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in *The Island Of Mount Desert Register*, 1910.

Making America Work: A Look at Christians and Jews on Mount Desert Island

by Judith S. Goldstein

By the late nineteenth century, Mount Desert Island, along with Newport, Rhode Island had developed as one of America's two most glorious summer communities. Mount Desert, Maine's premier connection to the Gilded Age was a social frontier where qualifying for acceptance in upper-class society was serious business. Both places provided refuge from the summer heat as well as an escape from urban social and cultural tensions centered on immigrants from eastern and southern Europe. By their presence, the new immigrants were challenging the foundations of American ideals: its pluralistic creed versus Christian superiority and homogeneity; equality of opportunity versus exclusivity; and acceptance of Jews and other new immigrants versus prejudice.

Beginning in the late 1870s, a typical American land boom took off on Mount Desert Island, especially in Bar Harbor. In just a few decades, the farming and fishing hamlets in Bar Harbor, Northeast Harbor, Southwest Harbor, Seal Harbor, and Somesville were transformed first into havens for boarders and tourists and then for summer rusticators or residents. In the 1880s, the magnetic mix of land, money, and the beau monde flourished in Bar Harbor's 250 cottages and its best hotels. By the 1890s, steamers and railroads were carrying 25,000 people a year—many of them with cosmopolitan tastes and the ambitious desire to replicate on summer soil their year-round homes and institutions in cities such as New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago. Bar Harbor's new summer residents spawned an impressive set of institutions: their own Congregational, Catholic, Episcopal, Methodist, Baptist, and Unitarian churches; a hospital, a YMCA, a YWCA, the Jesup Memorial Library, and a Greek-like temple, the Building of Arts.

Families formed the summer colonies and staked their claims on Mount Desert—many with a tenacity and attachment that continue to this day. Society gathered in sumptuous cottages, gardens, and exclusive clubs in Bar Harbor: the Kebo Club, Canoe Club, Reading Club, Pot and Kettle Club, the Bar Harbor Swim Club, and the Yacht Club. The summer residents—the comfortable, the quietly rich, and the extravagantly rich—formed complex strata of a beguiling new society. The society of the rich attracted the society of the powerful. There were visits by presidents, vice-presidents, ambassadors, consuls, cardinals, and bishops. A host of advantageous marriages were carefully encouraged on Mount Desert as old names crossed with new money to form an intercity aristocracy.

Compared to Bar Harbor, Northeast Harbor possessed a different aura and mystique. It was a summer enclave with its own carefully controlled dynamic: slow growth, a quiet commercial life, and an unpretentious appearance. Centered around the founders of the community, Charles W. Eliot, President of Harvard, and the Episcopal Bishop of Albany, New York, William Crosswell Doane, Northeast Harbor promoted itself through a network of relatives, friends, and acceptable friends of friends from Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Albany. The summer residents took pride in the simplicity of their lives: their closeness and respect for the local population, the moral and spiritual cohesiveness, and, above all, the harmonious, educated nature of their community.

Yet, however much Bar Harbor and Northeast Harbor differed in taste and style, they shared a set of underlying values and aspirations: a drive and desire for exclusivity, social superiority, Christian homogeneity, and relief from congested cities and the problems of ever-increasing immigrant populations from eastern and southern Europe. In keeping with social pressures throughout America, by the 1890s, Mount Desert Island experienced a relatively rapid process of social refinement. The reign of summer residents meant that boarders at Bar Harbor's big hotels felt unwelcome; excursionists and lower-class immigrants were discouraged; and the local population was transformed into a service class that tended the luxurious needs of summer residents. A native of Northeast Harbor, Emily Phillips Reynolds, remembered as a child saving a dollar to have her hair washed and combed at a beauty shop in Northeast Harbor. She asked Mrs. Coburn, a lady from Philadelphia, to do her hair. "When I made my request she said she didn't do Natives. Crestfallen, I left and was very disappointed and perplexed for I had never been called a Native before."¹ Yet the relationships with the service class and local population were more complicated than such an incident would suggest. Local residents were admired and often idealized for their skills, fortitude, traditions, and uncomplicated ways. Those natives had once owned all the island's land, they had a pride in their own culture and families, they were sturdy and competent, and they were Protestant.

Although it was by no means the largest of the many denominations on the island, the Episcopal church dominated the upper echelon of the island's social life. Bishops and ministers presided at the pastoral courts of the wealthy. The summer roster of Episcopal clergymen was a "Who's Who" of the church. The most splendid moment of affirmation and recognition of Mount Desert's Episcopal community occurred in 1904. The Archbishop of Canterbury, at the behest of Bishops Doane and Lawrence of Massachusetts and of J. Pierpont Morgan, who regularly visited the island

on his yacht, officiated at St. Mary's-by-the-Sea. For the first time, the Archbishop celebrated Holy Communion outside of England.

While the Archbishop's visit made a long-lasting impression as an imperial event, the presence of the Rev. Endicott Peabody, Rector of Groton, and Dr. Samuel Drury, Rector of St. Paul's, two of America's most outstanding boarding schools, had a deeper, long-lasting impact on the summer community. Each summer in Northeast Harbor, Dr. Drury prominently participated in religious services for the children and parents of his school. Peabody preached at St. Mary's-by-the-Sea. Their presence reinforced the significant connections between the Christian boarding school and summer resort. Peabody's mission was to train boys to achieve an active, civically responsible life and to "cultivate manly, Christian character."² The quality of the Groton education—secular and religious—the associations with the best and richest families, and the exposure to the forceful personality of the headmaster attracted many to the school. In the late nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth centuries, Groton, along with other boarding schools in New England, helped to redefine the Christian social hierarchy. The positive powers of admittance to a Christian education, on the one hand, and the negative weapons of exclusion, on the other hand, were formidable defenses of the upper-class Protestant social order.

It is not surprising that in Peabody's assertively Christian educational world there was no place for prominent, wealthy Jews. One Jewish father made inquiry of Peabody. He asked if his son might attend the school but not go to chapel. Impossible, Peabody replied. "The boys all go to Chapel together It is an integral part of the life of the community. If a boy were to give up attendance at Chapel, he would still have evening prayers at the house; if he were absent from those, there would still be Sacred Studies; there would remain a Christian atmosphere, which, we trust, pervades the place, and from this he would find no retreat."³

There were no Jews at Groton at the turn of the century; there were few, if any, at the other elite boarding schools; and there were certainly not more than a few Jewish families at the closely related, status-conscious summer resorts, including Mount Desert Island. For Jews, friendships, business associations, or wealth were insufficient to gain entrance to the clubs, schools, resorts, professional associations, and businesses controlled by upper-class Christians. This was not only because of different religious beliefs that guided Peabody's leadership at Groton. New definitions of acceptance were essential for the newly wealthy—the ambitious usurpers at the door of the old order. New criteria for acceptance were equally important for those fighting to maintain their established positions. With

the startling growth of new, industrial-based wealth and the radical increase of immigrants from eastern and southern Europe in the 1880s, upper-class Protestant society, according to historian John Higham, had to "sharpen the informal lines of status." It did so by "grasping at distinctions that were more than pecuniary, through an elaborate formalization of etiquette, the compilation of social registers, the acquisition of aristocratic European culture, and the cult of genealogy. . . . Practically, anti-Semitic discrimination fostered another means of stabilizing the social ladder. . . ." ⁴

Of the double threats to the old elites—new industrial wealth and the disruption of traditional patterns of leadership in the immigrant-filled cities—the immigrants caused the greater dismay and social reaction. The Jewish population in America grew from 250,000 in 1871 to 1,000,000 by 1900. The new system of social classification shut out the immigrants as well as Jews who had been in America for decades. Clubs that had turned to Jews as founding members, such as the Union League Club in New York City, before and during the Civil War, now turned down their sons for membership. Status was defined by interlocking Christian associations: family relationships, memberships in clubs, affiliations in schools, private organizations, and professional associations, especially medicine and the law. The process involved, as historian Oscar Handlin wrote, the privatization of social life, which was "devoid of public interest and not subject to government interference." ⁵

The resorts, the most blatantly commercial and public forum of seeking status, joined in the exclusion. In some places, they became conspicuous battlefields where the refusal to accept Jews became public incidents. Incidents of rejection occurred at Saratoga or Coney Island and other places within easy range of major cities with large Jewish populations. In other resort areas, such as the Catskills and Adirondacks and throughout New England, the process of social segregation was quietly evident. The few Jewish summer residents at Mount Desert and other exclusive resorts were acceptable exceptions.

In Bar Harbor Joseph Pulitzer, the powerful, iconoclastic, and eccentric owner of the *New York World* and *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, was one who defied the pattern of social segregation. Walter Damrosch, the musician and conductor, was another Jew who settled in the town. In both instances, Jewish men married Gentile women, and their children, who were Gentile, were accepted in society at the summer resort. But neither Pulitzer nor Damrosch tested the boundaries of the liberality of Bar Harbor's society, as did the financier Jacob H. Schiff, the senior partner of the New York investment banking house Kuhn Loeb. In terms of power and prestige in

business and philanthropy, Schiff easily qualified for membership in the exclusive summer community. His reputation for wealth and philanthropy followed him wherever he went. He was the acknowledged leader of American Jewry in the realms of philanthropy, public policy, and the growing fight against anti-Semitism. His prodigious efforts significantly helped establish the foundations of Jewish life in America in the twentieth century.

Regardless of his strong identification as a Jew, and a religious Jew as well, Schiff found respect and tolerance for himself and his family on Mount Desert Island during the many summers he vacationed in Bar Harbor. His presence on the island was encouraged by his good friend Charles W. Eliot. Once or twice a summer, Schiff would go to Northeast Harbor to lunch with Eliot. Schiff, who spoke with a heavy German accent, would recount: "Today I had the most interesting conversation with President Eliot. And he said to me in that peculiar New England accent of his. . . ." ⁶ Theirs was a unique friendship—one that flourished on Mount Desert—between the liberal educator and the philanthropist, the Brahmin and the German immigrant, the Unitarian and the Jew. It was one of the very few of its kind in the social history of Mount Desert.

From 1907 until 1920, Schiff, however, was the only prominent, practicing Jew who regularly returned to Mount Desert. Samuel Fels, the co-owner of Fels-Naphttha, the soap company, Josef Hoffman and David Mannes, the musicians, Dr. Simon Flexner, director of the Rockefeller Institute of Medical Research, and Lillian Wald, founder of the Henry Street Settlement House in New York, were short-term visitors. But these Jews never formed a community—or a challenge to the Christian nature of the island.

The small number of Jewish merchants, who were year-round residents, made little impression on the island. Bar Harbor's dazzling wealth and fancy reputation were magnets for a handful of enterprising Jewish immigrants such as Max Franklin, Mark Perlinsky, A. M. Shiro, Nathan Hilson, and Nathan Povich. From the late 1890s into the first decades of the twentieth century they settled in the town and established a store selling an array of goods and services: dry goods, mens and womens clothing, shoes, and furniture. But in the fortuitous mix of immigrant families and their descendants, no forceful leaders emerged who were committed to building an observant Jewish community. There was never an attempt to build a synagogue or establish a Jewish cemetery. Those Jews who wished to maintain a connection to religious observance went to Bangor to attend one of its several synagogues. Those who felt too isolated from Jewish life simply left the island to live elsewhere. Many others intermarried or assimilated completely into the Christian life of Mount Desert.

After Schiff's death in 1920, Walter Lippmann, the renowned journalist, political observer and philosopher, and Ambassador Henry Morgenthau, Sr., were the two most prominent Jews who joined the summer community in Bar Harbor. When he bought a cottage in Bar Harbor in 1926, Morgenthau, the former American Ambassador to Turkey, felt confident in gaining acceptance by the island's society. Dignified and friendly, he came to the island as a distinguished German Jew: a self-made man, rich from real estate investments in New York City, a member of the diplomatic establishment, a devoted guardian of Woodrow Wilson's presidential legacy, and an outstanding leader of American Jewry. His reputation and friendships gained him entrance at the Kebo Club and the Bar Harbor Swimming Club.

When Morgenthau settled on the island, he was, however, moving against the powerful stream of social and economic segregation—a force of virulent populist and patrician anti-Semitism in the 1920s and in the Depression-ridden years of the 1930s. Employment was limited by prejudice. Anti-Semitic literature spread under the sponsorship of men such as Henry Ford, who publicly endorsed and publicized the anti-Semitic tract, “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion,” and Father Coughlin, a popular Detroit-based Catholic priest who broadcast weekly diatribes against Jews. Colleges and universities implemented stringent quotas to reduce and contain the number of Jewish students.⁷ One of Seal Harbor's most prominent summer figures, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, the wife of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., tried to resist the worsening climate of anti-Semitism. She wrote her sons at college in the late 1920s:

Out of my experience and observation has grown the earnest conviction that one of the greatest causes of evil in the world is race hatred or race prejudice. . . . The two peoples or races who suffer most from this treatment are the Jews and Negroes. . . . I want to make an appeal to your sense of fair play and to beseech you to begin your lives as young men by giving the other fellow, be he Jew or Hebrew or of whatever race, a fair chance and a square deal.⁸

Mrs. Rockefeller's views notwithstanding, there is reason to believe that Morgenthau, because he was Jewish, was not invited to join the Seal Harbor Club, founded by her husband, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and Edsel Ford.⁹ Other clubs on the island maintained the same exclusive policy. As to widespread public prejudice on Mount Desert Island, in 1924 the Ku Klux Klan drew large audiences, first at The Neighborhood House in Northeast Harbor and then, a year later, an audience of 600 at Bar Harbor's Congregational church.¹⁰

The subtle and overt signs of prejudice that permeated much of American life made some of Morgenthau's family feel uncomfortable with his anomalous position in Bar Harbor. His granddaughter, Barbara Wertheim, who later became the highly acclaimed historian Barbara Tuchman, visited her grandparents in 1932. Many years later she wrote about her disquietude.

In his fierce desire for proof of assimilation, he established his summer home, when he was in his seventies, in the WASP stronghold of Bar Harbor, Maine consorting with snobs to my acute embarrassment on my visits. Possibly they liked or admired him—he was a man of great charm, known as Uncle Henry to all acquaintances from FDR to the policeman on the beat—but what slights he may have endured I cannot tell. Yet he never for an instant attempted to play down his Jewish identity or remain passive in regard to his people . . . Assimilation, for him, did not mean to cross over to Christianity; it meant to be accepted in Bar Harbor as a Jew: that was the whole point. He wanted to be a Jew and an American on the same level as the best. He wanted America to work in terms of his youthful ideals—and of course it did not.¹¹

In 1922 Morgenthau had confidently expressed those ideals in his autobiography. "Social barriers are not insurmountable. . . . Leave the intolerant to associate with their own kind. The Jew who has raised himself to the highest level will have put himself beyond the reach of prejudice and he will find himself welcomed in the highest Christian circles."¹² During the 1930s and 1940s, as Tuchman wrote, it was hard to believe that America would realize those goals. Certainly, when Morgenthau died in 1946, there was little reason to believe that prejudice and discrimination would be forced out of America's social and economic fabric.

And yet, ultimately, Morgenthau's hopes were not misplaced in America and specifically Mount Desert. By the late twentieth century the grip of prejudiced exclusivity had been slowly broken on the Island, in large part, through the force of conservation. The development of Acadia National Park, started under the leadership of Charles W. Eliot, George B. Dorr, and John D. Rockefeller, Jr. in the first two decades of the twentieth century, slowly brought public ownership, public responsibility, and unlimited public access to what had once been an enclave of upper-class society. To preserve the beauty of the island, the summer community entrusted their precious land to the national government on behalf of the American public.

To be sure, many other factors slowly changed the composition of social life on Mount Desert: the abandonment of Bar Harbor to the tourists by the rich summer residents both before and after the fire in 1947; the ascendancy of Northeast Harbor and Seal Harbor as enclaves of the rich;

the growth of scientific and other educational institutions on the island that attracted men of merit, irrespective of background; and the increasing tolerance in American society after the Second World War. Less noticeable was the unassertive presence of a group of European Jewish immigrants who settled as summer residents on Long Pond from the 1950s on. They did not look to buy homes in Seal Harbor or Northeast Harbor. Nor did they turn to the island's clubs for social affirmation and acceptance by the traditional summer communities. The refugees simply (and nearly invisibly) enjoyed the freedom of Acadia National Park. In Somesville and other communities on the western part of the island, as well as on the Cranberry Isles, the immigrants cherished the simplicity of summer life.

Those Jewish émigrés, as well as many other Jewish individuals and families that have settled on Mount Desert, were part of that great democratic public that Eliot, Dorr, and Rockefeller had worked for in creating the national park on the island that they treasured. "The present generation," Dorr wrote in the early 1940s, "will pass as my own has done, but the mountains and the woods, the coasts and streams that have now passed through the agency of the Park to the National Government will continue as a national possession, a public possession, henceforth for all time to come."¹³ Gentiles and Jews—local residents, summer residents, and tourists—are all the beneficiaries of the noble mission of converting private, exclusive land on Mount Desert to public use.

It has taken many decades for the many religious and secular communities on Mount Desert Island to develop an atmosphere of respect for a diverse population. As a result, in regard to work, social life, and religious observance, the growing Jewish community of individuals and families now living and working on the island can finally make confident choices about their religious identification, institutions, education, and practices.

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Previous works include studies of immigration history and works about Maine: Crossing Lines: Histories of Jews and Gentiles in Three Communities; Tragedies and Triumphs: Charles W. Eliot, George B. Dorr and John D. Rockefeller, Jr. and the Founding of Acadia National Park; and Majestic Mount Desert: Three Talks on the Places, People, and Power of Mount Desert Island.

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Notes

- ¹ Emily Phillips Reynolds, *Down Memory Lane* (Portland, Maine: Maine Printing Co, 1975), 2.
- ² Franklin D. Ashburn, *A Portrait: Peabody of Groton* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Riverside Press, 1967), 68.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 192.
- ⁴ John Higham, *Send These to Me: Jews and Other Immigrants in Urban America* (New York: Atheneum, 1975), 148.
- ⁵ Oscar and Mary Handlin, "The Acquisition of Political and Social Rights by the Jews in the United States," *American Jewish Yearbook* 56 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1955), 73.
- ⁶ Edward M. M. Warburg, *As I Recall* (privately published, 1978), 21.
- ⁷ Stephen Steinberg, *Ethnic Myths: Race, Ethnicity and Class in America* (New York: Atheneum, 1981), 245.
- ⁸ Mary Ellen Chase, *Abby Aldrich Rockefeller* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1950), 79-80.
- ⁹ J. D. Rockefeller, Jr. to Amy Montegue, 26 June 1933, Rockefeller Family Archives, 2 Homes, Box 74, Seal Harbor Club; John D. Rockefeller, Jr., Papers, Rockefeller Archives Center, North Tarrytown, New York.
- ¹⁰ *Bar Harbor Times*, 9 April 1924, 9.
- ¹¹ Barbara W. Tuchman, *Practicing History: Selected Essays* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 19-20.
- ¹² Henry Morgenthau, Sr., *All in a Life Time* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1922), 400.
- ¹³ Papers of George B. Dorr, Bar Harbor Historical Society, Bar Harbor, Maine.