

The Bar Harbor Express train. *Courtesy of Raymond Strout*

The Bar Harbor Express: A Most Elegant Travel Option

Brook Ewing Minner

The only thing more intriguing than the story of the Bar Harbor Express train is the fact that its history has nearly disappeared. Although the Bar Harbor Express transported passengers to Mount Desert Ferry in Hancock from 1885 until the mid-1930s, and to Ellsworth and Bangor until 1960, Lois Johnson of the Hancock Historical Society tells me that growing up in Hancock, she never knew anything about the train until she began to volunteer at the historical society. A recent walk down Ferry Road to Grant's Hill in Hancock shows almost no sign of the bustling train station and hotel that defined Mount Desert Ferry at the turn of the twentieth century. If one looks closely, a remnant of a pier can be seen. Otherwise, it is a quiet and beautiful point on the coast of Maine, now occupied by a marine service business.

Travel on the Bar Harbor Express mirrored the elegance found in the grand cottages on Mount Desert Island built during the Gilded Age. Due to the wealth and stature of those spending their summers on Mount Desert Island, the Bar Harbor Express became a premier example of train travel during the late 1800s. It was not uncommon for families such as the Vanderbilts, the Pulitzers, and the Morgans to ride the train to reach

the Island. In fact, the president of the Maine Central Railroad would ride the entire route prior to the opening of the summer season to see that the ride was smooth and functioning well. Track crews worked throughout the spring to ensure that the rails were in perfect working order and to guarantee that “not a drop of coffee or champagne were spilled.”¹

As wealthy families, artists, and laborers began to spend the summer on Mount Desert Island in the 1880s, the need for a fast and easy way to get to the Island from East Coast cities arose. Prior to this time, most visitors traveled to Mount Desert by steamboat in the early part of the summer and left in September. This required a transfer either in Rockland, Portland, or Boston. Traveling by steamboat was a slow undertaking and the passage could be rough. Also, the long trip made it difficult for people to come to Mount Desert Island for a short stay rather than for the entire summer season. There was passenger train service to Bangor and into parts of the coastal region, but this was year-round service, not particularly designed to appeal to a wealthy clientele. As the wealth amassed among summer residents, a desire for sophisticated, comfortable travel arose.

On March 4, 1881, the Maine Shore Line Railroad Company was formed with the plan to construct tracks from Brewer Junction, near Bangor, to the coast. Towns along the way stood to reap some of the benefits of the new passenger rail service and in February 1883, Ellsworth voters pledged \$10,000 to the Maine Shore Line Railroad while Bangor voters pledged \$20,000. In March 1883, a survey of the land between Brewer and Ellsworth was commissioned. J. A. Ruel, an engineer from St. John, New Brunswick, was hired to determine the best possible rail line route. Workers began to grade the land in May 1883 and the first freight cars were using the tracks by the end of the year.²

In 1884, a 41.3-mile line of track was built by Colonel John M. Green with the financial backing of the Maine Central Railroad between Brewer Junction and South Hancock, also known as Mount Desert Ferry.³ Ferry terminals were constructed at both Mount Desert Ferry in Hancock and in Bar Harbor, and by 1884, the route was carrying passengers by train to the terminus in Hancock where they would transfer to a steamship for the 8.1-mile crossing to Bar Harbor. Up to this time, Maine Central Railroad has leased the Maine Shore Line Railroad, but in 1888, Maine Central

Railroad permanently acquired the shore line and in 1905 also acquired the Mt. Desert & Machias Steamboat Company.⁴

The Bar Harbor Express made its inaugural run from Boston to Mount Desert Ferry on June 29, 1885 as a summertime-only train.⁵ In its first few years of service, it ran northbound on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday and southbound on Tuesday, Thursday, and Sunday. There was no Saturday service because the social calendar mandated that if you were already on Mount Desert Island on a Saturday, you would want to stay the entire week. In the first year of operation of the Express, passengers changed trains at Bangor. This step was later made unnecessary and one could ride from points south all the way to Hancock directly.

In 1887, Maine Central Railroad announced that the Bar Harbor Express would be upgraded to a “limited” train. This meant that the number of stops would be reduced, cutting down on overall travel time. New technology that allowed track water pans to be carried at three points on the train meant the steam engines could take on additional water “on the run.”⁶ Also, new engines were used and lighter Pullman cars were introduced, making for a faster trip from Boston to Mount Desert Island. In fact, the Bar Harbor Express was the fastest express train in the United States at the time. The route expanded to New York’s Grand Central Station in 1900 and to Philadelphia’s Broad Street Station in 1917.⁷ Eventually, the Bar Harbor Express stopped in Worcester, Massachusetts rather than Boston, due to the lack of a convenient connection between Boston’s North and South Stations. In 1917, the opening of the Hell Gate Bridge across the East River in New York City allowed for even faster, more direct service for the Bar Harbor Express. Now, it was possible to board the train as far south as Washington, D.C. in the evening and make it to the Island by mid-morning of the next day.⁸

The first steamship to transport rail passengers from Hancock to Bar Harbor was the *Sebanoa*, built in Bath, Maine in 1880 by the Eastern Steamship Company. The *Sebanoa* hauled 254 tons of freight and 12,299 passengers in 1885, generating \$27,621 in revenue that year.⁹ In 1886, the 149-foot steamship *Sappho* was added to the Maine Shore Line’s fleet. As the ferry service continued to thrive, stops were added in Seal Harbor, Northeast Harbor, Southwest Harbor, and Manset.

As the popularity of the Bar Harbor Express and the ferry service increased, so did the size and power of the steamships. In 1911, the 185-foot, 2350-horsepower steamship *Moosehead* was built at Bath; she was described as a “luxury liner” and matched the elegance of the train and the homes now dotting the Mount Desert landscape. The last vessel of the fleet was the *Rangeley*, also built in Bath, in 1913.



The Mount Desert Ferry station.
Courtesy of the Hancock Historical Society

The trains themselves were elegant and comfortable. The *Mount Desert Herald* described the cars in 1884 as “Perfect beauties, being finished on the inside in blue and gold, the curtains and seats and all the cloth trimming being of a beautiful blue and the woodwork carved prettily and gilded [*sic*]. Electric buttons between each window call the porter to each seat, there being room for thirty in the car. A charming compartment in one end of the car allows the gentlemen to smoke. . . . The ceilings of the cars are stained in imitation mother-of-pearl.”¹⁰

A Pullman Palace Car Company brochure from 1887 describes the “Mt. Desert Limited” as uniquely elegant, noting that,

Carriages of a train are rendered like the room of a dwelling . . . without a suggestion that there is such a condition as out-of-doors, except that received by a glance towards windows. . . . By this contrivance all the effects of rushing winds, draughts, sand clouds, rain, and snow pelting . . . are absolutely annihilated . . . and ladies may make social calls or wander at will. . . . Not only in the direction of the personal comfort and pleasure of the passengers have these innovations been productive of good results, but the safety of the train has been greatly enhanced as well.¹¹

The train initially consisted of five cars of seventy feet in length each. In 1906, Maine Central Railroad introduced dining cars between Portland and Mount Desert Ferry. Northbound trains served breakfast and lunch; southbound trains served lunch and dinner. From 1906 until 1916, breakfast and dinner each cost \$1.00 and the meals were advertised as “the best of which the season affords.” In 1917, the cost of dinner was increased to \$1.25 and in 1921, to \$1.50. In 1922, for the first time, breakfast and dinner were served “table d’hote,” also known as “prix fixe.” A June 1930 advertisement for the Bar Harbor Express said the trains “carry the vacationist in pleasant luxury. . . . The sleepers have large toilet-rooms, electric lights, fans and berth lights. You’ll enjoy restful slumber and you’ll arrive at your destination in vacation mood.”¹²

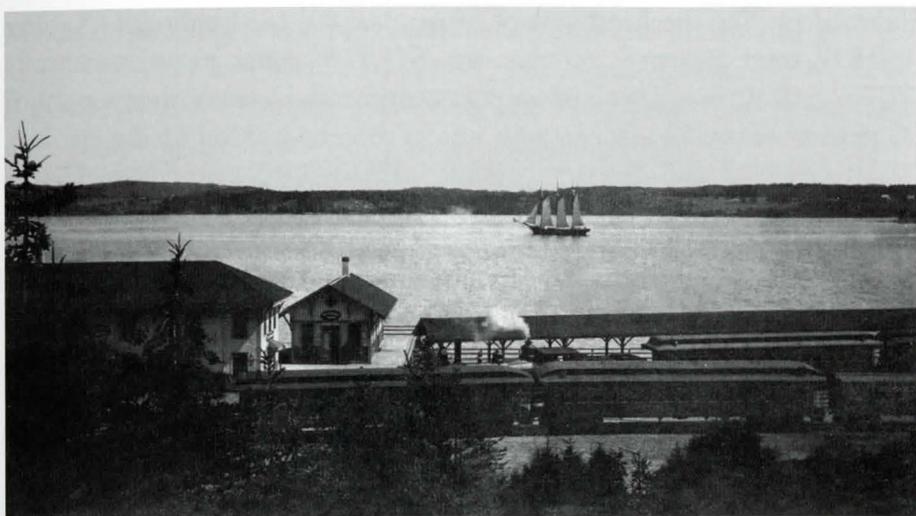
Thus the Bar Harbor Express was the transportation option of choice for wealthy families traveling to Mount Desert Island. The train even featured special accommodations for servants, and it was not uncommon for wealthy families to have their own private Pullman cars pulled to Mount Desert Ferry.¹³ In 1888, the Vanderbilts brought their private train car to Mount Desert Ferry on the Bar Harbor Express, but since the car was over seventy-three feet long, it had to be taken all the way back to Newport, Rhode Island in order to turn it around so that it faced the right way for the eventual trip home. In August 1889, President Benjamin Harrison arrived at Mount Desert Ferry by a special Bar Harbor Express train and the *Mount Desert Herald* recounted the large crowd that cheered him upon his arrival. President Harrison was the first of numerous leaders who rode the Bar Harbor Express. In 1894, Vice-President Adlai Stevenson also rode the train and took the ferry to get to Mount Desert Island.

In their 1966 book *The Trains We Rode*, Lucius Beebe and Charles Clegg wrote,

What *The Blue Train* was to traffic between Paris and Monte Carlo in the E. Phillips Oppenheimer years of the Russian grand dukes, and what *The Florida Special* over the rails of the Florida East Coast was to Palm Beach before the coming of the planes, *The Bar Harbor Express* was to the Maine summer resort on a stern and rockbound coast. . . . Pullmans on the Mount Desert ferry run were as prestigious as custom-built Rolls-Royces would be at a later date. . . . [T]he Bar Harbor Express [was] the most deluxe of all New England trains. . . . [I]t left Broad Street (in Philadelphia) at three in the afternoon, an hour convenient for E.T. Stotesbury and A. Atwater Kent (both of whom owned summer estates in Bar Harbor) to finish luncheon at the Philadelphia Club and sign a few important papers before getting away from it all for the weekend.¹⁴

But it was not only the wealthy who rode trains to get to the ferries serving Mount Desert Island. The Maine Central Railroad often ran cars over the same tracks used by the Bar Harbor Express, allowing Mainers of all socioeconomic classes to spend the day on Mount Desert Island. The “excursion trains” often ran after the majority of wealthy summer residents had departed for the season and could carry up to one thousand people, who would then fill the streets of Bar Harbor. Deane Spurling Whitney, writing on the history on the Maine Shore Line Railroad, notes that the “policemen were kept busy on such days,” but he does not provide any specific reasons for why this may have been the case.¹⁵

In addition to carrying people, the rail line supported freight—lumber, in particular. In 1895, an official for the Maine Central Railroad told the *Bar Harbor Record* that “more lumber came to Bar Harbor than to any other place of its size in the state.”¹⁶ During the summer months, the train carried a refrigerator car that transported perishables such as fish, meat, and butter. The refrigerator car made several stops between Bangor and Mount Desert ferry and brought access to fresh, perishable food to residents along the way.



Mount Desert Ferry viewed from The Bluffs Hotel. *Courtesy of the Hancock Historical Society*

The opening of the Mount Desert Ferry also brought substantial business and commerce to Hancock. In 1871, the *Maine Register* lists no hotels or restaurants in the town, but in 1887, four hotels are operating there, including the Crabtree House, the Tarrenteene House, and the Robinson House. Notably, the Maine Central Railroad opened and operated its own hotel for Ferry passengers; the Bluffs at Mount Desert Ferry opened in 1895 with more than three hundred rooms.¹⁷ Kate Grant operated a tearoom at the Ferry and Freeman Grant opened a store of “groceries and confectionary” at the site in 1903. By 1910, two additional stores, operated by R.W Grant and I.H. Foss, served passengers at Mount Desert Ferry.¹⁸

The ferry terminal itself housed a large and elegant waiting room with an open fireplace graced by an oak mantel and brass andirons. Black walnut armchairs and settees provided comfortable seating. There were stained glass windows and chandeliers for light. An entire community arose around the business brought to Hancock by the Mount Desert Ferry terminal—even a school. The Mount Desert Ferry Schoolhouse was built in 1887; sold in the early 1950s, it was eventually torn down.¹⁹ Due both to the comfort and elegance of the trains and the demand for travel to and from Mount Desert Island, the numbers of passengers on the Mount Desert branch of the Maine Central Railroad were far higher than on any other branch. According to the Annual Reports to the Stockholders of the Maine Central

Railroad, during the fiscal year of September 30, 1891 through October 1, 1892 total passenger revenue was \$71,718, equal to approximately \$1,767,549.92 in today's economy! Passenger revenue accounted for about 37 percent of overall income, with freight revenue making up the rest.²⁰

Although the Bar Harbor Express was generally a safe way to travel, there were notable accidents. The most serious tragedy occurred on August 6, 1899. The fleet of the Northeast Atlantic Squadron, fresh out of victory in the Spanish American War, was visiting Bar Harbor. Many visitors arrived at Mount Desert Ferry to make the trip by steamboat across to the town. Parades, picnics, and other festivities were planned to celebrate the arrival of the Squadron. The Maine Central Railroad added an additional engine to pull the eleven passenger coaches arriving at the Ferry. Rumors were circulating on the train that the steamboat *Sappho* was too small to accommodate everyone. As a result, many passengers rushed off the train and onto the pier that led to the *Sappho*.

Ferry officials quickly realized that there were too many passengers for the ferry to safely accommodate and they attempted to cordon off the pier. But it was too late. Within minutes, the slip that led from the pier to the *Sappho* was crammed with women, men, and children and was slanting downwards towards the boat at approximately a twenty-five-degree angle. Reports tell of a sudden and very loud crack, as if from a canon, and the slip broke into pieces. As many as two hundred people were on the slip at the time and many of them instantly fell into the cold water below. Those in the water were pinned in on three sides by the pier pilings and on the fourth by the boat itself. People on shore began throwing ropes and other objects to try to help those in the water. Some brave onlookers dove in to try to rescue others. The people in the water were so tightly packed that it was difficult to move or swim, even if they knew how. There were reports of people clinging to others and taking them underwater in the process. In the end, twenty were dead and countless others were traumatized.²¹

There were other mishaps involving the Bar Harbor Express that were not so serious. In 1915, Mr. Marston, the train's conductor, arrived at Mount Desert Ferry to find a number of Maxwell Roadster automobiles on the dock, awaiting transport to Sullivan and Sorrento where buyers were waiting. Intrigued, the train crew was looking over the cars and Mr.

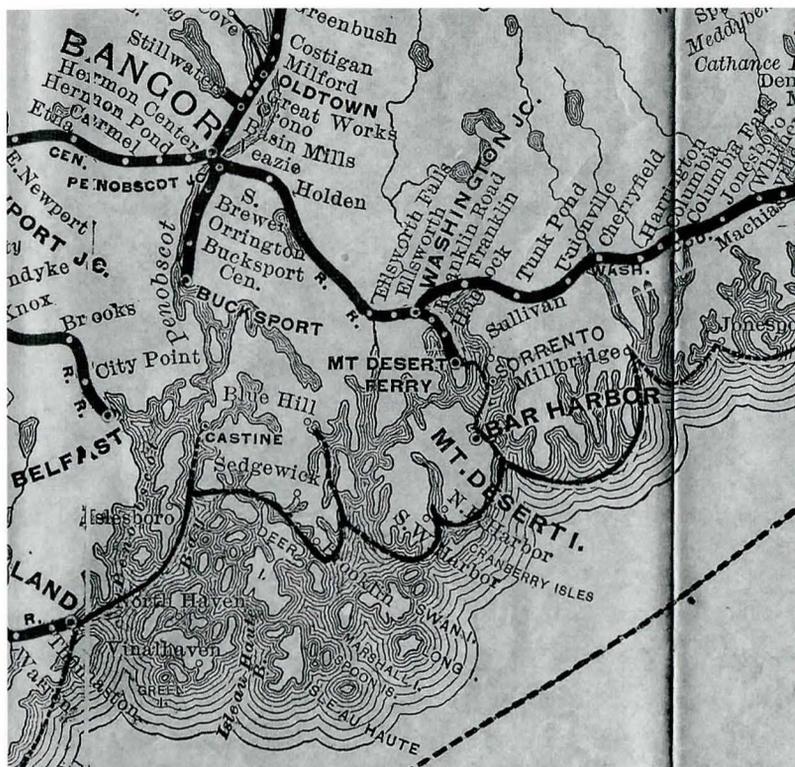
Marston “playfully seized the crank handle of one of them, and gave it a turn.”²² The car had been inadvertently left in gear and started to move. It bounced down the pier and rolled into Frenchman Bay. It was later recovered, at great expense, by Maine Central Railroad.

Just as the Maine Central Railroad was launching what would be its last two steamers, the *Moosehead* and the *Rangeley*, new laws on Mount Desert Island changed the course of history for the Maine Shore Line and the Bar Harbor Express. For the first time, cars were allowed on Mount Desert Island, although only in Bar Harbor. (It was still another eighteen years before the causeway opened to more easily allow automobile traffic to the Island.) But World War I also had a negative impact on the Maine Shore Line traffic. The S.S. *Moosehead* was taken into government service and would never return to the Maine Central Railroad. Then, in 1919, John D. Rockefeller brought his summer party of guests from New York to Mount Desert in five automobiles, marking a definitive change in transportation choices for the wealthy summer residents of the Island.²³

Throughout the 1920s, there was a steady decline in Maine Shore Line passengers and revenue. In 1924, ferry service to Seal Harbor, Northeast Harbor, and Southwest Harbor was discontinued. In 1925, the first of many train schedule cutbacks was instituted. In June of that year, Mr. D.C. Douglas, the Vice-President and General Manager of the Maine Central Railroad, gave an address to the Bar Harbor Board of Trade. He discussed the fact that passenger and freight numbers had declined steadily. He said that it was a “very remote possibility” that Bar Harbor train service would be discontinued.²⁴

Also in 1925, the Public Utilities Commission of Maine took applications to operate a motor coach between Ellsworth and Bar Harbor. Taking the train to Ellsworth, then riding a motor coach for the last twenty miles to Bar Harbor, was far faster than taking the train to Mount Desert Ferry and crossing Frenchman Bay by steamship. It seems, though—rather poignantly—that the public continued to believe there would always be train and ferry service to Mount Desert Island. On June 13, 1928, an editorial in the *Bar Harbor Times* said, “The Frenchman’s Bay boat service is a much less important thing now than it was in 1914, but it still fulfills a definite function and will be continued. There is one feature of the route

that will never change; it will always be a beautiful scenic route to Mount Desert Island and that alone will probably keep it in existence.”²⁵



Map of "Boston and Maine Railroad and Connections," ca. 1920.
Collection of the Mount Desert Island Historical Society

By 1930, there was only one steamer left in the Maine Central Railroad's fleet, the *Pemaquid*. In April 1931, she was hauled out in Rockland for maintenance and for three weeks there was no steamship service between Mount Desert Ferry and the Island for the first time since 1884. During World War II, from 1942 until 1945, train service was suspended to Hancock Point, then resumed a six-day per week schedule in 1946. But very quickly, in 1947, the service was cut to three days per week. In the early 1950s, service was cut to two days per week and then to weekends only by the mid-fifties.²⁶ Although the Bar Harbor Express did continue to offer passenger service until 1960, the train now stopped in Ellsworth and passengers were driven to Mount Desert by motor coaches operated by the Maine Central Railroad.

On Labor Day, 1960, the Bar Harbor Express made its final run from Ellsworth to New York. It simply was no longer profitable for Maine Central Railroad to operate the route. But as late as 1967, the Railroad was still discussing the loss of the Express and its impact on both the environment and the economy. E. Spencer Miller, the President of Maine Central Railroad, stated the following:

In common with many others who look into the future, I see a time when, in large sections of the country, the highways are going to become glutted and the great attraction of moving freight over them in single vehicles, or moving passengers over them with one or two people being carried in a vehicle powered by an internal combustion engine, is going to become non-existent and may even become limited by imposition of law. . . . One train operating into a metropolitan area could easily accommodate 800 to 1,000 people and therefore supplant somewhere between 500 and 1,000 automobiles, eliminating all of the congestion and all of the air pollution which they cause. We of the Maine Central believe that those things are going to happen and our state of mind is simply this: we are preparing them in the planning stages and thinking about this. We went out of the passenger business pursuant to public desire as evidenced by the fact that each of our trains by 1960 was handling less than half a bus load. We are willing and anxious to get back into that business when the pendulum swings to such an extent that it will be the desire of the people once again to have the comforts and reliability of passenger train service, in addition to the great public need to eliminate the uneconomic expense of super highways, and the pollution of the air which a multiplication of vehicles on them necessarily produces.²⁷

Almost anyone driving to Mount Desert Island in the summer months now will confirm that many of Mr. Miller's predictions came true. The traffic can back up for miles and road congestion is a serious issue for residents and visitors to the Island. However, the pendulum has yet to swing back to a time when there is popular demand for elegant rail service. Passenger train service has made a very slight come back in Maine, but only

as far up the coast as Rockland. It seems that, at least for now, the days of the Bar Harbor Express will mark the only time that visitors to Mount Desert Island could enjoy this relaxing and elegant travel option.

Notes

- ¹ "A Brief History of the Maine Shore Line Railroad/The Maine Central Railroad Bar Harbor Branch, Now the Home of the Downeast Scenic Railroad," accessed on January 12, 2013, <http://www.downeastscenicrail.org/ride/about/history/>.
- ² Michael W. Zimmerman, *The Sunrise Route* (Brewer, ME: Cay-Bel Publishing Company, 1985), 74.
- ³ John P. Ascher, *When the Maine Central Railroad Went To Sea* (Farragut, TN: M.J.A., Inc., 1993), 82.
- ⁴ Peters L. Bradley, *Maine Central Railroad Company: A Story of Success and Independence* (Portland, ME: Maine Central Railroad, 1976), 14-15.
- ⁵ Roger Buetter, "The Bar Harbor Express," *Yankee Magazine*, August 1967, 140.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ Ascher, *Railroad Went To Sea*, 99.
- ⁸ Buetter, "The Bar Harbor Express," 142.
- ⁹ Ascher, *Railroad Went To Sea*, 83.
- ¹⁰ Deane Spurling Whitney, "A History of the Maine Shore Line Railroad" (Masters diss., University of Maine, 1961).
- ¹¹ Ascher, *Railroad Went To Sea*, 96.
- ¹² Sanford Phippen, ed., *The Sun Never Sets on Hancock Point, Volume 1* (Hancock, ME: Historical Society of Hancock, 2000), 158.
- ¹³ Ascher, *Railroad Went To Sea*, 101.
- ¹⁴ Phippen, ed., *The Sun Never Sets*, 155.
- ¹⁵ Whitney, "A History of the Maine Shore Line Railroad," 81.
- ¹⁶ Whitney, "A History of the Maine Shore Line Railroad," 83.
- ¹⁷ Joseph P. Schwieterman, *When the Railroad Leaves Town: American Communities in the Age of Rail Line* (Truman, MO: Truman State University Press, 2002), 105.
- ¹⁸ Sesquicentennial Committee of the Town of Hancock, Maine, *A History of the Town of Hancock 1828-1978* (Hancock, ME: Downeast Graphics, 1978), 160-61.
- ¹⁹ Sesquicentennial Committee, *A History of the Town of Hancock*, 175.
- ²⁰ Whitney, "A History of the Maine Shore Line Railroad," 86.
- ²¹ Nan Lincoln, "That Terrible Day at Hancock Point," *Ellsworth American*, December 28, 2000.
- ²² Roger Buetter, "The Bar Harbor Express," *Yankee Magazine*, August 1967, 145.
- ²³ Deane Spurling Whitney, "A History of the Maine Shore Line Railroad" (Masters diss., University of Maine, 1961), 106.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 107.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 108.
- ²⁶ Sanford Phippen, ed., *The Sun Never Sets on Hancock Point, Volume 1* (Hancock, ME: Historical Society of Hancock, 2000), 158.
- ²⁷ Roger Buetter, "The Bar Harbor Express," *Yankee Magazine*, August 1967, 146.