but there were certainly small local operations here and there, given the importance of cider vinegar for food preservation and the importance of hard cider.

The diversity of apple varieties that characterized American society and the agrarian tradition Down East in the nineteenth century consisted largely of dessert apples, or apples for eating fresh out of hand. The diversity came from the need of farmers to select apples for different seasons, uses, and characteristics, such as flavor and ability to last in storage. The thousands of apples that became popular in the nineteenth century were the product of farmers’ observations and selection of seedling trees that emerged along rock



walls, creek beds, or next to a barn from the Georgia foothills to the prairies of Minnesota. Maine was no exception to this dramatic expansion of varieties, and the fruit and farming tradition in this region ran back to early English settlements in southern Maine, as well as some trees that may be traced back to French settlers in the seventeenth century, or even Basque fisherman in the sixteenth century on offshore islands.

Most really old named varieties in Down East Maine probably came with the first waves of English settlers to the region in the 1760s. It is possible in the area around Castine and where French settlers were scattered along the coast (Oak Point in Trenton, Bagaduce, Naskeag, and Lamoine) that old world and Canadian varieties took hold earlier. Numerous anecdotal sources recount varieties being brought from Massachusetts with first settlers. The lore of one family on North Haven recounts that their prized apple was brought in a bathtub by a great-great-great-great-grandmother in the 1760s. One of the earliest definitive records of such a variety in Hancock County comes from Henry Little of Bucksport and Bangor, who reported in 1851 growing an apple known as the Triangle Apple, which his family brought from Salem, New Hampshire.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, Little's family hales from the same town as John Chapman, also known as "Johnny Appleseed."

While many settlers brought their trees with them from southern Maine or Massachusetts when they came to Down East Maine after the end of the Seven Years' War, one of the first nurseries in Maine was established by Ephraim Goodale around 1800 in nearby Orrington—then part of Buckstown, now Bucksport—where he peddled apples, pears, plums, and quinces to the burgeoning population of the region. A broadside for his business lists traditional favorites, like Maiden's Blush, Nonesuch, Stone Sweet, Yellow Geniton and others.<sup>7</sup> None of these varieties are familiar today, but these certainly provided the basis for the local orchards, and they are still alive at places like the Carroll Homestead in Southwest Harbor, where one tree captured in an 1880s photograph of the farm still stands. Efforts to collect, identify, and preserve these trees help nurture a direct connection to the past, and locals are intensely aware that these old trees convey a powerful sense of place.

Clergyman Jonathan Fisher of Blue Hill planted a beautiful orchard at his homestead with numerous varieties. Local lore has it that the Saint Germain pear planted at the Fisher House is close to 230 years old and the progeny of some of his cherry trees still survive on the Blue Hill Peninsula. His orchard map survives at the Farnsworth Museum in Rockland and lists his Golden Russeting, Roxbury Russeting and Ribbed Pippin among others, as well as pears and plums. On Mount Desert Island, one of the places with the longest continuously tended orchards is on the site of Marie Therese de Gregoire's home in Hulls Cove. She had settled there in the late eighteenth century. De Gregoire was the grant holder for lands in eastern Maine (including the eastern half of Mount Desert Island) through her grandfather, Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac, who had been granted the seignory of the province of Les Douacques, the portion of New France that included much of eastern Maine. The tree at this site is certainly among the oldest in the immediate vicinity, although it is uncertain what variety it is. A similarly ancient tree survives off of Sargeant Drive in Northeast Harbor on the old Manchester farm, now part of an estate. Most of the very oldest trees in the region are difficult to identify because the descriptions and information on them is often quite scant.

The real boom of apple production and the explosion of named varieties took place in the second half of the nineteenth century. Several factors led to this. Fresh-eating fruit became more and more popular as Americans turned their backs on hard cider and the relative importance of cider apples declined. The expansion of the agricultural frontier in the west multiplied the demand for apples while requiring homesteaders to plant fruit in order to guarantee their claim to a parcel of land. Also, new ideas about "improving" farming, as well as other trends, fed the selection and naming of varieties. Most orchards would have had several dozen varieties in the middle of the nineteenth century, and the diversity was driven by the wide-ranging needs of farms and the broader community. The simplest reality was that a combination of seasonality and keeping qualities led to much of the expansion in choices that emerged. Because apples were the first substantial fresh fruit of each year, the selection of early season apples was driven by a desire for the



Hulls Cove, 1776.  
Map detail. Joseph  
F.W. DesBarres,  
*Mount Desert Island  
and Neighboring  
Coast of Maine*  
(London: Joseph  
F.W. DesBarres,  
1776). *Courtesy of the  
Library of Congress*

earliest possible fruit. American farmers, including those in the Down East region, sought early apples from nurseries but also from local seedlings that popped up naturally along field edges and walls. These trees would fruit in the second or third week of July into early September and were an important part of the mix in a typical family orchard. These trees often ripened early and dropped quickly, so they were traditionally planted close to the back of the house where they could be kept track of easily. The reason these fruits were so important is that long-keeping apples from the previous fall could be stored in root cellars until June and July, so the summer apples were just a few weeks from ripening when the last barrels of storage apples were being used.

When farmers selected new storage apples, they would attend closely to how long they would last in the cellar, and good storage qualities were highly prized. There are frequent accounts of apples “two years in storage and of good quality.” What time of year a

storage apple was in its prime was part of the consideration for whether or not to plant it in the family orchard. Apples known as “keepers,” picked in the fall, would be in their prime coming out of the barrels in the cellar in May roughly five months after they had been picked. Winesap, Stark, and Ben Davis were widely planted in this area and kept until May in the typical root cellar. Red Canada and Newtown Pippin kept until June.

Similarly, farmers and their families paid close attention to those apples that dried well when pared and hung out to dehydrate or those that make excellent sauce or pies. Northern Spy was an apple renowned for pie-making, and Tolman Sweet was a variety whose primary usage was to make apple molasses, a sweetener made from boiled cider and used throughout the year. Some pie apples were terrible for fresh eating, and sweet apples lacked the acidity people sought for sauce.

The end product of all of the seasons, uses, and flavors was an immense and growing catalog of varieties in the late nineteenth century. In eastern Hancock County in 1885, Charles Atkins wrote for the Maine Pomological Society that “orchardists do not appear to have studied the market much, and the list of varieties raised, though long, consists largely of varieties little known abroad.”<sup>8</sup> He went on to say, “I think there are more Baldwins raised in this vicinity than any other sort; though across the river to the westward Bare-limbed Greenings take the lead.”<sup>9</sup> Atkins observed that around Bucksport,

In old orchards you will find Yellow Bellflower, Kilham Hill, Nodhead, Blue Pearmain, Mathew Stripe (or Martha Stripe) a very sour winter apples, an old fashioned Russet something like a Roxbury, Hunt Russet, Stone Sweet (a hardy winter sort), Queen’s Pocket (winter), Lyscom (September, also known as Mathew, or Martha Stripe), Hightop Sweeting, Williams’ Favorite, Golden Russet (early), Leland’s Golden Pippin, Bell’s Early, and a long list of obscure sorts, mostly unnamed. I speak only for Bucksport and other towns adjoining, on the river about its mouth. In the interior of the county they might tell a different story.<sup>10</sup>

Atkins highlights the high level of local diversity, and that diversity was intensely local.

This same pattern held to the east of Bucksport on Mount Desert Island, and here we return to the Eden Fair of 1897. At the Eden Fair, the list of locally grown varieties was similarly long, however, the apples grown and exhibited were different than those farther to the west along the Penobscot River. The short distance as the crow flies between the two towns meant a world of difference in terms of what was being grown, and as Atkins noted, the mix of varieties was distinct on the Schoodic Peninsula and in western Hancock County. The intensely local nature of farming communities meant that at times, a variety would be grown only on three farms in a remote location, and that varieties were passed from neighbor to neighbor. A fascinating dimension of the local diversity and the character it gave each community was that the apples themselves came from both local fruit discovered in a town and varieties from all over the country and the world. Each district had its own fruit and also looked far afield for new varieties they might like. As apples old and new, as well as local and “from away,” were mixed in diverse orchards, their progeny were wildly diverse, providing new seedlings every season never seen before. If we were to imagine this as a generalized pattern, we could come to understand the conditions that gave rise to the tens of thousands of named varieties that eventually emerged in the United States.

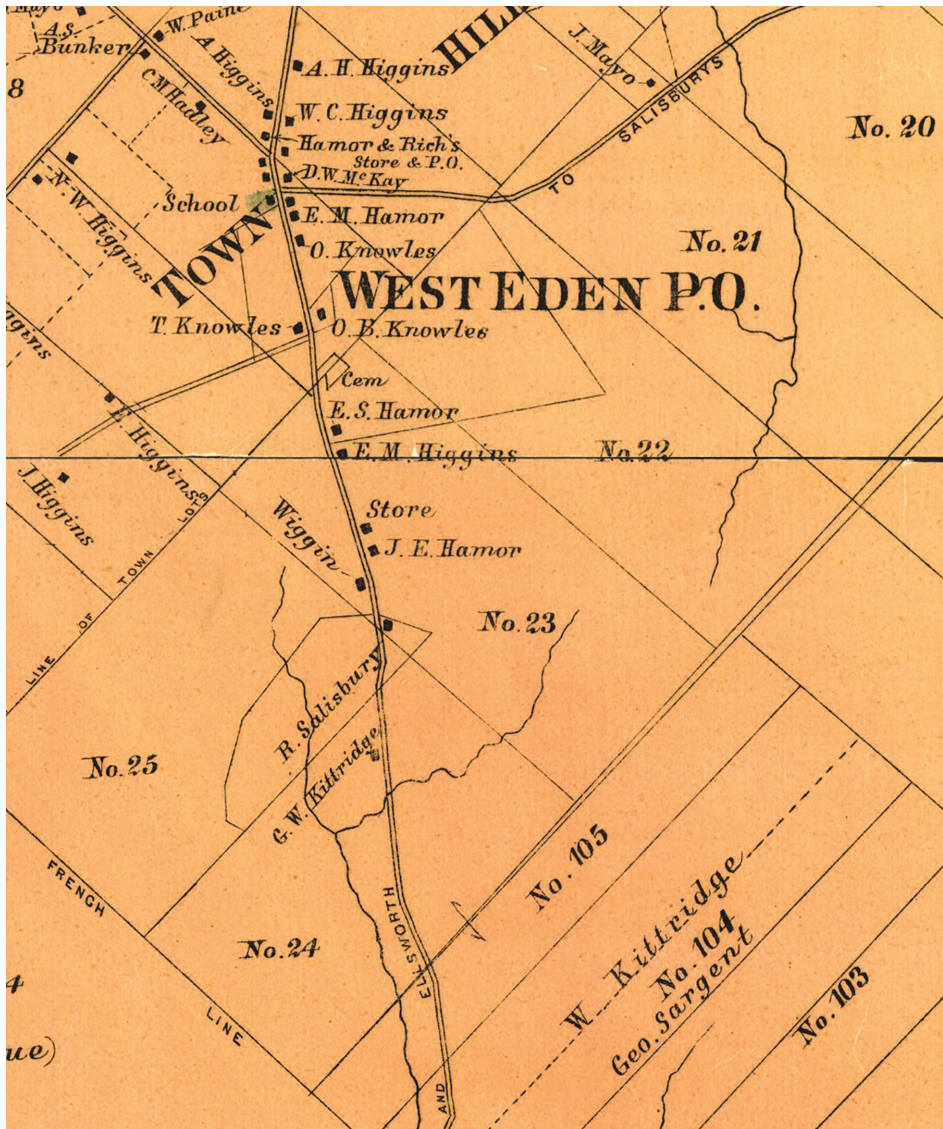
What is striking about the lists of prize-winning varieties from the *Bar Harbor Record* is that these brief newspaper accounts are the only extant records of many of these apples being grown in the area, or even in Maine as a whole. For some of the varieties, these snippets are the sole surviving evidence of their existence. For example, an apple called “Leafless,” grown by C.W. Kitteridge in 1897, had never been recorded otherwise. Pretainger, Sunrise, and Rhode Island Sweet are heretofore undocumented apples, while others are rare varieties hailing from Canada, Ohio, New Jersey, and Vermont.

The snapshot provided from this intensely local perspective allows us to appreciate the processes at work as farmers experimented with new apples, shifted to market production, and sought out fruit with desirable characteristics through nursery catalogs then just emerging

or through personal contacts and gossip. Any reader familiar with the power of seed catalogs to provoke innovation will grasp some of the dynamics as fancy lithographed images of apples were peddled door to door in Maine by nurserymen from as far away as western New York. The temptation to try new varieties must have been compelling.

The market was also singing a siren song as “apple commission men,” as they were known, spread across the state to buy apples with “cash on the barrel head.” Farmer’s preferences for what to grow had shifted in the period between 1897 and 1923, and this coincided with the massive export boom to England during that period. Maine was sending from 1.5 to 2 million barrels of apples a year to England through Liverpool and other ports, and it appears that the export boom swept through eastern Hancock County just at the turn of the century. Many of the apples given premiums in 1923 are precisely those valued for their good shipping qualities and export potential. Clear evidence of the export boom is seen in many of the relict orchards in Hancock County whose old surviving trees were planted to satisfy the apparently insatiable demand for apples across the sea. On Beech Hill near Somesville, the trees at Beech Hill Farm, like the Pewaukees, Baldwins, Fameuses, and Kings, all were planted to supply the trade to England.

The collapse of local orcharding came with the restriction of British markets after World War I and then a brutally cold winter in 1933–1934. Over three hundred thousand trees were killed by extreme temperature variations that winter after a bumper crop had weakened the trees’ winter hardiness. This catastrophic climatic event came in the middle of the depression and pretty much killed the small, diversified orchards that had blossomed with the export market of the late nineteenth century. Old orchards were cut down and burned. Men working for the Civilian Conservation Corps set about grubbing up orchards and setting the stumps alight. The few orchards that survived economically were replanted with “modern” market varieties like McIntosh, Cortland, and Macoun, which came to dominate the orchards of the rest of the twentieth century throughout New England and New York. With that one winter, the long history of diversity in Maine’s orchards was dealt a final death



Kitteridge Farm, near Town Hill. Map detail. George N. Colby and J.H. Stuart, *Map of Mount Desert Island* (Houlton, ME: George N. Colby, 1887). *Courtesy of the Library of Congress*

blow. The orchards with fifteen, twenty or even thirty different kinds of apples disappeared and were replaced with a simplified and entirely market-oriented mix of apples.

### Conclusion

The radical diversity of American apple varieties reflected the character of American farming, itself powerfully diverse. Local conditions in eastern Maine gave rise to dramatic diversity as well, and documentation demonstrates the hyperlocal nature of many varieties. The detective work required to find and track down these varieties in the flesh makes for a compelling historical research project because year after year, town by town, we have been able not only to document, but also to rescue and propagate these last vestiges of Down East Maine's agrarian society. Their unique and diverse characteristics connect us to the ethos of experimentation and curiosity that gave rise to perhaps the most impressive collective effort in plant selection in American history. Because of the genetic diversity of apples and the nature of nineteenth-century agrarian conditions, there emerged thousands upon thousands of widely planted but also only locally grown fruit. The heritage left to us in our backyards and neighborhoods in the form of deliciously different fruit hangs on trees all over just waiting for us to notice. C.W. Kitteridge's mysterious Leafless apple could be hanging just beyond the old rock wall or in the dooryard.

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<sup>1</sup> Dan Bussey, *The Illustrated History of Apples in North America* (Mount Horeb, IA: Jak Kaw Press, forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> The growth of agricultural societies in the nineteenth century was one aspect of the everyday life of farmers in Maine and elsewhere. Statewide organizations like the Massachusetts Horticultural Society sprang up in the 1820s with Maine



farmers participating from the outset. County and local agricultural societies emerged later in the 1850s and 1860s. One activity they engaged in was to host local fairs and competitions of the type highlighted here. Premiums came from legislative appropriations administered by the Board of Agriculture. The Maine Pomological Society emerged in the 1850s from the Bangor Horticultural Society and other groupings across the state. The annual reports of the Maine Pomological Society provide a wealth of information on the development of orcharding and agriculture generally.

<sup>3</sup> List compiled from *Bar Harbor Record*, November 3, 1897; September 27, 1899; October 2, 1901; and *Bar Harbor Times*, September 24, 1924.

<sup>4</sup> George Wasson, *A Survey of Hancock County, Maine* (Augusta: Sprague, Owen and Nash, 1878), 47.

<sup>5</sup> John Black Archives, Ledgers and Journals, Woodlawn, Ellsworth.

<sup>6</sup> Frederick Charles Bradford, "Apple Varieties in Maine" (master's thesis, UMO, 1911), 342.

<sup>7</sup> The complete list of Goodale's trees was reproduced by the Maine Pomological Society in their first annual report. Maine State Pomological Society, *First Annual Report Secretary of the Maine State Pomological Society for the Year 1873* (Augusta: n.p. 1874), 12.

<sup>8</sup> Maine Pomological Society, *Transactions of the Maine Pomological Society for the Year 1885* (Augusta: Office of the Kennebec Journal), 460.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*