

# Chebacco

The Journal of the Mount Desert Island Historical Society

Volume XXI  
BEFORE 1820

2020  
Mount Desert, Maine

## *Chebacco* Editorial Team

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Please address all inquiries to:

Mount Desert Island Historical Society

P.O. Box 653

Mount Desert, ME 04660

[tim.garrity@mdihistory.org](mailto:tim.garrity@mdihistory.org)

[www.mdihistory.org](http://www.mdihistory.org)

Printed in Newcastle, ME by Lincoln County Publishing Co., Inc.



This map shows the physical terrain of fertile lowlands, rugged uplands, rivers, and lakes inhabited by the Wabanaki and other tribes prior to the arrival of Europeans. By removing political boundaries and emphasizing waterways, the map suggests routes for human travel and networks throughout the region. *Courtesy of College of the Atlantic*

## Introduction

By Eloise Schultz and Tim Garrity

From its founding in 1931, the Mount Desert Island Historical Society has often told a history that begins with a "first," the arrival of Abraham Somes at the head of Somes Sound in 1761, and a "last," a Native sakom who supposedly gave him a deed to local land, written on birch bark. In this telling, the first settler establishes the village of Somesville and the last Indian is never heard from again.

The historian Jean O'Brien studied hundreds of local histories of New England and identified a recurring pattern in founding stories. There is a "genre of local history writing that became crucial in defining Indians out of existence," she wrote. Such local histories, "created a narrative of Indian extinction that has stubbornly remained in the consciousness and unconsciousness of Americans." Hundreds of local histories, stories of "firsting" and "lasting," are preserved in archives throughout New England. Local historical societies like ours had a central role in perpetuating the myth of the vanishing Indian. In 1856, one Connecticut official said, "It is sad to think of all that race who then peopled this region, nothing but tradition now remains."<sup>1</sup>

This historical interpretation has persisted despite contrary evidence. Of her nineteenth-century childhood, Adelma Somes Joy (1837-1930) wrote, "It may be that Indians were here when Abraham Somes came up the Sound and settled at what is now called 'Somesville.' The Indians of the Penobscot Tribe, since I can remember, were always camping around the fresh water ponds."<sup>2</sup>

For this year's issue of *Chebacco*, "Before 1820," we asked our writers to help us understand

Maine as it was prior to statehood. To further our exploration of ways the past has shaped the present, we also commissioned Jennifer Steen Booher's portrait series of Wabanaki scholars, teachers, and artists. Rather than portraying Native Americans as people of the past and descendants of Europeans as people of the present, we feature work that shows Wabanaki people as very much part of a modern world.

The contents of this journal are foregrounded with remarks by the Penobscot Nation Tribal Ambassador, Maulian Dana, to the Maine Statehood and Bicentennial Conference, held at the University of Maine on May 31, 2019. By positioning Dana's remarks at the beginning of this issue, we pose the question of what it means to be "from Maine," to inherit its history, and to have a responsibility for what Dana calls "the effects of that history throughout the generations." As stewards of the histories of Mount Desert Island, we want to center, rather than mask, indigenous presence and persistence on the island. We want to appreciate, as Dana articulates, "the knowledge that we have come so far and have the power to keep going." By honoring the indigenous history of this landscape, and this island, Pesamkuk, we show respect and gratitude for the hundreds of generations that precede us in calling this region home.

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1. Jean O'Brien, *Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians out of Existence in New England* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 2010), xi-xii.

2. Adelma Somes, "Reminiscences of Somesville," ca. 1920-30, Collection of the Mount Desert Island Historical Society.