



Preview

The Story of Mt. Desert Island and Acadia National Park
a manuscript submitted

By Paul S. Richardson for publication by
The MDI Historical Society.

By Anne S. Funderburk

As a direct descendant of James Richardson, co-founder with Abraham Somes of the first permanent European settlement on Mt. Desert Island, Paul S. Richardson is particularly well-qualified to write "The Story of Mt. Desert Island and Acadia National Park". His manuscript, in the process of being edited for publication by the Mt. Desert Island Historical Society, comprises a comprehensive and compact history of the Island, together with an intensive and detailed account of the formation of the Park, the creation of the carriage road system, and the development of the Park's motor roads. The first seven chapters describe the historical evolution of the rich and colorful multi-cultural heritage of Mt. Desert Island, while the remaining ten chapters focus on the heroic efforts of many dedicated and courageous people to preserve that heritage and make it accessible to the public.

In the early chapters Mr. Richardson shows how the religious and political turmoil of late 16th and 17th century France directly affected the exploration and settlement of coastal Maine and Canada. He then brings to life the intense and bitter rivalry between the French and English in this arena, contrasting the French interaction with the native peoples (accepting and co-operative) with the English approach (confrontational and coercive). After 1763, with the French permanently ousted from the area, he traces the growth of settlement and division of land on the Island, touching on some of the problems experienced by the early settlers (theft of hay and lumber), as well as on early efforts at self-government.

Chapter seven, "The Need For Protection", is the transition point of the manuscript, swinging away from the European influence on Island history and toward American political and natural history. It discusses the mid-nineteenth century roles of the Hudson River School of painters and the early "rusticators" in making the natural beauty of the Island known to the outside world. These visitors returned, bringing with them important, influential and wealthy friends, who began buying land, building houses and constructing trails from which they could better enjoy the loveliness around them. By 1901, facing the threat of rapid development and wholesale logging, leaders of both the summer and year-round communities on the eastern half of the Island banded together to form the Hancock County Trustees of Public Reservations. Their goal was to protect "woodlands, mountain tops, and spectacular and fragile areas." The rest of the chapter chronicles the early acquisitions of the Trustees, their incorporation into protected status as Sieur de Monts National Monument (1916) and their establishment as Lafayette National Park (1919). "This was the first National Park east of the Mississippi and the only National Park established entirely by the gift of lands." (p.31)

In Chapter Eight, the manuscript focuses on John D. Rockefeller, Jr. and the central role he played in the preservation and protection of the natural beauty of Mt. Desert Island. Beginning in 1913 with carriage roads for his family's use near his house, "The Eyrie", on Barr Hill and around Long Pond, Rockefeller soon expanded the

scope to include the Amphitheater Valley, Little Harbor Brook, and Brown Mountain (now Norumbega Mt.). This meant coming to an accommodation with the Trustees. Although he could not purchase easements from them, in 1915 he was permitted to cross their lands with the understanding that these roads would eventually form part of a future park. There follows a detailed and well-illustrated account of carriage road and bridge construction up to 1919.

In chapter Nine, Mr. Richardson relates in some detail the work carried out during the 1920's and describes the social and political turmoil deriving from it. Mr. Rockefeller's plans to expand the carriage road system and to introduce motor roads up Cadillac Mountain and along the ocean met with lively opposition from many influential people. Some of these felt that certain areas should be accessed only by footpath in order to protect them from overuse. Rockefeller, on the other hand, believed that "the carriage roads would provide an opportunity for more people to see the interior of the Island and its great natural beauty without destroying it" (p. 42), while the motor roads in the Park would guarantee that motors would never be allowed on the carriage roads. (It would seem that time has proved the wisdom of this position.) The author gives an entertaining view of the political jockeying and finagling behind the scenes which resulted in the success of Mr. Rockefeller's plans.

Throughout the following chapters on the construction of the roads and bridges, Mr. Richardson gives considerable personal detail of the lives and characters of many of the men who worked on this great project. He includes amusing anecdotes about A. E. Clement and Paul Simpson, among others, which bring these dedicated and creative men vividly to life. He also quotes passages from the correspondence of members of the summer colony which point up the bitterness of those who opposed the creation of the Park Loop Road.

This last project, dubbed "The Four Million Dollar Road", involved much more than the opposition of certain summer residents. It also entailed moving the naval radio station, established during World War I by Alessandro Fabbri on the east shore of Otter Creek. Mr. Richardson gives a most informative capsule history of the station,

emphasizing its great importance to the war effort. During the 1930's, when the Navy proved reluctant to move the station to the Schoodic Peninsula (which had even better radio reception than Otter Cliffs), George B. Dorr intervened, as he so often did throughout the early history of the Park. Indeed, without Mr. Dorr's involvement through his personal contacts in Washington, D. C., his powers of persuasion, and his tremendous energy and generosity, Acadia National Park might very well never have been created. His presence permeates the manuscript, and the reader comes to a better appreciation of the great-hearted man who had the wisdom and forethought in 1914 to invite Mr. Rockefeller to work with him and the Trustees of Public Reservations to save the glorious natural beauty of Mt. Desert Island.

Mr. Richardson's manuscript has been well-researched, citing many previously published works on the history of Mt. Desert Island as well as assorted documents, conversations with descendants of many of the key figures in the manuscript, and unpublished notes from various sources. It is amply illustrated with 50 photographs which give the reader a vivid impression of Island history. The appendix, which gives specific and detailed descriptions of all the carriage road bridges, is accompanied by original drawings (by the author's granddaughter - Abby Richardson Gee) of every bridge in the system. There is an excellent generic diagram of a stone bridge clearly labeled with the terminology of stone bridges, as well as a glossary of that terminology. The care and effort which characterize this manuscript are perhaps best expressed in the author's own words from the acknowledgements: "My greatest support has been from my wife, Dot, who in cold and snowy weather helped me measure every bridge. We have walked all the roads and studied how they were built from the ground up. We have crawled into stone drains and noted the difference in coping stones from one road to another. After repeated visits to bridge sites we learned that each bridge has special qualities; these we have tried to identify." It is the considered opinion of this reviewer that Mr. Richardson has succeeded well in his endeavor.