

Icy, Corkscrew and Whalesback:

Descriptive Terms in the Placenames of Mount Desert Island

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A characteristic human trait is the creation of names; we name our pets, our children, our cottages, our streets – and all to very good purpose. Without such names, we would find it difficult to identify which cat, which child, which cottage, or which street is being discussed. Similarly, the use of names to identify specific places on the Earth's surface makes it possible to identify individual mountains, streams, coves, and other features or localities. The landscape of Mount Desert Island and the immediately adjacent islands¹ is enriched with more than 1,200 named physical features and locations.²

Placenames commonly become established through a natural evolutionary process. Initially a feature bears no name, but eventually it becomes necessary to identify it in some way. What may start out as “You know, that brook down by Richardson’s place” is shortened to Richardson’s Brook and in time simply **Richardson Brook**. “That mountain owned by Dan Brewer” becomes **Brewer Mountain**. Or “the valley where I shot the wildcat last winter” evolves into a more convenient **Wildcat Valley**. The majority of Mount Desert Island placenames were established through this casual process. In addition, however, this island is distinct in having many names applied rather artificially during the hotel and cottage eras of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The various groups who have provided names – settlers, fishermen, cottagers, and others – have lent a placename diversity to the island that is not commonly found elsewhere.

The origin of a few names can be documented; we know exactly how the name was established. For many others we may only surmise the origin based upon land ownership, an obvious appearance, etc. For other names, still, their origins are a complete mystery. Further

confusing attempts to establish name origin is the possibility of misinterpretation and incorrect assumptions. It is easy to attribute **Pine Island**, a former name for Somesville's Bar Island, to the presence of pine trees, overlooking the past ownership of the island by the Pine family. And placenames suggesting colors – Green, White, Black – may also be family names.

Placename Elements

Most placenames contain two elements, a generic term identifying the type of feature (mountain, creek) and a specifier term that distinguishes one place from others of the same generic class (**Conners Nubble, Otter Creek**). In addition, a few places may lack a generic term (**Wonderland, Center**), and occasionally a generic term is used as the specifier (**The Bowl, The Heath**).

Specifiers often reflect the historic development of a region. For example, more than 300 Mount Desert Island places bear personal names, usually of early settlers or landowners (**Youngs Mountain, Israel Point**);³ others were later commemorative additions, typically selected before they came into common use (**Dorr Mountain, Eliot Mountain**). Some specifiers take note of a particular incident (**Brig Landing Cove**), or economic activity (**Tryhouse Point**), or were transferred from a foreign name (**Algerine Coast**). There are also many names – more than 500 of them – possessing specifiers that in some way describe the feature's location, appearance, or other distinctive physical characteristic. These so-called descriptive names are the basis for this article.

Locational or Relative Position Names

The largest group of descriptive names, about 20% of the total, are those indicating a site's location with reference to some other site, a simple and common device. Two similar features, especially if in close proximity, frequently are identified with a locational specifier. In this way we can identify the **North Bubble** from the **South Bubble**, and distinguish between **Northern Neck** and **Southern Neck**. Usually the two features are given approximate equality; however,

we also find locational specifiers that are not equal: *North Norwood Cove* in reference to **Norwood Cove**, not *South Norwood Cove*, or **West Tremont** relative to **Tremont**. We also have at least one triple-reference in the Triads: **North Triad**, **East Triad**, and **West Triad**.



Thunder Hole

Locational names also may indicate a relative position within a region rather than position in relation to a like feature. **Northeast Creek** and **Western Mountain** suggest their positions on Mount Desert Island rather than proximity to comparable locations; **Eastern Point** on Greening Island indicates its relative location (without a comparable Western Point). Further, a locational name is not necessarily accurate. Bartlett Island's **North Point** and **Western Point** are properly descriptive, but its **Eastern Point** is at the southern tip of the island.

Other locational names involve relative position terms rather than simple compass directions. **Upper Breakneck Pond** and **Lower Breakneck Pond** (and the equivalents at the Hadlock Ponds) are non-compass locations suggesting only their relationships to each other. **Halfway Brook** (Tremont) and **Halfway Mountain** (south of The Bowl) indicate locations relative to other features, although their origins are obscure. **Head of the Harbor** and **Up Island** indicate relative positions, while **Ponds End** is obvious.

Use of the descriptive term **Backside** varies depending upon one's perspective. The name now customarily applies to the western side of Mount Desert Island but, in earlier times when the island's center of population was in the Southwest Harbor area, the Backside referred to the eastern half (although, jocularly, residents of Tremont and Southwest Harbor still occasionally place Bar Harbor on the Backside).

Magnitude Names

Closely allied to the locational or relative names are more than 50 names, such as *Big*, *Great*, or *Little*, that make reference to the magnitude or size of a feature. These typically are introduced by local inhabitants, and generally are quite basic designations. In some cases two names are paired, as in **Great Cranberry Island** and **Little Cranberry Island** (that presumably indicate the relative sizes of the islands, not the size of cranberries found there), **Great Meadow** contrasted with its nearby **Little Meadow**, or **Great Notch** versus **Little Notch**. Elsewhere we find paired names, but with only one of the features – invariably a *Little* name – indicating its magnitude relative to its companion: **Little Bunker Hill**, **Little Echo Lake**, **Little Hunters Beach**, and **Little Round Pond** have their corresponding Bunker, Echo, Hunters, or Round features that do not bear a *Big* specifier. In addition, some magnitude names have come into use without benefit of a nearby linked feature. **Big Rocks**, **Great Brook**, **Great Spring**, **Little Creek**, and **Little Island** all exist independently.

Although *Big* and *Little* are by far the most common magnitude names, a few others occasionally appear. **Broad Cove** on the west side of Somes Sound, two **Deep Coves** near Pretty Marsh, and several uses of **High Head** illustrate this type of name. *Long* appears frequently, as in **Long Brook**, **Long Cove**, **Long Heath**, **Long Hill**, **Long Ledge**, **Long Point**, **Long Porcupine Island** and, of course, **Long Pond**. Conversely, the use of *Short* is rare, but is represented in the little-used **Short Brook** on Great Cranberry Island.

Appearance or Condition Names

How a physical feature appears to the observer has given rise to many descriptive placenames, among which color names are most common: **Black Brook**, **Black Guzzle**, and of course **Black Woods**; **Blue Head** and **Blue Rocks**; **Green Island** and **Green Nubble**; **Red Rock Corner** and **Red Rock Spring**; **White Beach** and **The Whitecap**. A feature's distinctive shape yields **Pointy Head**, **Crescent Beach**, and **Halfmoon Pond**. **Bald Mountain** and **Bald Peak**, **Burnt Hill** and **Burnt Ledges**, **Cold Brook** and **Fresh Meadow**,

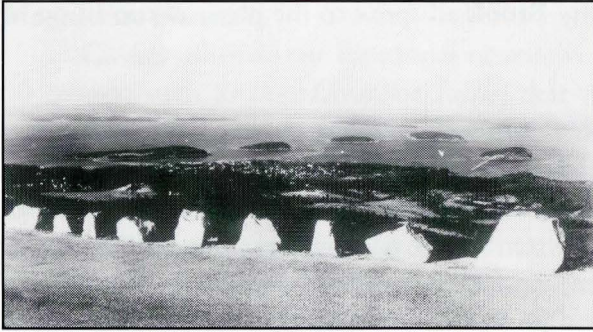
Round Pond and **Stony Brook** all speak to the physical condition of these features.

The significance of some names has changed through time, accompanying the march of progress. **Icy Hill**, along Route 3 east of the Champlain Monument, was once a notorious winter challenge for travellers between Otter Creek and Seal Harbor. Reconstruction of the road in the late 1930s removed some of the treacherous curves, steep slopes, and ice-prone sections that were so memorable.⁴ Although the old roadbed may still be found in the adjacent woods, the Icy Hill name survives today chiefly in nearby trail signs. Similarly, few people today can appreciate the significance of **Shady Hill** at Northeast Harbor, which has been so drastically altered since acquiring its name. And Bar Harbor's **Stony Hill** became less stony when it was upgraded to Kebo Street.⁵

Flora and Fauna Names

Many places bear names of plants or animals, most of which came into use during the 19th century. About three dozen plants or habitats, and twice as many animals, are identified. They tend to reflect one of three conditions that stood out in the minds of the placenamers: a relative *abundance* of the species at a particular location, a *scarcity* of the species making its presence unusual, or an *unusual incident* involving the species. However, since these names are so common and since there are few records establishing how they came into existence, the rationale behind them is largely a matter of speculation.

Herbaceous plants rarely were adopted in plant names, and each appears only once or twice (such as **Strawberry Hill**, **Fern Spring**). **Mullein Hill** (in Somesville) may be attributable to its abundance: "The name 'Mullein Hill' was due to the quantities of that spectacular plant which covered the field there . . . Even after the extension of the road to Pretty Marsh, the name continued in use until trees 'took over' the field and the mullein disappeared. Then people forgot why it had ever been given the name; . . ."⁶ We also seem to have forgotten how a **Turnip Point**, on Sutton Island, acquired its name.



Porcupine Islands and Frenchman's Bay from the Summit of Cadillac Mountain



The Bubbles from Jordan Pond



Sheep Island

Somewhat more common is the use of trees, including both deciduous and coniferous species. **Birch** appears several times (as Brook, Island, and Spring), and **Beech Mountain** is well known. Conifers include **Juniper Cove**, **Cedar Spring**, and **Spruce Point**. But with the wide distribution of some of these species it is a mystery why one location, for example, should be designated **Pine Hill**. What was it that made this site stand out from other areas bearing valuable pines?

Certainly the presence of plants of particular economic importance helps explain some names. Cranberries were prized, leading to **Cranberry Hill** and **Cranberry Point** and **The Cranberry Islands**. "Several of these islands are called 'Cranberry,' singularly enough, because the excellent berry of that name grows there in quantities profitable to the goodly numbers of people who make it their business to gather them."⁷ Similarly the presence of oak, desired for construction of barrels, helps account for **Oak Hill** not far from Abraham Somes' settlement. A second Oak Hill in Tremont might be attributed to the same process, although **Oak Hill Cliff** and **Oak Meadow** (below The Precipice) are less likely.

Several habitat types, usually considered as generic terms, have crept into use as descriptive specifiers, giving us **Lake Wood** and **Hardwood Island**. **Meadow Brook** applies to four different streams on Mount Desert Island, one of which provided the name for Rudolph Brunnow's cottage below Champlain Mountain, later renamed High Seas. A simple **The Heath** appears several times (twice in the Cranberry Islands, again west of Hulls Cove).

An abundance of some animals accounts for **Otter Cove** and other Mount Desert Island placenames. "**Bass Harbor** abounded in bass, and the Marsh is named for the harbor"⁸ and **Seal Cove** "was famous in former times as the resort of seals."⁹ However, such species were not unique to these localities; bass and seals were found in other locations and seals have provided a half-dozen names. Not surprisingly, marine species often were incorporated into names

yielding, for example, **Anemone Cave**, **Cod Ledge**, **Dogfish Cove**, **Old Whale Ledge**, **Quahog Pond** and **Squid Island and Cove**. Birds contributed **Crow Island** and **Crows Nest**, **Duck Brook** and **Duck Pond**, **Fish Hawk Point**, **Goose Cove**, and **Old Squaw Ledge**. But given their importance to the region, lobsters don't fare well; **Lobster Channel** (Great Gott Island) is a rare occurrence.

About half of the animal-related names are those of terrestrial species. A variety of native species crop up in placenames, including at least four involving bears: **Bear Brook**, **Bear Hill**, **Bear Island**, and **Bears Den**. More typically, however, an individual species appears only once or twice, as **Frog Pond**, **Great Snake Flat**, **Moose Island**, **Smelt Rock**, **Squirrel Brook**, **Toad Hole**, and **Trout Brook**. Domesticated species commemorated in local names include **Dog Point** (and, of course, the historic **Dog Mountain**), **Horse Cove** (Bartlett Island), **Ox Hill**, and **Sheep Island** (Somes Harbor). Cow-names also appear a number of times, in **Cow Cove**, **Cow Ledge**, and **Cow and Calf Ledge**.

More than most, the animal-related names probably are the result of some long-forgotten incident rather than any particular frequency of occurrence of the species. There is no reason to think that deer were more abundant in the **Deer Brook** area (below Sargent Mountain Pond) than in any other locality on Mount Desert Island, nor is it likely that Deer Brook was named because finding deer here was an unusual occurrence. It is more likely that it received its name from some distinctive event. We might imagine that this is where a hunter shot an unusual number of deer in one day, or possibly found a deer with a broken leg, leading to its locational reference. Some similar incident may account for **Fawn Pond**, **Bear Brook**, or **Wildcat Valley**. For the most part we no longer know how or why these places received their names, but we may assume that **Mosquito Cove** on Great Cranberry Island was not named due to a remarkably small mosquito population found there.

Physical and Geological Names

While flora and fauna names represent elements of the organic natural environment, the physical and geological names are derived from the inorganic realm. Although a few of these names are commonly-found features (such as the Ledge used in Bartlett Island's **Ledge Point**), more typically names were selected because of their distinctive or unusual occurrence on Mount Desert Island. On these rocky shores, sandy locations are sufficiently infrequent that their presence is worthy of note, and *Sand* names are the third most common category (after Big/Great and Little). At least seven examples of **Sand Point** can be identified: just east of The Ovens, along the east side of Long Pond, opposite Valley Cove, and elsewhere. Even the village of Northeast Harbor was once known as Sand Point. Additionally, **Sand Beach** appears several times, not only at the well-known site along Ocean Drive but also west of Town Hill, on Little Cranberry Island, and again on Little Gott Island.

One of the more distinctive features along the Maine coast is the presence of one island tied to an adjacent island by a connecting gravel bar (the geologist's *tombolo*), which has yielded a host of names. Locally, the best known of these, **The Bar**, has contributed in turn to the village and Town names of Bar Harbor and to the nearby Bar Island, named at least as early as 1776.¹⁰ Other Bar Islands can be found at Somesville and at Tremont. The gravel bars also give us **Bar Ledge** (Somesville) and **Bar Point** (Little Cranberry Island).

Some names use a generic term as the specifier and include a second generic term: **Chasm Brook**, **Dike Peak**, **Basin Brook**, and **Bluff Head** illustrate this pattern. Somewhat more frequently, the specifier and the generic term become one: **The Amphitheater**, **The Cleft**, **The Gorge**, **The Gut**, **The Nubble**, **The Precipice**, and **Whalesback**. Inclusion of the definite article *The* with many of these names emphasizes their exceptional occurrence, and most appear only once. On the other hand, when a generic term represents a more common feature on the ground, it may be used multiple

times, as in **The Bluffs** (at Hulls Cove and at Echo Lake), **The Narrows**, **The Pool**, or **Seawall**.

Metaphorical Names

Among the most frequently-occurring names, and among the more imaginative, are the metaphors, emphasizing a particular characteristic of the named feature. A handful of metaphorical names appear more than once, including **Pulpit Rock** (used at least three times), at least four **Thrumcaps** (which are common elsewhere along the Maine Coast), and, historically, **Peanut Row** (in both Bar Harbor and Hall Quarry), but multiple use of metaphors is unusual. More typically, each metaphorical name appears just once, suggesting both uniqueness of the feature and creativity on the part of the namers.

Although it is no longer possible to identify most original namers, metaphors only rarely were generated by the indigenous population, illustrated by **Tremont** in 1848¹¹ and, at least by 1866, **The Bubbies** (a name rarely seen in print,¹² and later euphemistically transformed into The Bubbles). More typically, local inhabitants were inclined to employ practical and clearly descriptive names, a **Long Island** or a **Hodgdon Pond** rather than a **Cloisters** or a **Corniche**. In contrast, the majority of metaphorical names probably were applied first by people “from away” – explorers, artists, or cottagers.

The earliest known metaphorical name is the **Porcupine Islands**, first appearing in 1765 on the Jones and Mason survey for Governor Francis Bernard.¹³ Other early metaphors appearing on surveyor’s maps and charts include **Ship Island**¹⁴ and **The Hop**,¹⁵ (although it is not known whether these names were created by surveyors and cartographers, or whether they recorded names already in local use). By the 1860s the occasional tourists were introducing a number of metaphorical names. **Thunder Hole** appears by 1866¹⁶ and DeCosta’s 1868 *Scenes in the Isle of Mount Desert* yields **The Ovens**, **The Assyrian** (a rock “face” near Cromwell Cove), and **Pulpit Rock** (on the Bar Harbor shore), among others.¹⁷

However, it was during the island's booming hotel and cottage eras that most metaphorical names were introduced, particularly at sites of interest to the island's rusticators. An afternoon's pastime might involve a ride to **Paradise Hill**, continue to **The Cathedral**, and on to **Star Crevice**. Along the way, their carriages passed down the aptly-named **Corkscrew Hill**, a twisting, winding road by-passing The Bluffs. Meanwhile, in the mountains hikers reached **The Featherbed**, **The Horseshoe**, and **Giant Slide**. Even locations bearing earlier, more prosaic, names were recast as metaphors during this period. Thomas Cole's Sand Beach Mountain¹⁸ of 1844 was transformed into **The Beehive**; what had previously been Dean Higgins Cove became **Compass Harbor**; and Otter Point's Deep Cove evolved into **Monument Cove**. Rusticators had a boundless capacity for naming and renaming.

Among the various placename categories, then – including those derived from a settler's or landowner's name, an incident or event, commemoration, etc. – are those of a descriptive nature. Some of these names describe a feature's relative location or magnitude. Others make note of a feature's appearance or physical condition, while still others identify biological or geological attributes. Finally, the numerous metaphorical descriptors take placenames beyond the ordinary. Representing more than 40 per cent of all local names, the descriptive names contribute significantly to the interest and diversity of the placename mantle on Mount Desert Island.

Henry Raup, a retired professor of geography, has had a long interest in the placenames of Mount Desert Island. He may be contacted through The Mount Desert Island Historical Society.



ENDNOTES

¹ The area covered in this study includes all of the Towns of Bar Harbor, Cranberry Isles, Mount Desert, Southwest Harbor and Tremont,

and small sections of Gouldsboro and Trenton that are intimately associated with Mount Desert Island.

² Many places have been identified by more than one name (i.e. *variants*), some obsolete, others still in use. For example, Bald Porcupine Island has previously been known as Wheeler, Tracy, Round, and South Porcupine Island. Only the current or principal names are considered here. Additionally, many names are so-called *transfer* names, derived from a nearby related feature, and are excluded. Thus *Otter* appears only once, as Otter Cove, originally Otter Creek or Otter Creek Cove; Otter Creek village, Otter Point, and Otter Creek stream all are transfer names from the original Otter Creek. Conversely, Seal Harbor (Mount Desert) and Seal Cove (Tremont) were named independently, and both are included.

³ The absence of the possessive apostrophe in such names as Youngs Mountain is in keeping with the policy of the U.S. Board on Geographic Names, intended to simplify names where possible and to reduce clutter on maps, despite the objections of grammarians.

⁴ *Bar Harbor Times*, December 29, 1938.

⁵ *Bar Harbor Times*, October 18, 1935.

⁶ Somes-Sanderson, Virginia. *The Living Past*. Mount Desert, ME: The Author, 1982, 119.

⁷ Nichols, George W. "Mount Desert," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 45(267), 1872, 325.

⁸ Fernald, O. H. *Mount Desert Herald*, March 28, 1890.

⁹ DeCosta, B. F. *Scenes in the Isle of Mount Desert, Coast of Maine*. New York: Privately printed, 1868, 104.

¹⁰ Mount Desert Town. [Record of Mount Desert organizational meeting], March 30, 1776.

¹¹ Street, George E. *Mount Desert – A History*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1926 (rev. ed.), 224.

¹² *Portland Transcript*, August 18, 1866.

¹³ Jones, John and Barnabas Mason. [Map] *A Plan of the Islands Eastward Laying from Penobscot Bay & of the Granted Townships...*, 1765. MS, original in Massachusetts Archives, Boston.

¹⁴ DesBarres, Joseph F. W. [Map. Coast of Maine from Frenchman Bay to Mosquito Harbor], 1776.

¹⁵ Coast and Geodetic Survey. [Map] *Mount Desert Island, Maine*. Chart 292, 1882.

¹⁶ Willets, James R. *The Cruise of the Forest Home; or, Chronicles of a Pleasure Trip to Mount Desert*. New York: Francis Hart, 1866, 145.

¹⁷ DeCosta, *Scenes in the Isle of Mount Desert, Coast of Maine*, 125, 131

¹⁸ Cole, Thomas. [Sketch, 1844] *Sand Beach Mountain, Mt. Desert Island*. Reproduced in John Wilmerding, *The Artist's Mount Desert: American Painters on the Maine Coast*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994, 37.