

Chebacco

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the Mount Desert Island Historical Society

HARBORING RELIGION: MISSIONARIES,
CONVERTS, AND SOJOURNERS

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Volume XX
HARBORING RELIGION:
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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 sanctuary
window, ca. 1885, artist
unknown. *Southwest Harbor
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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

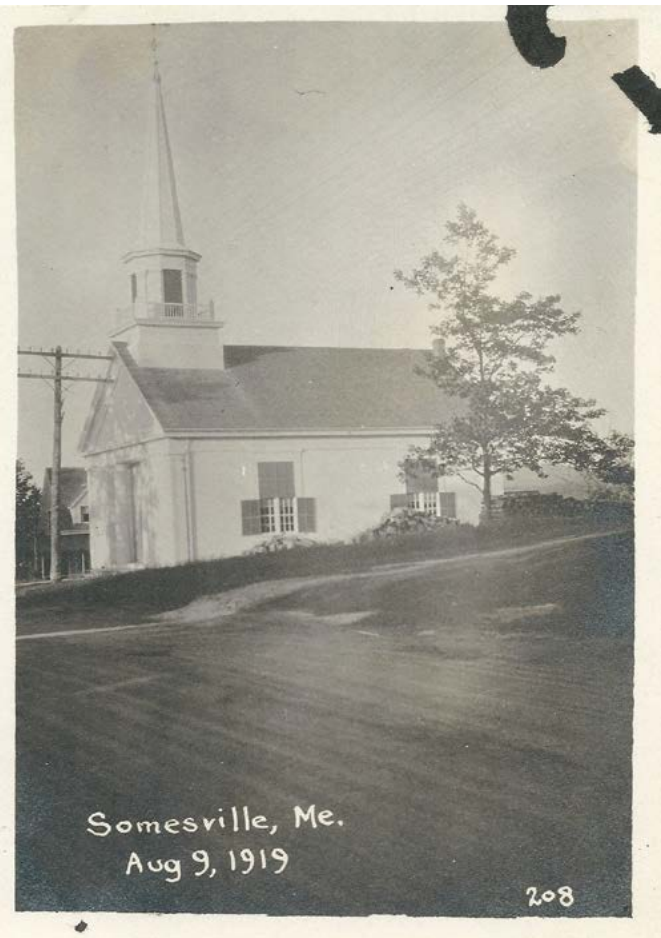
After Eaton retired in 1833, the church once again faced the challenge of finding a minister, but by this time they had outside support. The Maine Missionary Society had been formed by Congregationalists in 1807 "to send the glorious gospel to those who are destitute of the public and stated means of 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 Some

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.

Margaret Bendroth is the Executive Director of the Congregational Library and Archives in Boston and a historian of American religion. She has written widely on American fundamentalism and evangelicalism. Her most recent book, The Last Puritans: Mainline Protestants and the Power of the Past (2015), tells the story of how Congregationalists engaged with their storied history to shape their modern identity.

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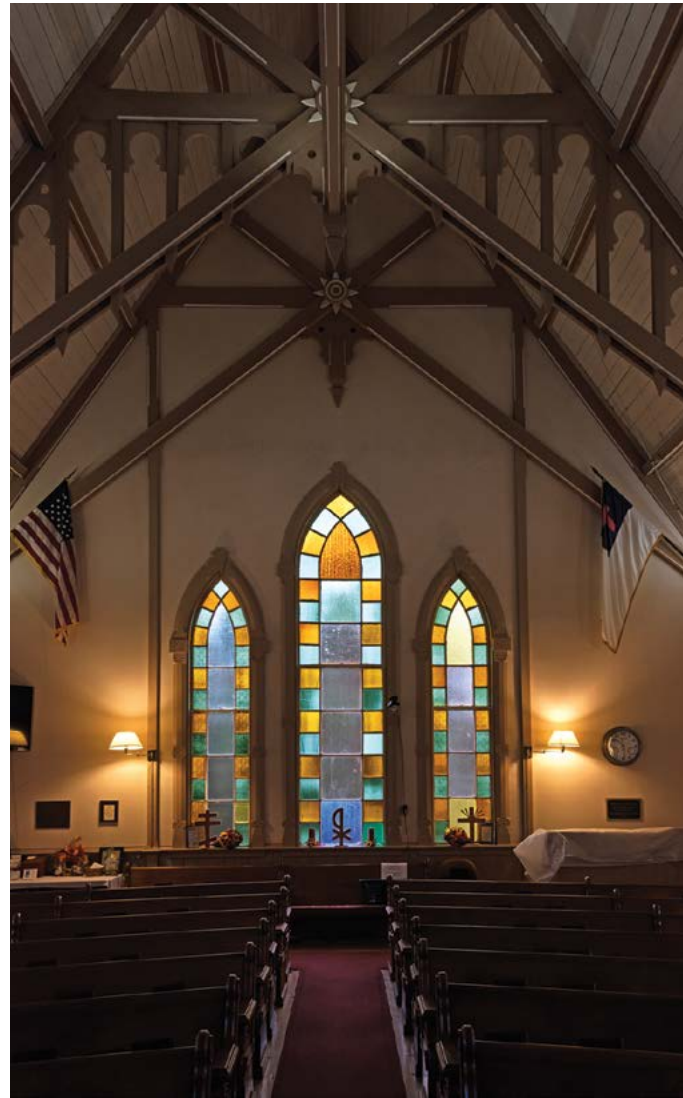
The author thanks Tim Garrity, as well as Marie Griffith and Leigh Schmidt, for careful, often life-saving editorial support, and the staff of the Congregational Library for research assistance.

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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*



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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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