

# Chebacco

A stained glass artwork featuring two pinecones and two pine branches with needles. The pinecones are rendered in shades of yellow and brown, while the pine needles are in vibrant teal and blue. The background is a deep blue with a grid pattern of black lines, and the entire scene is framed by a yellow border at the top and bottom.

The Magazine of  
the Mount Desert Island Historical Society

HARBORING RELIGION: MISSIONARIES,  
CONVERTS, AND SOJOURNERS

Volume XX 2019

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2019  
Mount Desert, Maine

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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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Detail of Perkins memorial window, ca. 1882, designed by F. Crowninshield of Boston, executed by Donald MacDonald of Boston. *Saint Mary's by-the-Sea, Northeast Harbor*



## *Acadia National Park: A Soul and Spirit Stretching Place*

By Thomas S. Bremer

The history of national parks in America, with their often hallowed associations, places these treasured reserves squarely in the American religious landscape. Acadia National Park typifies the role of parks as destinations of often sacred significance. Its founding came at a key moment in the long religious history of American conservationism, and its attractions serve the spiritual desires and needs of millions of people each year. The national park came to dominate the island's landscape in geographic terms and has played a similarly prominent role in Mount Desert's religious history.

### *Worshipping in Acadia National Park*

At least some of the more than 3.5 million annual visitors to Acadia National Park find a spiritual element in their experience of the park, according to one observer, Scott Planting, President of the Maine Seacoast Mission in Bar Harbor.<sup>1</sup> In his optimistic estimation, "90% of the people who visit Acadia National Park have a spiritual experience, a feeling of mystery with the sea, the woods, the mountains."<sup>2</sup> Though most of these experiences may be little more than fleeting aesthetic encounters with the park's spectacular scenery and other attractions, at least a few people engage in formal religious devotional



Volunteers from A Christian Ministry in the National Parks lead a sunset worship service on Cadillac Mountain at the Blue Hill Overlook. *Courtesy of A Christian Ministry in the National Parks*

practices in the park. These include actual worship services aimed especially at Christian visitors.

During peak tourist season, visitors can find regular Protestant religious services inside the park offered by A Christian Ministry in the National Parks (ACMNP). Volunteers for this national interdenominational Protestant parachurch organization conduct Sunday morning worship services throughout the peak tourist season at the two national park campgrounds on Mount Desert Island, and they also have a sunset service on Sunday evenings atop Cadillac Mountain, the park's highest point.<sup>3</sup> For the young volunteers of ACMNP, Acadia National Park is an ideal

setting to offer "a Christian interpretation to the awe and grandeur of God's creation."<sup>4</sup>

Although ACMNP conducts the only regular worship inside Acadia National Park, local religious communities on Mount Desert Island recognize the importance of the park in the spiritual history of the island. In celebration of the park's centennial in 2016, the Mount Desert Island Clergy Association staged a public arts and worship program at the Fabbri Memorial on the Park Loop Road in Otter Cove on July 27, 2016.<sup>5</sup> "The Spirit of Acadia: Celebrating our Spiritual Connection with Place and Park" included "readings, music and dance from diverse spiritual perspectives and traditions," according to the press release announcing the program, which emphasized that "All are welcome to participate and share in the service."<sup>6</sup> The public announcement included an acknowledgment from Superintendent of Acadia National Park Kevin Schneider: "The inspirational quality of Acadia makes it a deeply spiritual place for many." Jack Russell, the co-chair of the Acadia Centennial Task Force, added, "Acadia was conserved by people from many faith communities whose common cause was to protect these extraordinary land-and-seascapes as a source of spiritual renewal. As we celebrate the centennial of Acadia, it is good that people gather in faith that stewardship of this remarkable place can help us find our better selves and best community."<sup>7</sup> In seeking their "better selves and best community," the organizers based the program on the Canticle of St. Francis, a medieval Christian song celebrating the natural world as God's creation. They conceived it as an interactive commemoration of the national park's spiritual heritage, with the intention "to reflect in word and song, in silence and movement, about the spiritual impact [of] this park and this place upon our lives."<sup>8</sup>

Rev. Scott Planting began the program by observing that "Everywhere on Mount Desert, life is compressed between great forces — terrestrial

and marine — that have car[v]ed out innumerable ecological niches. Life thrives with heartening diversity. And the larger look of the landscape — the rugged, inviting sweep of it — has a profound impact upon us that never wears out. Mount Desert is a soul and spirit stretching place, and that is what we celebrate today."<sup>9</sup> The celebration included song, poetry, dance, silent reflection, and stirring words about nature's beauty and specifically the inspirational qualities of Acadia National Park.

"The Spirit of Acadia" centennial celebration highlighted the aesthetic attractions that move many visitors toward a profound, sometimes transcendent, experience of the natural world. Although missing the specific confessional language and conventional liturgical order of the interdenominational worship services that ACMNP offers regularly in the park, the purpose of the Mount Desert Island Clergy Association's program aligned closely with that of A Christian Ministry in the National Parks: to acknowledge and honor a spiritual presence in the stunning landscapes of Acadia. The park for many visitors remains a place of spiritual encounter, whether one understands spiritual encounter in the particular Christian imagery of evangelical interpretations or in less distinct aesthetic terms.

### *Worshipping Nature in Acadia National Park*

The distance between an evangelical Protestant view of nature as God's creation and the more generalized spiritual



Detail of "Resurrection," 1930,  
Tiffany Studios. *Church of Our  
Father, Hulls Cove*

aesthetic that was apparent in the Mount Desert Island Clergy Association's centennial celebration is much less than some may think, at least historically. The history of environmentalism in the United States, and the aesthetic interpretation of nature that has lent great popular support to environmental concerns, originates in the same Calvinist traditions that produced much of evangelical Christianity in America. To a large extent, Acadia National Park comes from the same historical strains that bring the evangelizing volunteers of ACMNP to worship in its campgrounds and on its mountaintops.

Mount Desert Island entered the American popular imagination when painter Thomas Cole and others in the Hudson River School of landscape painting, especially Cole's protégé Frederic E. Church, painted the island's spectacular scenery in the 1840s and 1850s.<sup>10</sup> These painters are best remembered for their impressive renderings of pastoral New England, but they produced art saturated with religious associations.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, their paintings, including the seascapes and landscapes of Maine's largest island, contributed to an enduring spiritual aesthetic that would give rise to national parks.

The American landscape painting tradition initiated by Thomas Cole derived from the pervasive Calvinist ideals that in the 1830s, according to historian Mark R. Stoll, "were fostering an art aesthetic, a landscape ideal, a scientific worldview, and moral and practical notions about land and landscape that would inspire and galvanize the American conservation and environmental movements."<sup>12</sup> Cole's art epitomized American Protestant ideals derived from Calvinist views of nature that would eventuate in nineteenth- and twentieth-century movements to preserve and protect natural environments. The sixteenth-century Protestant reformer John Calvin had regarded the natural world as the most important source outside

of the Bible for Christians to know God. He went so far as to declare in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* "that it can be said reverently, provided it proceeds from a reverent mind, that nature is God."<sup>13</sup> Protestants in the Calvinist Reformed tradition would pursue this view of nature with scientific inquiries aimed at revealing the moral lessons of nature. Among the most influential figures for American Reformed Protestant naturalists was Alexander von Humboldt, whose explorations in South America at the turn of the nineteenth century enthralled American readers with adventurous tales laced with "noticeable Calvinistic moralism and hints of spiritual wonder at the unity in diversity of the cosmos."<sup>14</sup>

Thomas Cole's art was, in the words of historian Mark R. Stoll, "Humboldtian art" that incorporated a scientific view of nature with moral overtones. Cole and other Hudson River School artists translated the Calvinism of the Reformed tradition that dominated the Connecticut Valley in the early nineteenth century into a moral aesthetic of nature that would plant the seeds of American conservation movements. Stoll concludes, "The Congregationalists of the Connecticut Valley and the New England diaspora would give the nation conservation in all its aspects," including "parks, which preserved God's natural world for the benefit of the people."<sup>15</sup> Calvinist Puritan ideals that linked art, science, and morality in attitudes toward the land and the natural world germinating in the New England soil of Congregationalism would culminate



Frederic E. Church, "Eagle Lake Viewed from Cadillac Mountain, Mount Desert Island, Maine," (1850–1860). The dominant position of the radiant sun and the rustic figure of a cross in the lower left corner of this painting by Thomas Cole's most famous protégé typifies the religious symbolism that often appeared in the art of the Hudson River School painters. *Original painting in the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, New York City; image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons*

in Acadia's founding as the region's first and most prominent national park.

The land preservation movement on Mount Desert Island that made Acadia National Park possible was heir to the religious ideals of New England Reformed Protestant traditions bestowing a religio-aesthetic appreciation of nature as God's

creation. Charles W. Eliot, longtime president of Harvard University, convened a meeting in 1901 at Seal Harbor to consider a proposal "to hold reservations at points of interest on this Island, for the perpetual use of the public." Those who attended this initial meeting of the Hancock County Trustees of Public Reservations (HCTPR) came as "persons interested in the preservation of this island as a place

for healthful enjoyment."<sup>16</sup> Specifically, President Eliot sought to perpetuate the legacy of his son, the prominent landscape architect Charles Eliot whose early death brought profound grief to the elder Eliot and left him determined to fulfill his son's vision of preserving the landscapes of Mount Desert Island.<sup>17</sup>

The younger Charles Eliot had been one of the most promising of Frederick Law Olmsted's students, working in the wake of his mentor's success as the founding figure of American landscape architecture. Olmsted had established a distinctive landscape design approach with such iconic places as New York's Central Park, the US Capitol grounds in Washington DC, and Stanford University in California. From the beginning of his career, Olmsted's work reflected the Puritan values that he had gained in his early Connecticut education, what religious historian Evan Berry describes as Olmsted's "soteriological view of recreation."<sup>18</sup> These values became foundational for subsequent generations of landscape architects.<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, American landscape architecture, beginning with its most influential progenitor, relied significantly on park design principles derived in part from a Reformed Protestant religio-aesthetic vision of nature cultivated in the nineteenth-century Congregationalist milieu of the Connecticut Valley.

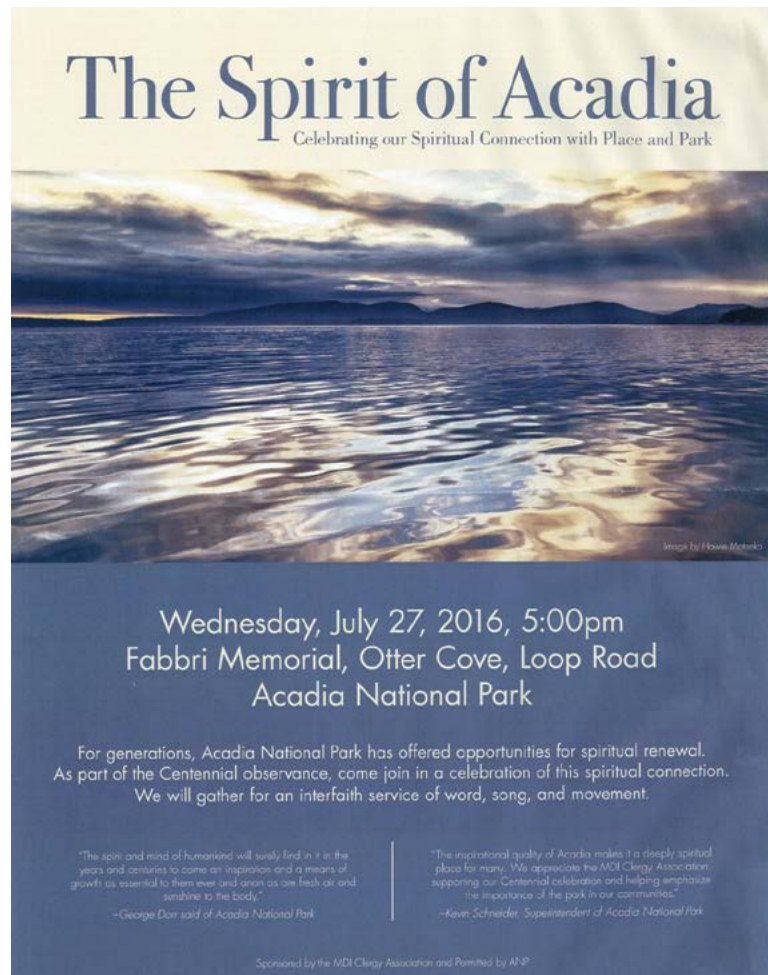
Even before Charles Eliot fell under Olmsted's spell as one of his most promising apprentices, he was among the first to recognize the need to protect Mount Desert scenery. The twenty-three year-old Eliot wrote in his personal diary in 1883, "The scenery of Mount Desert is so beautiful and remarkable that no pains should be spared to save it from injury — to the end that many generations may receive all possible benefit and enjoyment from the sight of it." The young Eliot became a strong advocate for landscape preservation, but he did not live to see his preservationist vision fulfilled on Mount Desert Island.<sup>20</sup>

Charles Eliot's death in 1897 at age 37 devastated his father.<sup>21</sup> As a tribute to his son's legacy, Charles W. Eliot resolved to fulfill his son's vision of preserving Mount Desert scenery. He convened twelve of his summer neighbors who shared his concern about Mount Desert's future, and they formed the HCTPR based on a land trust model that the younger Charles Eliot had devised.<sup>22</sup> This model, based on values derived from a Congregationalist religio-aesthetic vision of nature that he gained in working with Olmsted, became the foundation of Acadia National Park.

A key personality in the success of the land trust model on Mount Desert Island was George B. Dorr, a founding member of the HCTPR. From their initial meeting in 1901 to Woodrow Wilson's 1916 establishment of the Sieur de Monts National Monument and its elevation by Congress to Lafayette National Park in 1919, Acadia National Park owes its existence to Dorr's diligent and persistent efforts.<sup>23</sup> As his biographer notes, Dorr has wide recognition as the "Father of Acadia National Park," having served as "the founder and first superintendent of New England's only national park and the central figure in Maine's land trust movement."<sup>24</sup>

Dorr demonstrated considerable political skill throughout his many years of dedication to creating and managing the national park, but his success also revealed a distinct religious element as well. Though a lifelong Episcopalian, Dorr was more interested in an Emersonian spirituality of immersion in nature than he was in week-to-week church

This 2016 publicity poster announces "The Spirit of Acadia: Celebrating Our Spiritual Connection with Place and Park," a program of "word, song, and movement" from the Mount Desert Island Clergy Association commemorating Acadia National Park's centennial. *Courtesy of Scott Planting*



life. His work to preserve the wildness of Mount Desert Island typifies the importance of a Transcendentalist religious sensibility in supporting the massive expansion of national parks in the early twentieth century.<sup>25</sup>

Woodrow Wilson established both Sieur de Monts National Monument and Grand Canyon National Monument just a month before he signed the National Park Service Act in August 1916, creating

a new federal agency to manage the national parks.<sup>26</sup> This new attention to parks and the added resources to develop and protect these revered places coincided with an enthusiasm for Ralph Waldo Emerson, the revered sage of Concord, as "the guiding spirit for the first generation of American Modernist artists, craftsmen, and architects." Out of these artistic circles, enamored with Emerson and also Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman, came many of the designers and builders of national park infrastructure.<sup>27</sup> Landscape art of the early twentieth



Detail of "Without Fault before the  
Throne of God," 1926, Clement Heaton,  
UK. *St. Saviour's Episcopal Church, Bar Harbor*



century, as environmental historian Mark R. Stoll documents, had evolved from the Calvinist-inflected paintings of Cole, Church, and the other Hudson River School artists to the Transcendentalist influence of the Modernists' reverence for nature "as the highest source of all things spiritual, moral, and creative." They had a very direct impact on American national parks precisely at the moment that the new park in Maine joined the ranks of America's most treasured sites. Stoll notes that "the establishment of the Park Service during the apogee of the Emersonian era ensured that to a large degree park officials, architects, artists, and visitors viewed them as places of Transcendentalistic worship." Stoll concludes, "From the vision of an unpeopled landscape of the spirit evolved the ideals and goals of the new National Park Service. The Park Service's managers, developers, and designers strove to create and preserve the illusion of an uninhabited world of otherworldly beauty."<sup>28</sup> The landscape of Mount Desert Island certainly fit this generation's Emersonian vision of national parks. Indeed, a good deal of the conservation work of George B. Dorr and the other members of the HCTPR was aimed at preserving the wild beauty of the island, in effect creating a destination valued largely for its natural features, much like other national parks that had become shrines of American nature religion.

### *Ritualized Experiences of Acadia National Park*

In the orientation film *Acadia Always* shown at the Hulls Cove Visitor

Center, audiences learn from host and narrator Jack Perkins that the park offers "solitude, recreation, and inspiration."<sup>29</sup> These experiences make Acadia National Park a sacred place for many visitors, not because of any sort of sectarian confessional tradition, but through embodied engagements with nature facilitated by rituals of visitation. Attention to visitors' ritualized behaviors offers another way of thinking about how religion has been part of the park's history.

Much of conventional tourist practice fits what ritual studies scholars regard as "ritualization," ways of acting and behaviors that "distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian activities."<sup>30</sup> Many of Acadia's visitors typically engage in ritualized activities seeking the "solitude, recreation, and inspiration" promised in the park's orientation film. Perhaps the most widely publicized tourist ritual in the park is the pre-dawn trek to view the sunrise from the summit of Cadillac Mountain, where most expect to witness the first light of day to reach the US.<sup>31</sup> During the peak tourist seasons in the summer and fall, dozens, sometimes hundreds of park visitors can be found on the mountain's summit as the sun lifts over the eastern horizon. In the 1960s those who made the effort to witness this spectacle could become certified members in the "Sunrise-From-Mount-Cadillac Club." A 1961 tourist brochure includes an application for membership in this elite if somewhat dubious organization. To gain membership, applicants had to certify their experiences of the Cadillac Mountain sunrise with signatures from the proprietor of their place of lodging and from the Harbor Master at Bar Harbor.<sup>32</sup>

The more common ritual that far more visitors undertake involves the core practice of tourists in many destinations throughout the world: sightseeing. Acadia's scenery is superlative and constitutes the park's main attraction. Most visitors tour these magnificent sights by following a conventionally

ritualized route through the park. It begins at the Hulls Cove Visitor Center and follows the 27-mile Park Loop Road, with numerous attractions and observation points along the way, including a spur road to the top of Cadillac Mountain. Many end their ritual tours of the park with an obligatory stop at the Jordan Pond House for their famous popovers and afternoon tea.

For the more adventurous, the park offers endless opportunities for ritualized experiences of nature up close. Acadia boasts over 120 miles of hiking trails in addition to the 45 miles of carriage roads built by John D. Rockefeller Jr., and excursions to more remote off-island locations on Schoodic Peninsula and the smaller outer islands promise additional recreational experiences.

The variety of ritualized tourist activities available in Acadia National Park may seem far from the devotional practices found in more traditional communities of faith. Outdoor recreation, though, has a long and well-documented historical foundation in Christian theology and devotional culture, especially in the Reformed Protestant traditions of New England.<sup>33</sup> Visitors discover in the park more than pretty places and fun ways to occupy their leisure time. Many of them, perhaps most, participate in the sacred history of American nature religions as they experience "a feeling of mystery with the sea, the woods, the mountains" in the "soul and spirit stretching place" of Acadia National Park.

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1. Acadia National Park hosted more than 3.5 million recreational visits in 2017: National Park Service, "Annual Visitation Highlights," accessed July 24, 2018, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/socialscience/annual-visitation-highlights.htm>.
  2. Scott Planting, interview with author, May 17, 2018.
  3. "Acadia National Park, ME: A Christian Ministry in the National Parks Involvement," accessed July 24, 2018, <http://www.acmnp.com/employment/acadia-national-park-jobs>. A Christian Ministry in the National Parks began in the early 1950s as an interdenominational ministry affiliated with the National Council of Churches aimed at serving national park visitors. They started with just two summer interns at Yellowstone National Park and quickly spread to other parks, including Acadia. See G. Holger Hansen, *As It Was in the Beginning: A History of a Christian Ministry in the National Parks* (Freeport, Maine: A Christian Ministry in the National Parks, 2001), 5–9.
  4. "About A Christian Ministry in the National Parks," A Christian Ministry in the National Parks, accessed July 24, 2018, <http://www.acmnp.com/about>.

5. President Woodrow Wilson created Sieur de Monts National Monument by proclamation on July 8, 1916. Ronald H. Epp, *Creating Acadia National Park: The Biography of George Bucknam Dorr* (Bar Harbor, ME: Friends of Acadia, 2016), 172.; George Bucknam Dorr, *The Story of Acadia National Park*, 3rd ed., (Bar Harbor, ME: Acadia Pub Co, 1997), 50.
6. Details about the celebration come from Scott Planting, interview with author, May 17, 2018; he also provided me with the official program of the event that includes a press release announcing the celebration.
7. These quotations are in the press release included with the official program.
8. Scott Planting's opening remarks as printed in the program.
9. Ibid., with reference to *Time and Tide in Acadia* by Christopher Camuto for this section.
10. David Little and Carl Little, *Art of Acadia: The Islands, the Mountains, the Main* (Camden, ME: Down East Books, 2016), 33–36. Also see Pamela J. Belanger and J. Gray Sweeney, *Inventing Acadia: Artists and Tourists at Mount Desert* (Rockland, ME: Farnsworth Art Museum, 1999), 19.
11. Mark Stoll, *Inherit the Holy Mountain: Religion and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 58.
12. Ibid., 12.
13. Ibid., 50.
14. Ibid., 52.
15. Ibid.
16. These words from President Eliot's invitation of August 12, 1901, to George B. Dorr to attend the organizing meeting of the HCTPR are quoted in Dorr, *The Story of Acadia National Park*, 13–14.
17. Epp, *Creating Acadia National Park*, 93.
18. Evan Berry, *Devoted to Nature: The Religious Roots of American Environmentalism* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 66. As a child, Olmsted was sent to live with Zolva Whitmore, a Congregational minister, where his early education concentrated on religious instruction. See Witold Rybczynski, *A Clearing in the Distance: Frederick Law Olmsted and America in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Scribner, 1999), 25.
19. Stoll, *Inherit the Holy Mountain*, 97.
20. Catherine Schmitt and Maureen Fournier, "Acadia's Nineteenth-Century Origins," *Friends of Acadia Journal* 23 no. 1. accessed July 24, 2018. <https://friendsofacadia.org/the-champlain-society-transcriptions/>.
21. Epp, *Creating Acadia National Park*, 93.
22. Ibid.
23. Congress converted the national monument to Lafayette National Park in 1919, and then renamed it Acadia National Park in 1929. See *ibid.*, 172, 87, and 239; and Dorr, *Story of Acadia National Park*, 50, 74, and 109.
24. Epp, *Creating Acadia National Park*, 2–3.
25. Dorr's family worshipped at the Summer Street Trinity Church in Boston, which was destroyed in 1872 by the Great Boston Fire. His funeral service was at St. Saviour's Episcopal Church in Bar Harbor. *Ibid.*, 43 and 301.
26. *Ibid.*, 172–73.
27. Stoll, *Inherit the Holy Mountain*, 115.
28. *Ibid.*, 135–36. Evan Berry also documents the religious foundations of American attitudes to nature and wilderness. See Berry, *Devoted to Nature*, 128.
29. *Acadia Always: The Story of Acadia National Park*, DVD (Bar Harbor, ME: Jeff Dobbs Productions, 2010).
30. Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 74. I utilize Bell's understanding of ritualization to highlight how tourists distinguish and privilege their activities in the places they visit much the same way that religious pilgrims ritualize pilgrimage shrines.
31. Although the claim of America's "first light" has been a standard promotional trope for Mount Desert Island for decades, this is true only in fall and winter. See Michael J. Vieira and J. North Conway, *New England Rocks: Historic Geological Wonders* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2017), 122.
32. "Sunrise-From-Mount-Cadillac Club," *Your Mount Desert Island Passbook for 1961*, Bar Harbor Times Publishing Company, Mount Desert Island Historical Society, box 9, folder 34.
33. Evan Berry explains the relationship between religious elements and American outdoor recreation in the early twentieth century. See Berry, *Devoted to Nature*, 128.



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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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