

Chebacco

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the Mount Desert Island Historical Society

HARBORING RELIGION: MISSIONARIES,
CONVERTS, AND SOJOURNERS

Volume XX 2019

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Volume XX
HARBORING RELIGION:
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We would also like to acknowledge the Southwest Harbor Public Library Digital Archive and the assistance of Charlotte Morrill and George Soules in obtaining many of the historical photographs that illustrate this issue.

A close-up photograph of a stained glass window. The window is set in a dark wooden frame. The glass features a geometric, Art Deco-style design. On the left side, there are clusters of red circles, possibly representing grapes, with green leaves. To the right, there are vertical bands of light blue and white glass, separated by dark lines that form a stylized, leaf-like pattern. The overall design is symmetrical and decorative.

Detail of south
wall window,
ca. 1916, artist
unknown. *Sz.
Edward's Convent,
Bar Harbor (currently
the Bar Harbor
Historical Society)*

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"Martha and Mary,"
1904, Reynolds,
Francis & Rohnstock,
Boston. *Church of Our
Father, Hulls Cove*

Introduction

By R. Marie Griffith and Leigh E. Schmidt

At the Baptist Church in Seal Cove in 2016, a "missionary evangelist" from Texas had posted a card on a signboard outside the meetinghouse detailing some "FACTS ABOUT MAINE" that made apparent why he considered his transplanted ministry to be both so crucial and so challenging: "The least religious State in the nation ... 48th in concern for God and the Bible." Recent survey data, from both Pew and Gallup, certainly gives credence to the evangelist's estimates of the state's irreligion. While Vermont usually comes out on top as the state where religion figures least prominently in people's lives, Maine certainly holds its own along with New Hampshire in helping to mark northern New England as the least religious region in the country. About half the people in the state seldom or never attend a religious service; most Mainers rarely bother to read scripture; and fewer still join a Bible study or prayer group. Those without any religious affiliation at all now constitute a larger block (31%) than those who still identify with one of the two next largest groups, mainline Protestants (21%) and Roman Catholics (21%). For enterprising evangelists in the twenty-first century, Maine can still look like a forbidding missionary field — much as it did to Catholics and Protestants assessing the reaches of the North American colonial landscape

in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹

A reputation for irreligion can obscure a lot of things, not least the opposing reactions that the ostensible absence of religious involvement generates. As in the case of the missionary evangelist from Texas, the perceived prevalence of religious indifference regularly becomes a powerful motivation to redouble efforts to awaken those who slumber. In one Protestant narrative after another in American religious history, the lack of interest in religion serves as the prologue to revival, a primary incitement to pursue sundry projects of redemption, conversion, and moral reform. Hence, the religious life of a place is often made all the more varied and strenuous through the very specter of irreligion. That dynamic has been on display in much of Maine's religious history, including on the island. To take one example: at a meeting of the Mount Desert Temperance Society in 1832, a Baptist preacher bemoaned the rum-soaked infidelity that he saw all around him in coastal Maine. "Everything that floats upon the sea," he concluded, was a perfect school for "making drunkards," but that only meant that "the *cold water* folks" needed to work all the harder for the righteousness of their cause.² So it goes: missionaries and converts have recurrently tried to remake the island's social and moral terrain in Christian terms, while various other inhabitants and sojourners have met those projects with indifference, resistance, or recalibration. From Wabanakis negotiating their way between French Jesuits and English Protestants to Jews struggling against the exclusiveness of summering Protestants or spiritual seekers hallowing Acadia's landscape on New Age terms, Christian

endeavors have always been only part of the story. Equally partial, though, has been any story about religion's marginality in the region's past and present.

Maine was a missionary and frontier borderland through the eighteenth century. A conflict-ridden contact zone of British and French empires, the region was only slowly incorporated into New England's orbit as the eastern fringe of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The arc of that colonial history shaped the early religious history of the region: the initial jostling of Wabanakis, French Catholics, and English Protestants gave way, officially at least, to a Congregational establishment, an inheritance of the standing order in Massachusetts. In the District of Maine, though, the Congregational way never had the same authority as it did in Boston or New Haven. Certainly, Congregationalists had a significant head start on other church groups in the region (thirty-eight of fifty-four churches in Maine in 1780 were Congregationalist; the Quakers were second with six meetings). Over the next generation, however, that denominational environment changed dramatically in Maine as it did elsewhere in the country with the sweeping growth of the Baptists and Methodists. Hancock County mirrored, in miniature, that larger transformation across the region and the nation: six of seven churches were Congregationalist in 1800; by 1820, twenty-seven out of thirty-six were Baptist and Methodist. The swelling ascent of evangelicalism in the early republic came to Mount Desert just as it did every corner of the country. By the 1820s and 1830s, wondrous accounts of revival meetings dominated religious news from the island. In the fully conventional vernacular of evangelical awakenings, the King of Glory was pouring out his Spirit on the island's townships. Among Mount Desert's claims to

fame in these evangelical circles was that the celebrated Methodist Bishop David Wasgatt Clark had come of age among a small knot of Methodists on Beech Hill in the 1820s. By the middle decades of the nineteenth century, the island had been woven into a grand Protestant history of the advancing work of redemption.³

After the Civil War Congregationalists, Baptists, and Methodists were still plentiful on the island, but another note had crept into news coverage, even in the religious periodicals formerly so enamored of accounts of revival meetings. A column from August 1869 in the *Christian Mirror*, a Congregationalist newspaper in Portland, contained a single line of news about the island: "About 250 pleasure tourists landed at Mount Desert during the week ending July 10th." A couple of years earlier, the same paper recommended *Mount Desert on the Coast of Maine*, an "unpretending little pamphlet of 36 pages," designed "for tourists" as a "convenient guide and companion" to the "points of interest in this resort, the fame of which is fast extending." Bar Harbor was bursting with new hotels by 1870, and the island was blossoming as a summer retreat for the prosperous and well-connected. This fundamental shift in the island's economy toward Gilded Age travel and leisure massively affected the religious culture of the island as well. A number of more genteel church edifices arose in Bar Harbor, and a whole new



North wall window, 1986, Nancy O'Neal. *Beth Abraham Orthodox Synagogue, Bangor*

denominational presence was built through the development of several Episcopal parishes from the 1870s through the 1910s. Mount Desert was now held up as a place for ministers to go in the summer to relax and recuperate while attending to the modest religious needs of their vacationing flocks. "Mount Desert is attractive to ministers," the *Christian Register* reported from Boston in 1871. "It has a grand tonic for exhausted nerves and brain; and while our ministers are breathing in the ocean's might, it is well for them ... to keep their hand in the work." While there were still local revivals (and would be more once Pentecostalism came to the island in the next century), they were no longer what caught the eye of cosmopolitan editors. The island was now of interest because it had been incorporated into a new gospel of recreation, healthfulness, and the outdoors. Those new religious blessings would then be sealed in the spiritualized renderings of America's national parks, with Acadia as a prime exemplar.⁴

The religious history of Mount Desert Island is rich and complex, hardly to be contained fully in one collection of essays, however full and wide-ranging. Necessarily unable to cover the waterfront, this assemblage is nonetheless broad and diverse in its scope. Laura Chmielewski opens this volume by illuminating the colonial world of religious encounter in which French Jesuits vied with English Protestant emissaries in a fraught landscape of mission and empire. Within that combative environment, Chmielewski suggests, cooperation and courtesy were hardly impossible across the Protestant-Catholic divide; in fact, surprisingly friendly estimates of Christian rivals emerged in the Maine borderlands where interreligious associations were commonplace. James O'Toole examines how early twentieth-century

Catholics looked back on that colonial Jesuit history in Maine to make a case for their primacy in the region's religious history. Celebrating the three hundredth anniversary of 1613, when the first Mass ever performed in Maine took place on Fernald's Point and the ill-fated French settlement of Saint Sauveur began (and quickly ended), Bishop Louis Sebastian Walsh gathered Catholic dignitaries to Bar Harbor, including even an apostolic delegate sent by the Vatican to represent Pope Pius X. Both of these essays offer a forceful reminder at the outset of the considerable lengths to which European missionaries, settlers, and their descendants went to claim the island on Christian terms and at the expense of its indigenous inhabitants, the Wabanakis.

Margaret Bendroth next tells of the difficulties faced by New England's Puritan progeny, those who built up a Congregational heritage on Mount Desert beginning in 1792. Their story is driven by the laypeople, women and men alike, who innovated in remarkable ways when they confronted challenges such as clergy shortages, theological disagreements, and bitter splits, the results of which remain visible in the island's numerous and often very different Congregational churches. Brittany Goetting chronicles the Baptist revivals that occurred on the island in the early republic as part of a national upsurge in evangelical Protestantism, often referred to as the Second Great Awakening. Her



South wall pictorial window, ca. 1916, artist unknown. *St. Edward's Convent, Bar Harbor*



"Nativity," ca. 1908,
Mayer & Company,
Germany (now Franz
Mayer of Munich, Inc.).
*Holy Redeemer Catholic
Church, Bar Harbor*

narrative attends closely to the rich array of benevolent organizations that flourished amid the Baptist impulse to do God's work in the world, societies focused especially on missions, temperance, and religious education. Mark Silk tells the fascinating tale of the nineteenth-century African-American evangelist William Foy, in Silk's view likely the most significant religious figure ever to live in Hancock County. A highly formative influence on Ellen White, who later founded the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Foy settled in Otter Creek as a Freewill Baptist minister and later in Sullivan, where he became "one of the local fixtures" and "a pillar of local religion" until his death in 1892.

Our travels through the island's religious history continue with David Hollinger's searching inquiry into Charles Eliot's classic 1899 book, *John Gilley of Baker's Island*, a text that imbued Gilley with the self-sufficiency and simple virtues that summering rusticators yearned to find in the island's hardscrabble local citizenry. The Harvard president's portrayal, meant to rescue "one of the forgotten millions" from historical obscurity, sought to remind the urban elite of the frugal, industrious, close-to-nature souls who had sustained the early nation and who embodied its time-tested values amid the industrializing, frontier-waning fluctuations of the late Victorian era. Next, Tim Garrity takes his inspiration from a mysterious set of initials carved into a granite slab

near Seawall; working outward from that artifact, he discloses the moving story of George Henry Hefflon, the minister of the Southwest Harbor Congregational Church at the end of the nineteenth century. Hefflon would eventually settle elsewhere and develop a substantial ministry serving the Deaf, but he later returned to Mount Desert — "Happy Memories!" he wrote poignantly in his diary — and was fondly remembered by his island parishioners.

Returning to the "summer people," Mikeal Parsons chronicles the friendships nourished on the island among the Jewish philanthropist Jacob Schiff, Harvard's President Eliot (a Unitarian), and two Baptist biblical scholars at Harvard, Crawford Howell Toy and David Lyon. Among the most visible and enduring results of those summer friendships was the creation of the Semitic Museum at Harvard, an institution designed to study ancient Near Eastern civilizations and also, especially in Schiff's view, to stand against the long history of European and American anti-Semitism. This particular alliance between Schiff and a handful of liberal Protestants was a hopeful sign of interfaith collaboration, but still a relatively small one in the larger culture of the time. Anti-Semitism remained a reality among the elite white Protestant summer residents of Mount Desert, Judith Goldstein reminds us, even as the Ku Klux Klan flourished locally. Her narrative follows three leading figures of the American Eugenics Society, including the founder of the Jackson Laboratory, all of whom spent significant time on the island, took Anglo-Saxon superiority as a given, and hoped to preserve the island as "a refuge from diversity."

The Episcopalians next enter the scene in Craig Townsend's rendering of the denomination's scattered missions across Mount Desert Island, including their

spread onto nearby Gott's Island. The story on Gott's Island is a reminder of the disruptive potential of denominational competition as the new Episcopalian presence unsettled the Methodist community, hitherto the lone church on this sparsely populated island — an ecclesial divide that then led to wider conflicts. Thomas Bremer brings Acadia National Park into focus as a place where millions of visitors and sojourners have experienced a sense of wonder and awe, a feeling that many interpret in spiritual or religious terms. The lens here is trained on a variety of ritualized tourist activities and religious programs within the park, from Protestant worship services held on Sundays during peak tourist season to a program called "The Spirit of Acadia" that paid homage to Acadia's inspiring landscape during the park's centennial in 2016, and even to the ritual of experiencing a sunrise atop Cadillac Mountain. Finally, Brook Wilensky-Lanford recounts the history of three groups that are part of the manifold expressions of Buddhism on the island: the Whole Health Center, the Kanzeon Zen Center, and the True Nature Zen Sangha. Intersecting and at times competing with one another, sometimes flourishing and occasionally faltering, these communities represent a crucial turn in the island's religious history in which new alternatives to Christianity have increasingly opened up over the last four decades.

All of us writing for this issue of *Chebacco* have ties to Mount Desert Island, in one form or another, and love of this place is a connecting thread throughout the essays. We, the co-editors, want to thank all the contributors for their enthusiasm and their excellent work. We also thank Tim

Garrity for inviting us to put this volume together, Jenn Booher for her resplendent photographs, and the excellent staff at the Mount Desert Island Historical Society for careful editing and other assistance. It is our hope that you, our readers, will take as much pleasure as we have in these assorted offerings, deeply researched pieces chronicling a number of engaging stories, which, taken together, help illuminate the surprisingly consequential religious history of this island we all cherish.

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Their Way in a Godly Nation (2016). He is a summer resident of Southwest Harbor.

Acknowledgments: We are grateful to have had this opportunity to edit this special issue of Chebacco and to explore the religious history of Mount Desert Island, a place that means a great deal to us and to our three children: Zach, Ella, and Jasper Schmidt. The colleagues we assembled to work on this with us have been extraordinary — generous, conscientious, and ever insightful — and we extend our warmest appreciation to every contributing writer. Additional thanks to Tim Garrity and Jennifer Steen Booher for their outstanding work on this volume and also to the members of the Mount Desert Island Historical Society who support this publication. We offer a special word of thanks as well to John L. Merrill, a long-time friend, who shared in more than one journey around the island to see what we could discover about the area's religious history.

1. Leigh Schmidt and John Merrill noted the card, announcing the ministry of evangelist Chuck Barnes Sr., at the Seal Cove Baptist Church on September 3, 2016. For the data on Maine's religious life, see <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/state/maine/> for a 2014 survey and <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/state/maine/> for a 2017 survey.

2. James Gillpatrick, *The Nature and Remedy of Intemperance* (Boston: Lincoln and Edmands, 1832), 13.

3. For an excellent overview, including county-by-county tables on church statistics, see Stephen A. Marini, "Religious Revolution in the District of Maine, 1780–1820," in Charles E. Clark, James S. Leamon, and Karen Bowden, eds., *Maine in the Early Republic* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1988), 118–45. For four examples of revival accounts, see "Revivals of Religion," *New-York Observer*, Aug. 2, 1823, 2; "Revival in Mount Desert," *Zion's Advocate*, Jan. 15, 1829, 1; "The Churches in Hancock County," *Christian Mirror*, July 18, 1833, 1; "Revivals," *Boston Recorder*, April 24, 1840, 67. Stories of Bishop Clark's pious island youth were common, especially after the appearance of a glowing biography in 1873 by Daniel Curry, a prominent Methodist editor. See, for example, H.C. Farrar, "The Life-Story of Bishop Clark," *Vermont Christian Messenger*, Feb. 19, 1874, 1. The basic ecclesial outlines of the nineteenth-century Protestant story are captured well in George E. Street's chapter on "Mount Desert Churches" in his *Mount Desert: A History*, ed. Samuel A. Eliot (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Co., 1905), 227–80.

4. "About 250 Pleasure Tourists," *Christian Mirror*, Aug. 10, 1869, 4; "Book Notices," *Christian Mirror*, July 9, 1867, 3; "State Items," *Christian Mirror*, May 24, 1870, 2; "Missionary Work in Eastern Maine," *Christian Register*, Aug. 26, 1871, 3; "Pleasant Retreats," *New-York Observer*, Aug. 3, 1871, 5. For indications of later Pentecostal missions and revivals on the island, see James E. Peters, *Prevailing Westerlies: The Pentecostal Heritage of Maine* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image, 1988), 431–33, 437.



The mission of the Mount Desert Island Historical Society is to foster meaningful engagement with the histories of Mount Desert Island.

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Cover design by Rebecca Hope Woods based on Jennifer Steen Booher's photograph of a stained glass window in Saint Saviour's Church, Bar Harbor.



Chebacco silhouette adapted from a photograph by Len Burgess for the Essex Shipbuilding Museum.

Our magazine, *Chebacco*, is named for a type of boat built in the eighteenth century in Gloucester, Massachusetts and nearby towns. In 1762, Abraham Somes, his wife, and four young daughters sailed in a Chebacco boat to make their home in Somesville and become Mount Desert Island's first permanent Euro-American settlers.

We invite you to voyage through the histories of Mount Desert Island in this contemporary Chebacco.



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