Chebacco

The Magazine of
the Mount Desert Island Historical Society

HARBORING RELIGION: MISSIONARIES, CONVERTS, AND SOJOURNERS

Volume XX 2019

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HARBORING RELIGION: MISSIONARIES, CONVERTS, AND SOJOURNERS

2019
Mount Desert, Maine

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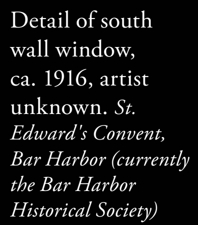

Detail of south wall window, ca. 1916, artist unknown. *St. Edward's Convent, Bar Harbor (currently the Bar Harbor Historical Society)*

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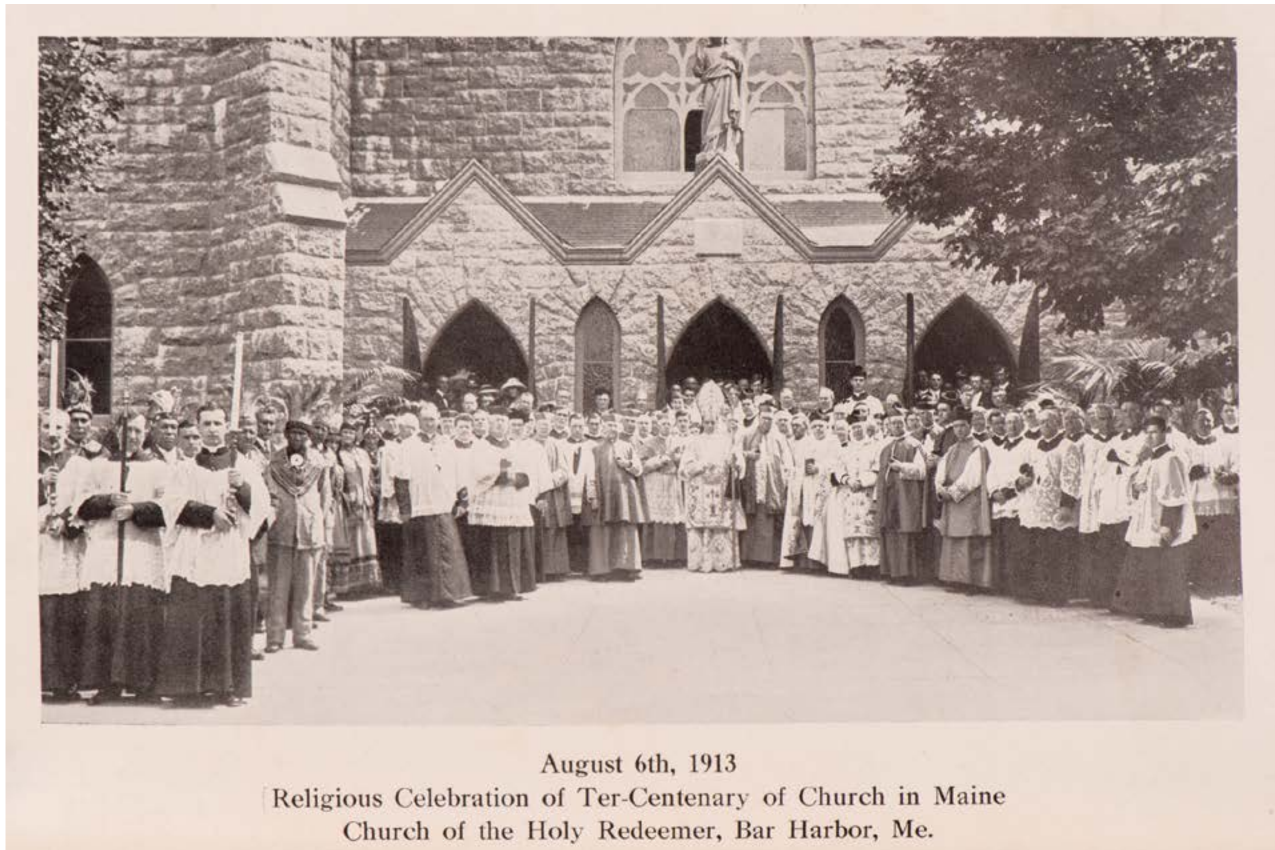
"Ter-Centenary": Inventing Tradition for Maine's Catholics, 1913

By James M. O'Toole

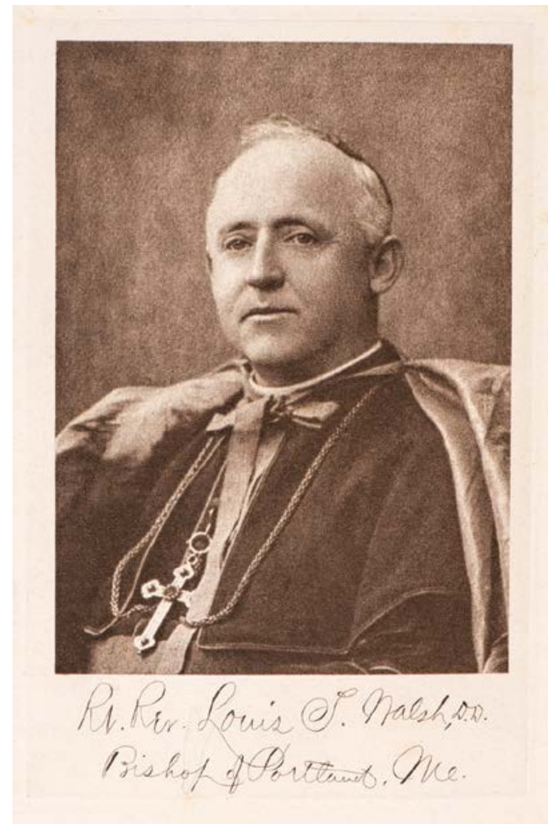


Clergy and laity, including Wabanaki people (at left), celebrate the Ter-Centenary. *Courtesy of the School of Theology and Ministry Library, Boston College*

As spectacles go, this was not the grandest ever, but it was still "a notable one in every respect," said an account, "solemn and inspiring" according to another. The participants had mostly arrived the day before, and on the morning of Wednesday, August 6, they assembled, clad in the elaborate liturgical robes of the Roman Catholic Church. They had come to dedicate a new parish church building and, as a crowd of about one thousand looked on, they began by walking around it in procession, reciting "the prescribed prayers whereby the material edifice is dedicated and sanctified for Divine services." Next, they went inside for a solemn Mass, during which one of the prelates preached for nearly an hour on a text from 1 Corinthians ("God

it is who giveth the increase"). The Mass concluded, a formal banquet began in a nearby hotel, featuring toasts, speeches, and accompanying music. "Though the audience was already well fatigued with the long exercises," an observer commented, "yet they listened most attentively." Then it was back to the church for a service of vespers with a shorter but still substantial sermon and, by the time everything ended at around ten o'clock that night, the "impressive exercises" had been deemed an unalloyed success.[1]

The perhaps unlikely setting for these ceremonies was the town of Bar Harbor on Mount Desert Island, in the summer of 1913. Clergy and laypeople, both locals and seasonal visitors, had assembled to bless the new Holy Redeemer church, built of stone to replace a smaller wooden structure. But the event had been designed to be something more than that, nothing less than a three hundredth anniversary — "ter-centenary" was the awkward word used — of the establishment of the Catholic Church in Maine. The day after the dedication, the notables went over to Fernald's Point on the western shore of Somes Sound, the site (they believed) of a short-lived French colony. There, in 1613, what was described as the first Mass ever said in what later became Maine had been celebrated by a missionary Jesuit. Calling the new church's dedication a three hundredth anniversary skipped over a great deal of intervening history. A substantial Catholic population in Maine was of much more recent vintage. Not until the middle of the nineteenth century were Catholics numerous enough in the state to constitute a noticeable and continuous presence. Largely immigrants from Ireland and French Canada, they and their children had often faced nativist hostility and even violence, recurring signs that they might not be entirely welcome. But the Catholic leaders of 1913, now claiming a sustained heritage that was three centuries old, hoped to make an important point about themselves and their community: theirs was a pedigree at least as long as that of those tempted to view them with suspicion. The tradition they celebrated in 1913 might have been, to some degree, invented for the occasion, but it served the purpose of making a statement about both the past and the present.[2]



Louis S. Walsh served as Bishop of Portland from 1906 to 1924. *Courtesy of the School of Theology and Ministry Library, Boston College*

Organizing and presiding over the ceremonies in Bar Harbor that bright summer day — it was he who delivered

the "interesting, historical and spiritual" morning sermon — was Louis Sebastian Walsh. A native of Salem, Massachusetts, he had studied for the priesthood in Montreal, Paris, and Rome, and after his ordination had returned to America to teach at a newly opened seminary in Boston, later serving as the first superintendent of the city's fledgling parochial school system. In 1906, he was appointed to the position of bishop of Portland, the fourth leader of a diocese that encompassed the entire state. There were about 115,000 Catholics in Maine, roughly 15 percent of the population, most of them concentrated in the cities of Portland, Biddeford, and Lewiston, with others scattered from Fort Kent to the New Hampshire line. In addition to addressing the religious needs of this widely dispersed flock, Walsh also maintained a lifelong interest in history, and he wanted to use the "ter-centenary" to promote interest in it. To this end, he established and published a monthly journal, the *Maine Catholic Historical Magazine*. Besides reporting news of current church events — parish fairs, school graduations, special collections for worthy purposes — the magazine promised to publish "whatever is important in person, fact or document, regarding origin and growth of the Catholic Church in the present state of Maine."[3] In its pages, he hoped, the state's Catholics would discover a usable past, a past of which they could be proud.

He was particularly interested in the French missionaries and colonists who had arrived in small, uncertain expeditions in the seventeenth century. One party of about fifty people, including Fathers Pierre Biard and Énemond Massé, landed on Mount Desert in May 1613 and started to build a settlement, which they called Saint Sauveur (Holy Redeemer). "First they planted a cross," the eminent historian Francis Parkman would say of them, "then they began their labors." Knowledge of the local geography was spotty, and several European rulers had, from afar, claimed the territory as their own. These settlers thought that this part of the New World belonged to them, the gift of Henry IV of France, but within a matter of weeks, other claimants arrived. Captain Samuel Argall from Virginia, bearing the warrant of James I of England, sailed into view at the end of the summer. By September, he had taken Biard and Massé prisoner, destroyed the half-finished colony, and dispersed its inhabitants. The Catholic presence in Maine had ended almost as quickly as it began.[4]

Even so, this was enough of a basis on which Bishop Walsh, three centuries later, could stake his own claim, this one to historical precedence. He might, with reason, have chosen other foundations to commemorate, but there were problems with all of them. There was, for example, another French Jesuit, Sébastien Rasle (sometimes spelled Râle), who worked among Native American tribes near present-day Norridgewock and had been martyred there, falling victim, a later Catholic writer said, "to the hatred of the English for the Catholic faith and their greed for the Abnakis' [sic] territory." But the bicentennial of that sad episode would not come until 1924, and the centennial of a monument to Rasle that was subsequently put up on the spot would not come until 1936 — both dates too far away to be useful. Another possibility, Saint Patrick's church in Newcastle, just outside Damariscotta, was the oldest Catholic church building in New England, and it turned one hundred in 1908. But that left Walsh, who was not installed as bishop until October 1906, too little time to plan any larger festivities around

it. Finally, a brief French settlement on Sainte Croix Island in Passamaquoddy Bay, nine years before Saint Sauveur, would not do either. Its three hundredth anniversary had already come and gone in 1904, before Walsh's arrival in the state.[5] Not wanting to pass up an opportunity to demonstrate the long history of his church in Maine, the bishop settled on Bar Harbor as the site for his celebration.

There was a small Catholic population in the town, "at first composed nearly entirely of maids and men of work" (as Walsh's magazine called them) who came seasonally with well-to-do visitors. The congregation might grow from 350 in the winter to more than 4,000 in the summer. A priest from Ellsworth had begun visiting Mount Desert in the 1870s, and a resident pastor was appointed for the first time in 1881. With the help of wealthy seasonal benefactors, he built a little wooden church on Kebo Street, "just above the Malvern Hotel," and called it Saint Sylvia's. (The mother of one of his patrons was named Sylvia.) It was described as "modest, but inviting." There was "nothing grand about it," a reporter thought; "indeed that was its special charm." By the turn of the century, the pastor was also occasionally saying Mass in little affiliated chapels in Seal Harbor and Northeast Harbor; sometimes he would cross Frenchman Bay to say Mass in private homes in Winter Harbor, "whenever there is a group of people there." Construction of the new stone church on Mount Desert Street in Bar Harbor, to be called Holy Redeemer, had begun in 1906. Finished four years later, it awaited formal dedication as the parish for the entire island and this, together with plans to open an elementary school (staffed by the Sisters of Mercy), confirmed Walsh's intentions to make this the scene of his "ter-centenary."[6]

He announced his program in a letter to all the priests in Maine right before Christmas 1912. Citing a possibility that "Christian Norsemen" had perhaps "knelt before the Cross and Altar and chanted the Kyrie Eleison" as early as the tenth century, he was nonetheless content to claim for his church "only the 300 years" since Saint Sauveur. That "only" spoke volumes. Yankee elites in Maine and elsewhere liked to think of their ancestors as the first European settlers in this corner of North America. A couple of hundred miles to the south in Massachusetts, plans were already well underway to mark, in 1920, another "ter-centenary," that of the arrival of the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock. (Closer to home, 1920 would also bring the centennial of Maine statehood.) Walsh was not so subtly suggesting that those settlers were newcomers and parvenus, that Catholics had in fact been here first. Tensions between the Yankee and Catholic communities had been persistent, and they remained alive, at least in memory, in 1913. In some quarters, Catholic loyalty to the pope (a foreign prince, after all) had been grounds for regarding them as less than reliable American citizens. A priest, Father John Bapst, had been tarred and feathered in Ellsworth in 1854, and some people remained wary of Catholic institutions half a century later. Two years after the Bar Harbor celebration, a representative from the small town of Eliot, Maine, introduced a "convent inspection" bill in the state legislature, authorizing public commissioners to show up, "unannounced," and search any "sectarian seminary, school, or institution" in hopes of exposing the nefarious deeds that were sure to be going on inside.[7] In such a climate, a three-hundred-year Catholic tradition in Maine

The other bishops of New England join Walsh and the papal delegate. *Courtesy of the School of Theology and Ministry Library, Boston College*

neatly trumped the Protestant one in Plymouth, a mere two hundred and ninety-three years old.

The bishop hoped that the anniversary would prompt interest in a variety of historical activities, and he made several suggestions. Sisters in charge of parochial schools throughout the state, for instance, might have their pupils write and stage pageants on the "First Mission of St. Sauveur"; these could be performed as part of graduation exercises. Pastors could devote Sunday sermons to the subject. A "Ter Centenary [sic] Fund" was established to raise money for support of the education of future priests and general "missionary extension in Maine." Besides the ceremony on Mount Desert in August, there would also be a "civic celebration" in Portland in the fall, to which the governor and the mayor, neither of them Catholics, would be invited.[8] All this would broadcast the claim to historical precedence far and wide, but the events in Bar Harbor were to be the principal focus of attention.

An impressive list of dignitaries was assembled for the occasion. Walsh invited the seven other Catholic bishops of New England and, with one exception, they all came. Conspicuously absent was Cardinal William O'Connell of Boston. He and Walsh had maintained frosty relations throughout their careers; O'Connell briefly served as Walsh's predecessor as bishop of Portland, and the latter suspected the former of mismanagement of diocesan accounts. As one of only three cardinals in the American church at the time, O'Connell might well have been expected to be there, but he took the occasion of a convention of the fraternal order, Knights of Columbus, held in Boston at the same time, to stay home. All the other New England bishops were present, led by Matthew Harkins of Providence, the longest serving of them and a personal friend of Walsh. Father James O'Brien, who had been pastor of Saint Sylvia's/Holy Redeemer since 1884, naturally had a prominent role, consulting with the bishop in advance regarding decoration of the church for the ceremony and other matters. Local lay leaders were featured, too, including the regular summer visitor, Edward de Veaux Morrell, a former congressman from Pennsylvania who had married into the prominent Drexel banking family and who donated the property on which a convent for the sisters at the proposed parish school was to be built. (The school, named Saint Edward's in tribute to Morrell, operated from 1915 to 1968.) Leading the list of invitees was Archbishop Giovanni Bonzano, who was the apostolic delegate (effectively though not formally an ambassador) from the Vatican to the United States, and he was there as the personal representative of Pope Pius X. [9]

With this notable cast of supporting characters, Walsh used the celebration to drive home his larger point about the priority of the Catholic stake in New England. His emphasis was evident from the opening words of his morning sermon. "Three hundred years ago today," he began, the intrepid French missionaries had celebrated their precedent-setting Mass. It was curiously precise dating: there was no documentary evidence that Mass had been said, or indeed that anything in particular had happened, on August 6, 1613. Alluding once again to the notional but "hardy Norsemen" who had perhaps been there already, he pushed further back to express his hope that proof would one day be found showing that the legendary explorer, Saint Brendan, had come ashore in the sixth century. But it was the settlers of Saint Sauveur who "established on New England soil" a colony — stretching the

Detail of "Christ the King," ca. 1929, Franz Mayer of Munich, Inc. *Holy Redeemer Catholic Church, Bar Harbor*

facts a little more, he even called it "permanent" — that was "Catholic in name, Catholic in spirit, Catholic in aspirations." He had to acknowledge that the colony had been destroyed, but happily "all is now restored, better than one hundred fold in grandeur. … Am I not right, therefore," he concluded in ringing tones, "in saying that the vision of 1613 in France and on this Island has been more than fulfilled in 1913?"[10]

The celebration had made its point. The civic ceremony that followed in the auditorium of the Portland City Hall in October further underlined the theme. Both Governor William Haines and Mayor Oakley Curtis — Haines would be defeated for reelection by Curtis the following year — praised the good work that the institutions of the church did for the community at large, while another speaker sought to lay to rest any suggestion that Catholics were less than full-blooded Americans. "Fidelity to the teachings of the Catholic church is loyalty to the American Republic," he said. Walsh, who would continue to serve as bishop until his death in May 1924, got the last word. Remembrance of the heroic men of Saint Sauveur had secured for them "a fitting place in the history of the church," marking them as the "advance guards of the Catholic Church and her children, to-day so numerous and so influential both in the religious and civic life of Maine." The conclusion was clear: "if there is any privilege in birthright, there can be no question of our place in Maine."[11]

"Our place." Walsh had built on the short, fragmentary history of the seventeenth century a tradition that was useful to the flock he led in the twentieth. It was now a flock both numerous and influential: politicians, take note. These commemorations of past events were what we today call "public history." They reminded people of the importance of history, but this was not merely history for its own sake. Rather, it was history put to a distinct purpose, using the past to say something significant about the present.

James M. O'Toole holds the Clough Millennium Chair in History at Boston College and is the author of The Faithful: A History of Catholics in America *(2008). He spends part of every summer in Spruce Head, Maine.*

Acknowledgments:
Thanks to Stephen Dalton, head librarian of the School of Theology and Ministry Library at Boston College, and to the anonymous parishioner of Holy Redeemer who showed me through the church during my visit in August 2018.

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1. "The Ter-Centenary Celebration," *Maine Catholic Historical Magazine* 1 no. 3 (September 1913): 33–54; hereafter MCHM. See also "The Catholic Ter-Centenary," *Bar Harbor Record*, August 13, 1913; "Maine's Catholic Ter-Centenary," *Sacred Heart Review*, August 16, 1913; and "North Shore Society Busy with Dances and Dinners," *Washington Post*, August 4, 1913.

2. "August 1913, Diocesan Chronology," *MCHM*: 22–24. See also Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1–14.

3. "Preface," *MCHM* 1 no. 1 (July 1913): 5–6. For Walsh's tenure as bishop, see William Leo Lucey, *The Catholic Church in Maine* (Francestown, NH: Marshall Jones, 1957), 282–326.

4. Parkman's account is in *Pioneers of France in the New World* (Boston: Little Brown, 1910), 300–320. See also Tim Garrity, "The Histories of Saint Sauveur," *Chebacco* 12 (2011): 21–39, and "Real and Imagined France in Acadia National Park," *Chebacco*, 18 (2017): 100–121. Parkman is generally credited with identifying Fernald's Point as the site of Saint Sauveur.

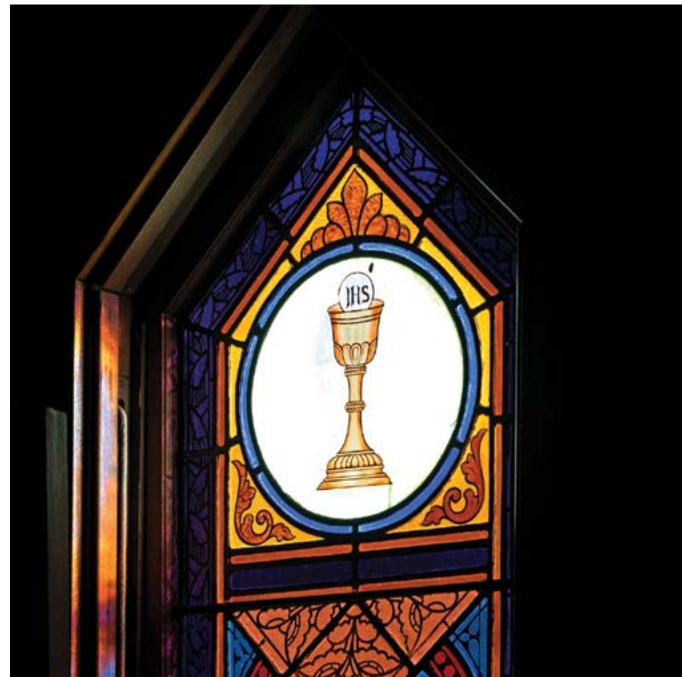
5. See accounts of these other anniversaries in "Ecclesiastical Notes," *Sacred Heart Review*, September 21, 1907, and August 1, 1908; see also Lucey, *Catholic Church in Maine*, 291–293. Walsh did celebrate an anniversary Mass in Saint Patrick's; see "Centenary of New England's Oldest Catholic Church," *Sacred Heart Review*, July 25, 1908. For a brief history of the Sainte Croix settlement, see David Hackett Fischer, *Champlain's Dream* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008), ch. 8.

6. "St. Sylvia," *MCHM* 1 no. 2 (August 1913): 24–28; Vincent A. Lapomarda, *The Catholic Church in the Land of the Holy Cross: A History of the Diocese of Portland, Maine* (Strasbourg: Editions du Signe, 2003), 105. See also "Catholic Church Summer Missions," *MCHM* 6 no.3 (March 1916): 6. The convent for the sisters attached to the school is today the headquarters of the Bar Harbor Historical Society.

7. "Third Centenary of the Catholic Church in Maine," *MCHM* 1 no. 1 (July 1913): 12–14; "Convent Inspection Bill," ibid., 4 no. 3 (March 1915): 18–21; the inspection bill was given "leave to withdraw" in the legislature and never came to a vote. On Bapst, see John T. McGreevy, *American Jesuits and the World: How an Embattled Religious Order Made Modern Catholicism Global* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), ch. 2. On the importance of "being first" in historical commemorations, see David Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), ch. 8. For the reception of immigrants on Mount Desert, see Tim Garrity, "Immigrants in the Borderland, 1880–1920," *Chebacco* 17 (2016): 59–79.

8. "Third Centenary of the Catholic Church in Maine," *MCHM* 1 no. 1 (July 1913): 12–14.

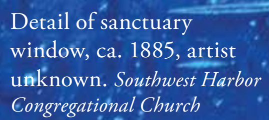
9. On the tensions between Walsh and O'Connell, see James M. O'Toole, *Militant and Triumphant: William Henry O'Connell and the Catholic Church in Boston, 1859–1944* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 53–55 and 195–202. The perfunctory notice that O'Connell's diocesan newspaper gave the Bar Harbor event is in "First Mass in Maine," *Boston Pilot*, August 9, 1913. For some of the advance planning, see Walsh to O'Brien, July 13, 1913, Walsh Papers, Archives, Diocese of Portland.



"Communion," ca. 1904, artist unknown. *St. Ignatius of Loyola Catholic Church, Northeast Harbor*

10. "Sermon on the Ter-Centenary of the Catholic Church in Maine," *MCHM* 1 no. 2 (August 1913): 10–23. The *Bar Harbor Record* (August 13, 1913) apologized to its readers for not printing the entire text of Walsh's sermon, noting that it would take up two full newspaper pages of agate type, contenting itself instead with excerpts.

11. "The Ter-Centenary Civic Celebration," *MCHM* 1 no. 4 (October 1913): 22–23. For a full account of the event, with excerpts of speeches, see "Significant Anniversary Appropriately Observed," *Daily Eastern Argus*, October 13, 1913.



Detail of sanctuary window, ca. 1885, artist unknown. *Southwest Harbor Congregational Church*

Congregationalists on Mount Desert Island, Maine

By Margaret Bendroth

John Winthrop and his crew of weary Puritans got their first scent of land in June, 1630, wafting across the ocean from the hills of Mount Desert Island. After seemingly endless days of spare food, cramped quarters, and cold North Atlantic gales, the fragrance of fir trees was to the tired travelers like "the smell of a garden." They had finally reached New England.[1]

A century and a half later, the descendants of Winthrop's band would return to make an indelible mark on Mount Desert Island. They founded churches and gathered communities, many of which persist to this day. Over the past 200 years or more, the Congregational churches have been integral to community life, both spiritual and social. Though they embody a tradition that goes back to New England's founding, they have weathered constant change, along with the island's people. The Congregational story is one of struggle, endurance, and adaptability.

Of course, Congregational churches on Mount Desert were never completely Puritan. The English settlers who came to Massachusetts Bay in the 1630s and 1640s wanted to run their own affairs, free from outside control by kings and bishops. Though they differed on particulars, the New England churches all upheld one basic principle, the self-sufficiency of individual congregations. By definition, a Congregational church is governed by its members: they choose their minister and have direct say in running church business. Yet in isolated frontier communities, beyond the confines of Massachusetts and Connecticut, local independence was a luxury few could afford. While Congregationalists in Maine might have had more theoretical freedom to run their own affairs, in practical terms, they needed each other's help and support far more.[2]

First Founders

The fifteen laypeople who organized Mount Desert's first Congregational church in 1792 did so largely without benefit of clergy. This was thirty years after Abraham Somes first built his cabin in Somesville, three years after the town of Mount Desert was incorporated. Though Maine's population had been growing rapidly, the population was scattered, poor, and transient. Ministers were few and far between; according to one estimate from 1816, roughly two-thirds of all the churches in Maine had no pastor.[3] Yet those fifteen laypeople still followed standard Puritan practice, drawing up a church covenant that bound them "to the Lord and to each other." In language echoed in churches across southern New England, the small band promised to "renounce the vanities of this present evil world," and "love one another as brethren in charity." But they could only go so far. In Puritan polity, the congregation's next order of business would have been calling one of their number to be minister. In fact, they would not have even begun organizing without an obvious candidate in the wings. Mount Desert's laypeople were largely on their own, supported only by sporadic help from neighboring clergy. In 1794, according to church records, the

Reverend Daniel Merrill of Sedgwick administered the sacraments and helped the congregation write a new covenant, longer and more doctrinally specific than the first. Deer Isle's Reverend Peter Powers came to preach for several Sundays in 1798. At that time, the congregation brought in some thirty four new members. By 1800, it had grown large enough to build two meetinghouses, one in Pretty Marsh and the other in Southwest Harbor.[4]

Still, we can guess at some anxiety. Without a minister, the people could not baptize their children or celebrate the Lord's Supper, much less receive pastoral care and religious instruction. The congregation also had to settle their own disputes, some fifty cases in the first fifty years, and exercise what discipline they could over the straying and sinful. Beyond the usual run of human frailty — adultery, intemperance, and neglecting the Sabbath — the young church also had to parse its way through some highly charged theological disagreements. In 1799, Captain Davis Wasgatt, a pillar of the congregation, announced his desire to be re-baptized. The Congregational practice of infant baptism suddenly made no sense to him, and he worried for his salvation. In Massachusetts or Connecticut he would have simply become a Baptist (though with some penalties), but in Mount Desert he had to come up with his own solution. In September 1801, Wasgatt went to the Baptist Church in Eden and was baptized by plunging. That, in turn, set up a problem for the congregation. After Wasgatt came to church the following Sunday and made a "great noise" about his beliefs, they put him on probation. He obliged by continuing to attend, even accepting their right to discipline him for being "overtaken with drink." In fact, Wasgatt stayed until a Baptist church was organized in 1816. Once a Congregationalist, always a Congregationalist, however. That same year, the Mount Desert church elected him clerk and met at his house to vet candidates for membership.[5]

Somewhere about this time (the records are not clear) Mount Desert finally installed a pastor. By most accounts, Ebenezer Eaton was a reluctant candidate, certainly not the austere patriarch of Puritan lore. From what we know, he was keenly aware of his lack of education or formal ministerial training; the record book describes him only as a "brother in this church." Nevertheless, Eaton served for the next three decades, licensed but not officially ordained until 1823, when he was in his mid-60s. Eaton was apparently a gentle soul who avoided confrontation. In 1803, the congregation found him "guilty of a fault, though not intentionally," of being too lenient with an offending church member. But their reproof was equally mild: "At the same time," the records read, "the church considered that they have been guilty of similar misconduct."[6]

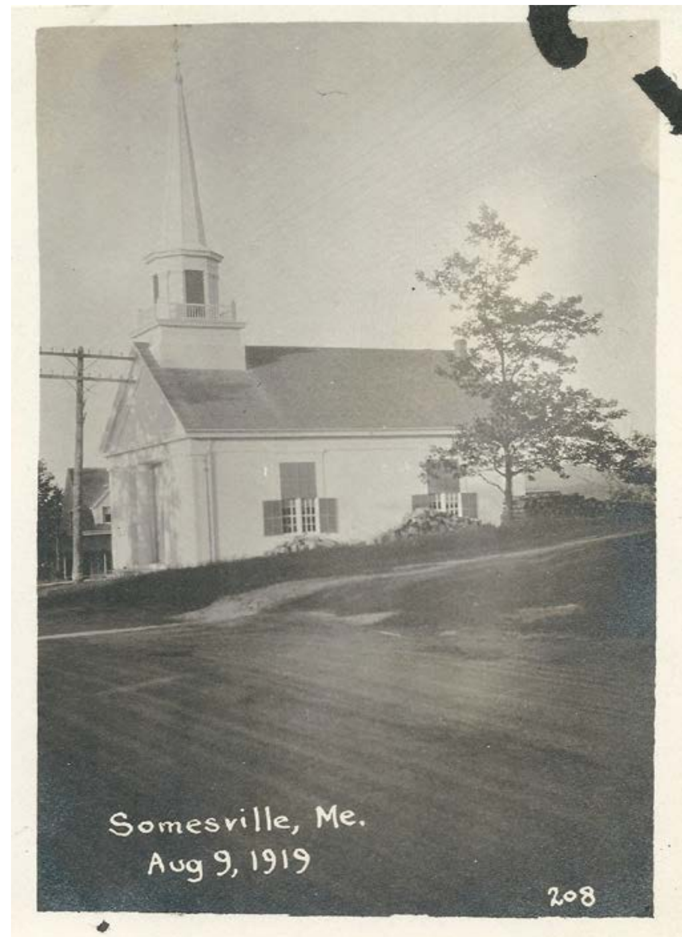
Help from Outside

After Eaton retired in 1833, the church once again faced the challenge of finding a minister, but by this time they had outside support. The Maine Missionary Society had been formed by Congregationalists in 1807 "to send the glorious gospel to those who are destitute of the public and stated means of religious instruction."[7] Like similar societies in Massachusetts and Connecticut, it deployed pastors to isolated rural churches, where they itinerated between several different pulpits, sometimes over many miles of harsh terrain. The Maine Missionary Society went a step further, however. Wherever possible, they settled pastors in

individual churches, often supplementing their salary until the congregation could manage on its own. The effort was surprisingly successful, especially after the opening of Bangor Seminary in 1817 ensured a regular stream of recruits.

In fact, over the next several decades, the Missionary Society proved a reliable ally. In 1831, the Mount Desert congregation asked the Missionary Society for help, this time with considerable pathos. "When you consider the poverty and the population of this town," they wrote, "the inhabitants scattered over so large an extent of territory, around the shores, creeks, coves, harbors, valleys and hills, of this mountainous island, and other islands of the sea belonging to this town, … we hope and trust and believe, you will afford us the aid desired."[8] The Missionary Society sent Micah Strickland, a Bangor student, who served until his retirement in 1841. After that, the Society supported the pastorates of Charles M. Brown, an eccentric figure affectionately known as "Uncle Charlie," who arrived in 1842, and Samuel Bowker, who came to the Island in 1855.[9]

Bowker actually served two churches. In 1840, residents of Somesville, weary of traveling to church in Southwest Harbor, had voted to form a new congregation. With a gift of land from John Somes



The Somesville Union Church has been a mainstay of the community since 1851. *Mount Desert Island Historical Society*

but no minister in residence they erected a church building, complete with a bell brought up from Boston, and began worshipping together. After Bowker's arrival, a succession of ministers served both Southwest Harbor and Somesville until the congregation formally organized as a separate church, adopting its own covenant in 1876.[10]

Yet even when clergy were in regular supply, laypeople, especially women, stepped in to provide key leadership. In 1861, women on the Cranberry Isles organized a Mutual Improvement and Benevolent Society, open to all "ladies" for the cost of a twenty-five-cent subscription. With only thirty-eight original members (and a secession that took nearly half in 1862), the Society managed to raise over three thousand dollars toward a new church, which was completed in 1866. Like their neighbors in Somesville, the Congregational Church of the Cranberry Isles did not formally organize until 1899, decades after church services began.[11] The same was true of the Congregational Church of Tremont, which was founded in 1890. The Ladies Guild raised money to purchase the land by holding bake sales and "public suppers." The sanctuary was built "with the sweat of the men of the congregation."[12]

The spirit which animated laypeople to organize and fund local churches, central to Congregational identity in the nineteenth century, also informed their view of the world. One example is the temperance cause. Most Congregational churches enforced abstention well before the passage of the Maine Law in 1851, which essentially prohibited all sale of alcohol in the state. Their motives were no doubt complex, but for many, a dry and sober society was a just and peaceful one, where workingmen did not spend paychecks on drink, and women and children would be free from domestic violence. It would be a mistake, however, to place Congregationalists at the forefront of every campaign for social justice, not least because they were simply too local and decentralized to speak in a unified voice. The Somesville Church, for example, denounced slavery in 1834, resolving that "the act of holding human beings as property to be bought and sold is absolutely unjustifiable and highly criminal, and ought, therefore, to be immediately abandoned." At the same time, however, the congregation recognized that "great numbers of professing Christians not only apologize for slavery and speak and write in its defense, but also perpetuate its abominations."[13] Yet in the national realm, leading Congregationalists like novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe, philanthropists Arthur and Lewis Tappan, and newspaper editor Elijah Lovejoy, as well as laypeople in local churches across the country, took up the antislavery cause in the years before the Civil War. Once war began, seven men from Mount Desert, some as young as eighteen, enlisted in the First Maine Calvary, most serving for the duration.[14]

Vacationland

By the late nineteenth century, Mount Desert was less Puritan than ever. Back in 1859, a visiting Congregational pastor actually mourned the island's natural beauty, a "pernicious" distraction from church matters that "enfeebled the heart" and led "to the very brink of voluptuousness."[15] But his tribe was decreasing. Congregationalists were coming to terms with the joys of leisure, though still a bit carefully. The first summer cottage on Mount Desert was built by a Congregationalist, the Boston

In the 1920s and 30s, many churches, such as the West Tremont Methodist Church pictured here, combined resources to form interdenominational Larger Parish organizations.
Photograph by LaRue Spiker, Mount Desert Island Historical Society

merchant and ship captain, Alpheus Hardy. And in 1894, the Congregational Sunday School and Publishing Society published a novel about summer life in Bar Harbor. Mildred Fairfax's *Mount Desert: A Summer's Sowing* was a tangled and only marginally religious narrative of flirtations, rejections, and outings on rowboats, sailboats, and Green (now Cadillac) Mountain.[16]

The Bar Harbor Congregational Church embodied that late nineteenth century reality. In 1887, the island's "summer people" had worked with locals to build and finance a nondenominational Union Church in Northeast Harbor, designed in the Shingle Style by leading Boston architects Peabody and Stearns.[17] Soon, however, the town had grown large enough to support a range of religious traditions, with Episcopalians constructing a church building in 1878, Roman Catholics in 1881, Methodists in 1882, and Unitarians in 1888. In 1883, thirteen Congregationalists organized the Bar Harbor church and called Joseph Torrey from Cambridge, Massachusetts, to be their pastor. "Under his guidance," as an early twentieth century church historian wrote, the congregation recognized "the splendid possibilities of a strong church both locally and for the summer residents." Again with generous outside support, the Bar Harbor congregation erected an imposing granite building, designed by a Boston architect and graced with a Hutchins-Votey pipe organ.[18]

Then the church looked outward. Under the twenty-year pastorate of Angus MacDonald, the Bar Harbor congregation established an endowment that provided aid to the year-round residents of the seacoast region. With his brother, Alexander, he organized the Seacoast Missionary Society in

Detail of sanctuary window, ca. 1885, artist unknown. *Southwest Harbor Congregational Church*

1905. As the story goes, the two men were standing on Cadillac Mountain, looking across the beautiful vista of islands and bays, when Alexander clapped his brother on the shoulder and declared, "Angus, what a parish!"[19] The result was a permanent legacy. First with the tiny sloop "Hope" and later with the "Sunbeam" (lovingly known as "God's Tugboat"), the Maine Seacoast Mission has ferried ministers as well as doctors, nurses, and teachers to isolated fishing towns up and down the Maine coast.[20]

Yet even while a new Maine was emerging (the state became "Vacationland" in 1936) Congregational churches found themselves hampered by old and familiar frustrations. Though vacationing ministers often filled pulpits in the summertime, the year-round situation was dire. A denominational report from 1919 found that twelve of the twenty-three Congregational churches in Hancock County were without pastors.[21]

Once again, limited resources inspired innovation. In the summer of 1925, when both the Federated Church at Northeast Harbor (which was Baptist and Congregational) and the Congregational Church at Seal Harbor were without ministers, the state Conference organized the Mount Desert Larger Parish. This experimental solution, increasingly popular among rural churches in Maine, established a single Parish Council to see to the pastoral needs and business affairs of both churches. Cooperation soon crossed denominational lines, with the Eden Baptist Church and the Eden Union Church joining by 1936. The first pastor of the Mount Desert Island Larger Parish, as it was called, was a Presbyterian, Lee Hanchett, and the next a Baptist, Ernest McKenzie. In 1930, when the Maine Conference organized another Larger Parish in Southwest Harbor-Tremont, it also became interdenominational, bringing together Baptists, Congregationalists, and Methodists.[22]

Today

Congregationalists occupy a much different space today than in 1792. Old habits persist, of course, especially in regard to the social order: the Bar Harbor church, like its parent denomination, the United Church of Christ (the result of a 1957 merger), has taken public stances on civil rights, LGBT issues, and religious tolerance, yet much has changed. Mount Desert Island is more religiously diverse, host to everyone from Episcopalians and Baptists to nondenominational evangelical and Pentecostal churches. But Congregationalists are still a mainstay. They remain the largest single religious group in Hancock County, with eighteen individual churches. Baptists are a close second at sixteen, with Methodists at eleven and Roman Catholics at nine.[23] The overall picture is cloudier, however. As is true across the western world, church attendance is declining. Only 17% of Hancock County's population consider themselves religious "adherents," according to a 2010 survey. The majority are mainline Protestants (4691), with Roman Catholics (2523) and evangelicals (1288) a fairly distant second and third, with "other" (Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, or Muslim) constituting only 820. Yet over 45,000 residents are, in the language of the survey, "unclaimed."[24]

Across the long haul, of course, the situation is a familiar one: Congregationalists on Mount Desert Island have been weathering adverse statistics since the 1790s. They have consistently faced clergy shortages, transient populations, and

outside competition on all sides, from Baptists to the tourist trade. In the past, deep community ties and a willingness to improvise along with changing times have allowed them to survive, even to flourish. If history is any guide, those same qualities will see them not only through the challenges of the present day, but those of the future as well.

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1. Edmund Morgan, *The Puritan Dilemma: The Story of John Winthrop* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1958), 54–55.

2. On Congregationalism generally, see John Von Rohr, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism, 1620–1957* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1992).

3. In 1816, there were only 120 Congregational churches in the entire District of Maine, serving a population around 270,000; two-thirds of those churches were without pastors. David Thurston, *Sermon Delivered in Saco, June 26, 1816, Before the Maine Missionary Society at their Ninth Annual Meeting* (Hallowell: N. Cheever, 1816), 4. See also Shelby Balik, *Rally the Scattered Believers: Northern New England's Religious Geography* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 91–97.

4. The Mount Desert congregation was only the third to form in the region, after Blue Hill and Deer Isle. Samuel MacClintock from Blue Hill and Samuel Eaton of Harpswell also assisted with the founding. *A Record of the Church of Christ in the Town of Mount Desert, When Gathered and by what order,* 2–13. See also Michael McGiffert, "Godly Discipline and Charitable Walking: The Congregational Church of the Town of Mount Desert The First Fifty Years," *Chebacco* 6 (2004): 9–40; Jonathan Greenleaf, *Sketches of the Ecclesiastical History of the State of Maine, From the Earliest Settlement to the Present Time* (Portsmouth: Harrison Gray, 1821), 162–165; Calvin Clark, *History of the Congregational Churches in Maine, Volume Two: History of the Individual Churches, 1600–1826* (Portland: Congregational Christian Conference of Maine, 1935), 325–326; Mrs. Seth S. Thornton, *Traditions and Records of Southwest Harbor and Somesville, Mount Desert Island, Maine* (Bar Harbor: Acadia Publishing Co., 1988), 45f.

5. McGiffert, "Godly Discipline," 12, 15–20.

6. According to one observer, he "never took the pastoral care of the church." See Eliphalet Gillett, *Complete List of the Congregational Ministers, Pastors of Churches, in the State of Maine, from the Settlement of the Country to the Present (September 1840)* (Hallowell, 1841), 262; *A Record of the Church of Christ in the Town of Mount Desert*, 30. Today, the church is the Southwest Harbor Congregational Church, a member of the Conservative Conference of Congregational Churches.

7. Calvin Clark, *History of the Congregational Churches in Maine, Volume One: The Maine Missionary Society, 1807–1925* (Portland: Southworth Press, 1926), 26. See also Mervin Deems, *The Maine Missionary Society, 1807–1957* (Portland: Marks Printing House, n.d.).

8. *Twenty-Fourth Annual Report of the Maine Missionary Society … in Fryeburg, June 22, 1831* (Portland, 1831), 17.

9. Congregationalists in Maine were consistently more organized and connected than other churches in the denomination. They formed local associations of ministers early on and were the first Congregationalists to organize statewide, with the founding of the Maine Conference in 1826.

10. Thornton, *Traditions and Records*, 244–248. By the 1850s, church life looked to be flourishing, with 120 members by 1854, two houses of worship, and nine Sunday schools operating during the summer. With Bowker's departure in 1855, the church was pastorless and membership declined. By 1865, membership had dropped to eighty-nine.

11. Velma Teel, "Founding of the Ladies Aid," *The Book of Remembrance*, Congregational Church (1960), accessed February 10, 2019, http://www.cranberryisles.com/photos/teel_report.html; "Cranberry Isles Mutual Improvement and Benevolent Society (1861–1899)" Cranberry Isles, http://cranberryisles.com/photos/sew_constitution.html; "Union Meeting House, also known as Great Cranberry Island Congregational Church," http://cranberryisles.com/photos/gci_church.html.

12. "Our Story," Tremont Congregational Church, accessed February 10, 2019, http://www.tremontcongregational.org/about-us.html.

13. George S. Brookes, *These Hundred Years: History of the Hancock Association of Congregational Churches and Ministers, 1825–1925* (Ellsworth, ME: n.p., 1926), 10, 12; Henry S. Club, *The Maine Liquor Law: Its Origin, History, and Results* (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1855).

14. Tim Garrity, "John Gilley Fell at the Battle of the Wilderness," *Chebacco* 12 (2011): 72.

15. "A Day on Mount Desert," *Maine Evangelist*, September 10, 1859, n.p.

16. Mildred Fairfax, *At Mount Desert: A Summer's Sowing* (Boston: Congregational Sunday School and Publishing Society, 1893).

17. This church would become the United Church of Christ of Northeast Harbor and Seal Harbor, later renamed and reorganized into the Seaside United Church of Christ. The building is listed on the National Historic Register of Historic Places. The Seal Harbor Congregational Church, built in 1902 in the Shingle Style, is also on the National Historic Register.

18. *Yearbook and Directory of the Bar Harbor Congregational Church* (n.p., n.d.); Rodney W. Roundy, "Twenty Five Years at Bar Harbor," *Maine Christian Pilgrim* (December 1947): 30–32. See http://barharborucc.org/.

19. Judith Burger-Gossart, "Maine Sea Coast Mission Hooked Rugs," *Chebacco* 11 (2010): 33–48.

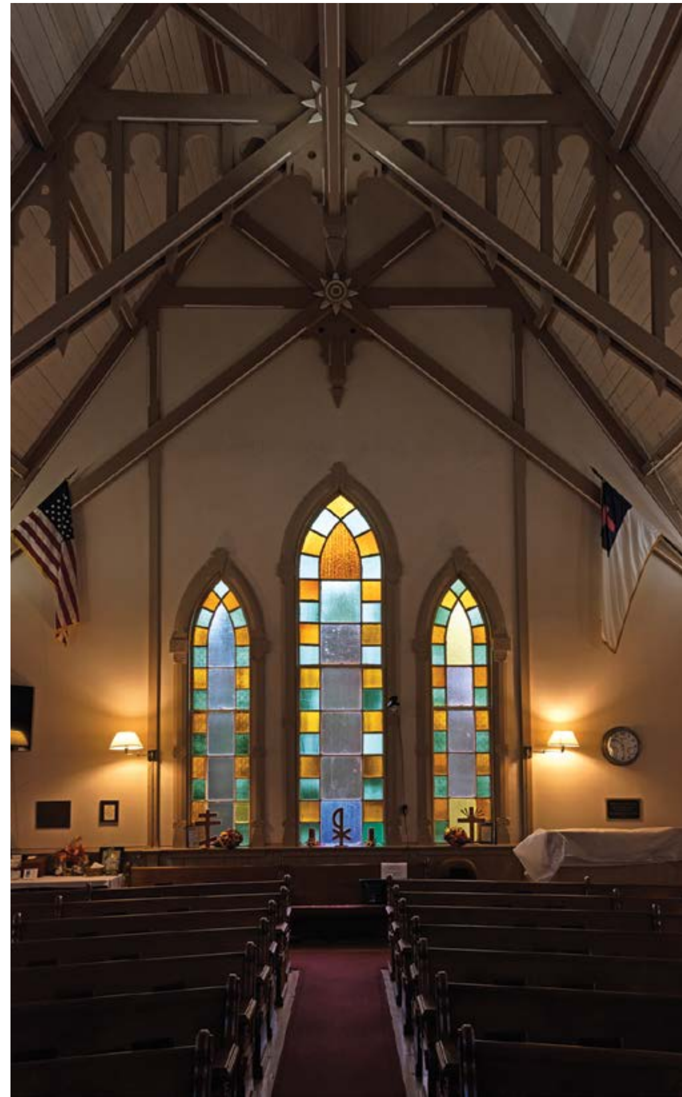
20. Orville Guptill, "Along our Far-Flung Maine Coast in the 'Sunbeam,'" *Congregationalism in Maine* 14 (April 1927): 24; "Mission Boat Brings Spiritual and Material Help to Islands Off Maine," *New York Times*, May 29, 1978. See also www.seacoastmission.org.

21. "Hancock Association," *Congregationalism in Maine*, (October 1919): 604, and Nelson, "Some Handicaps Confronting Union or Federated Churches," *Congregationalism in Maine* 10 (April 1923): 26.

22. Lee Hanchett, "The Mount Desert Larger Parish," *Congregationalism in Maine* 13 (April 1926): 32–33; "Mount Desert Larger Parish," *Maine Christian Pilgrim* 22 (October 1935): 105–6;

23. Association of Religion Data Archives, County Membership Report (2010), accessed February 10, 2019, http://www.thearda.com/rcms2010/r/c/23/rcms2010_23009_county_name_2010.asp

24. Ibid.



South sanctuary window, ca. 1895, artist unknown. *Tremont Congregational Church*

Doorknob, date and maker unknown.
Eden Baptist Church, Salisbury Cove

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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.

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