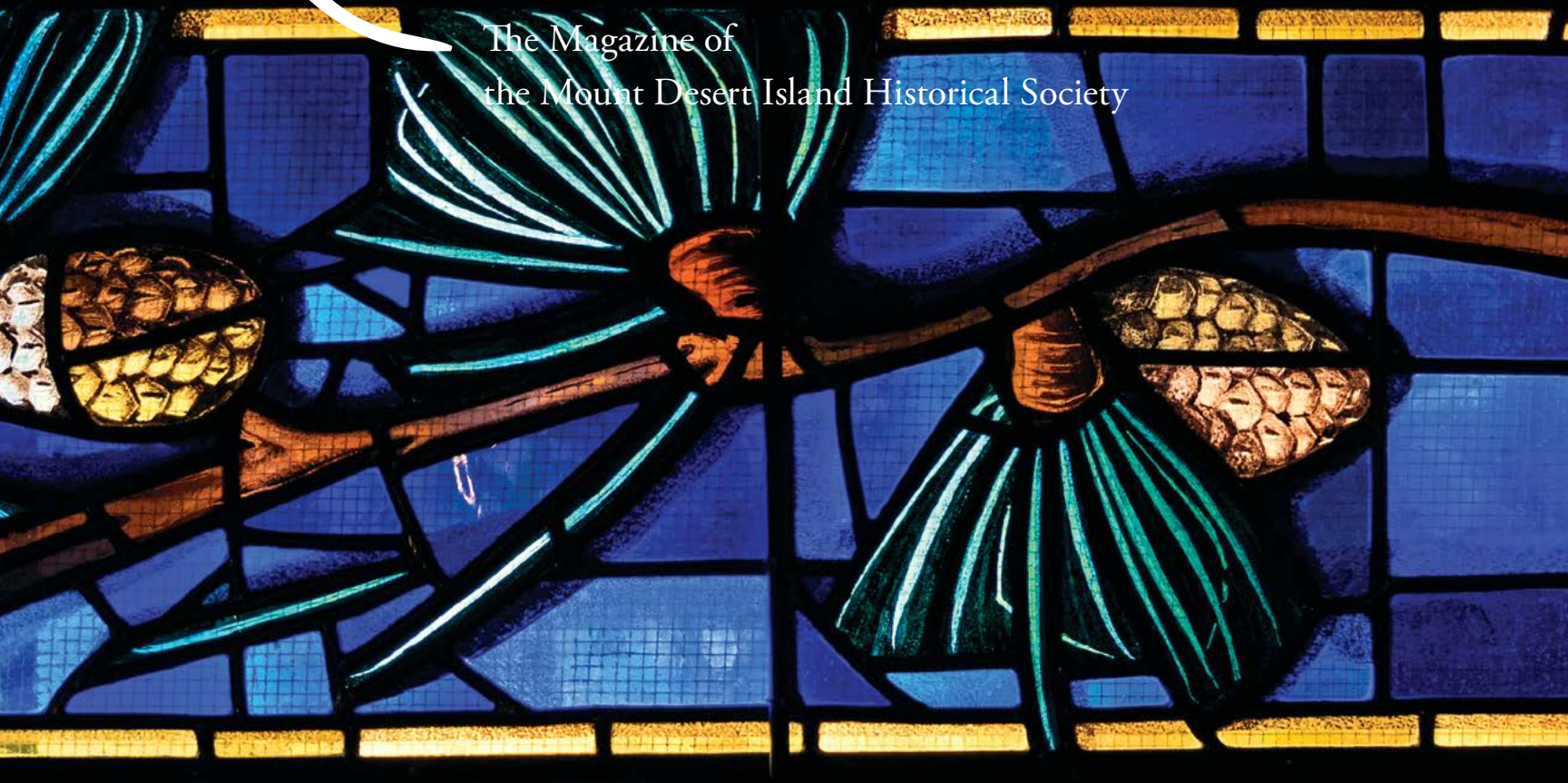
Chebacco

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. *St. Edward's Convent, Bar Harbor (currently the Bar Harbor Historical Society)*

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Elegy at Baker Island: Charles W. Eliot's Maritime Pastoral

By David A. Hollinger

This daguerreotype pictures John Gilley as a young man. *Courtesy of the Southwest Harbor Public Library Digital Archive, image 11756*

Charles W. Eliot declared that a farmer-fisherman he befriended in Northeast Harbor was the complete embodiment of what human beings were supposed to be. "We cannot but believe," the Harvard president concluded his memoir of 1899, *John Gilley of Baker's Island*, "that it is just for countless quiet, simple lives like this that God made and upholds this earth." John Gilley was one of the local residents who sold produce, fish, and poultry to the wealthy Bostonians and New Yorkers who spent their summers on Mount Desert Island. Eliot hoped that Gilley might be "a true American type." How promising the nation's destiny would be, Eliot reflected, if this remnant of coastal Maine's robust past could be a model for the future.[1]

The specific circumstances of Gilley's origin, and of his death, perfectly caught Eliot's symbolic imagination. Gilley was born in 1822 in the home of a midwife on Great Cranberry Island. His mother had travelled there from Baker Island, where she lived with her husband and nine older children. William and Hannah Gilley had this remote island as their own through what amounts to a purified re-enactment of the European occupation of that Atlantic side of North America. The small, round island four miles from the shore of Mount Desert was not inhabited, even by indigenous Americans who complicated the feeling of Europeans that American soil was theirs for the taking. The Gilley couple's act of occupation also partook of the classical American myth of "virgin land" as developed in relation to the westward movement.[2] "There it lay in the sea," wrote Eliot of the island, "unoccupied and unclaimed; and they simply took possession of it." Thus John Gilley's conception was almost immaculate, historically speaking: it happened beyond and prior to the physical and legal complexity of property rights and native populations. And when death came seventy-four years later, it struck the innocent child of nature in the mythically pure waters of the surrounding sea. Rowing from Northeast Harbor to Sutton's Island, assisted only by an untrained youth, Gilley was drowned when an October gale blew his boat westward to the mouth of Somes Sound, and capsized it.

> John Gilley had passed from a hearty and successful old age in this world, full of its legitimate interests and satisfactions, into the voiceless mystery of death. No trace of his body was ever found. It disappeared into the waters on which he played and worked as a boy and man all his long and fortunate life.[3]

Pastoral in death no less than in birth, and for decades in between, Eliot's hero was an artifact of a life that had been lost to the urban elite that came to Maine each summer.

Those Bostonians and New Yorkers were surrounded by a sprawling modernity that was anything but pastoral. The rapidly industrializing, urbanizing, ethnically diversifying events of the late-nineteenth century made men and women of Eliot's milieu all the more responsive to reminders of a world of self-sufficient families living in small, face-to-face communities. Life in the 1890s had come to be lived on a larger scale, with governments and corporations exercising more and more control over the lives of individuals. Eliot himself was one of his generation's greatest institution-builders, transforming a provincial Unitarian college of 1869 into one of the world's most cosmopolitan universities by the time he retired in 1909. In an apt turn of phrase, a discerning historian — himself a summer resident of Mount Desert! — has described the older social and economic order of the entire United States as an expanse of "island communities."[4]

Those communities were all the more precious in memory, and all the more easily idealized.[5] At least Eliot was able to develop his romantic vision of the past by meditating on a real island. Confronting nature head-on, "successive generations" developed "some of the best human qualities." Alone in a small boat out on the treacherous waters of the surrounding sea, a young lad received "admirable training in alertness, prompt-decision, resource in emergencies, and courageous steadiness in difficulties and dangers." By learning "to wring safety and success out of such adverse conditions," Eliot explained, a youth was "taught by these struggles with nature to be vigilant, patient, self-reliant, and brave." Eliot implied that the conditions of modern, urban life were less conducive to the development of these habits and capabilities. In a rare, explicit reference to the urban world, Eliot contrasted coastal Maine's panorama of unspoiled nature to "the straightened, squalid, ugly sights of a city."[6]

Charles W. Eliot. *Courtesy of Benjamin Pierce*

"West Window: Bear Island Light," 1940, designed by Agnes F. Northrop of New York, executed by Westminster Memorial Studios of New York. *St. Jude's Episcopal Church, Seal Harbor*

Nothing in Gilley's upbringing captivated Eliot more than the Gilley family's self-sufficiency. "They got their fuel, food, and clothing as products of their own skill and labor, their supplies and resources being almost all derived from the sea and from their own fields and woods." They made their own clothing from wool sheared from their own sheep. They crafted their own shoes from leather grown on the backs of their own livestock. William and Hannah Gilley and their twelve children lived a life "much more self-contained and independent than any ordinary family is today."[7] Eliot was moved by the strength, energy, and resourcefulness of Hannah Gilley and women like her. Living in complete isolation for much of every year, John Gilley's mother took "her share in the severe labors of a pioneering family." She taught all twelve of her children to read and raised all to maturity.[8]

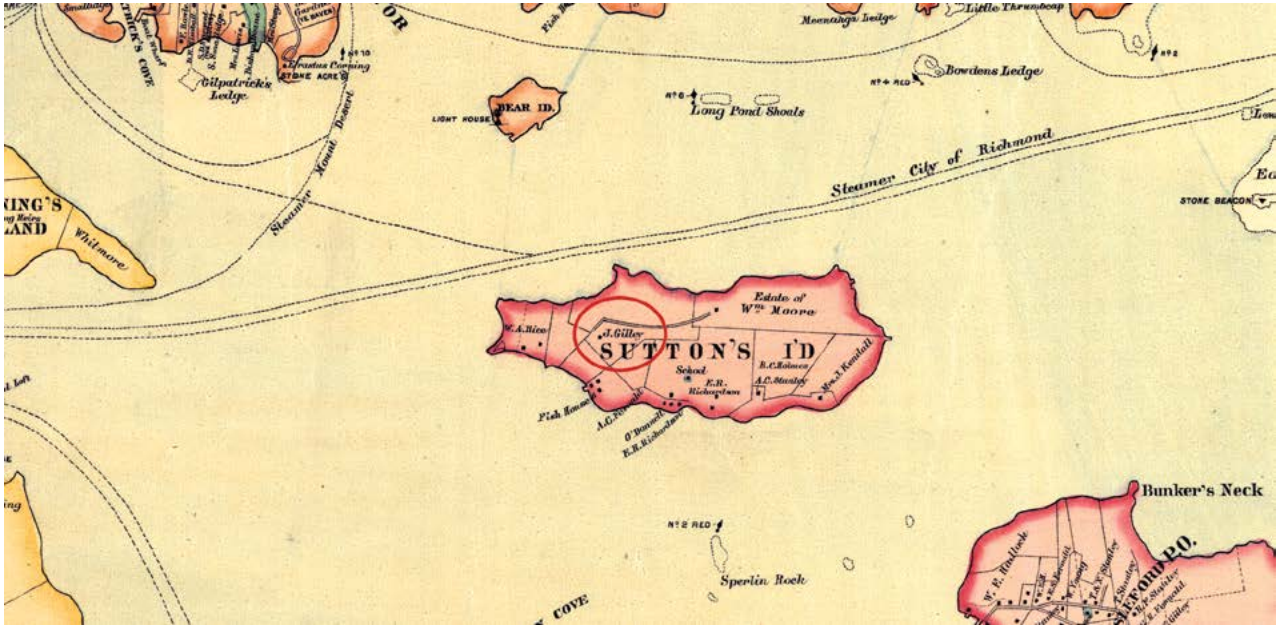
The personal quality Eliot was the most determined to ascribe to Gilley was "patient industry."[9] The noble yeoman applied himself diligently to every task, staying with it until completed. It had to be this way, because each family faced the elements almost alone. Even a family with "a good deal of property" was always close to the margin, and almost never had any kind of insurance. Occasionally, neighbors could be called upon for help, but the lack of socially interdependent institutions distinguished "island communities" like Gilley's from the solidarities of larger scale and scope being created by national leaders like Eliot. When disaster struck, one managed through "unremitting industry and frugality and an intelligent use of every resource the place afforded."[10]

Eliot's emphasis on "industry and frugality" is central to the rudimentary political economy that runs throughout *John Gilley of Baker's Island*. Eliot's account of Gilley's business enterprise describes his work as the captain of a schooner transporting goods from Boston to the summer residents of Northeast Harbor. On a small scale, Gilley was a model entrepreneur.

> He was noted among his neighbors for the care and good judgment with which he executed their various commissions, and he knew himself to be trusted by them. This business he followed for several years, paid off his debt to the seller of the schooner, and began to lay up money. It was an immense satisfaction to him to feel himself thus established in an honest business which he understood, and in which he was making his way. There are few solider satisfactions to be won in this world by anybody, in any condition of life. The scale of the business — large or small — makes little difference in the measure of content.[11]

The honest laborer was an ancient hero in English literature, and never more so than in nineteenth century America. Eliot wrote in the tradition of Maine's own Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, whose "Village Blacksmith" always had a brow "wet with honest sweat," and through arduous labor and honest dealings stayed out of debt:

> He earns whate'er he can,
> And looks the whole
> world in the face,
> For he owes not any man.[12]



This detail from an 1887 map shows Sutton's Island and the location of John Gilley's house. *Courtesy of the Library of Congress*

Eliot discerned intellectual as well as economic independence in Baker Island's cultural milieu. Gilley's mother took her children to the Congregational Church in Southwest Harbor — a journey of seven miles each way in an open boat — but she soured on the preacher's strict Calvinism, consigning many apparently good souls to eternal fire. "She bought books and read them for herself," and after years of reflection "could no longer accept the old beliefs." Hannah Lurvey Gilley became not only a Unitarian, like Eliot, but went all the way to the farthest shore of New England's religious liberalism: she "became a Universalist, to which more cheerful faith she adhered till her death."[13]

Such honest, independent inquiry appealed to Eliot in his role as an earnest advocate of the advancement of modern science. Mount Desert had no laboratories of the sort Eliot was building in Cambridge, but there are unmistakable parallels between Eliot's ethical image of science and his sense of the culture of the Gilley family. The ideal scientist was a humble and honest man of steady habits, laboring patiently, diligently, modestly, and without prejudice. When speaking at the opening of the American Museum of Natural History in 1878, the Harvard president extolled "the peculiar kind of human mind" produced by the practice

of scientific inquiry. It was a "searching, open, humble mind… patiently and enthusiastically devoted to the pursuit of such little new truth as is within its grasp."[14] No self-aggrandizing bravado here, no Byronic ego, no Young-Werther-like indulgences of melancholy self-pity; rather, the scientist was the ultimate embodiment of deeply Protestant petit-bourgeois virtue. And thus, not so very different from John Gilley.

Eliot was also moved by Gilley's relative anonymity. "History and biography alike neglect these humble, speechless multitudes," Eliot wrote in an idiom similar to the "history from the bottom up" slogans of the late twentieth century. Eliot opened *John Gilley of Baker's Island* in just this voice. "This little book describes with accuracy the actual life of one of the to-be-forgotten millions." So important was this framing that Eliot returned to it at the end:

> This is the life of one of the forgotten millions. It contains no material for distinction, fame, or long remembrance; but it does contain the material and present the scene for a normal human development through mingled joy and sorrow, labor and rest, adversity and success, and through the tender loves of childhood, maturity, and age.[15]

This sentence of Eliot's, like many others, follows conventions put firmly in place by Thomas Gray's poem of a century and a half before, "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard."[16] Eliot does not cite Gray, but he need not have. Most of his readers would have known many of its verses by heart. It was the most widely quoted poem during Eliot's lifetime. Gazing at the tombstones surrounding a rural church, the poet ponders the lives of the dead who were unknown beyond the village.

> Let not Ambition mock
> their useful toil,
> Their homely joys,
> and destiny obscure;
> Nor Grandeur hear with
> a disdainful smile
> The short and simple
> annals of the poor.

Do not suppose is it a result of any fault of their own, Gray warns "ye proud," that "o'r their tomb no trophies raise." Who knows what talent and virtue the neglected multitudes may have possessed?

> Some mute inglorious
> Milton here may rest,
> Some Cromwell guiltless
> of his country's blood.

Gray imagined these souls living their lives "Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife," where "Their sober wishes never learned to stray." Simple and quiet, like John Gilley,

> Along the cool sequester'd vale of life
> They kept the noiseless
> tenor of their way.

The point is not that Eliot should have acknowledged Gray, but rather that Eliot lived in a moral universe suffused with sentiments like Gray's. Gilley was not a Milton or a Cromwell, but Eliot wanted to make sure someone recognized his value. "Full many a flow'r is born to blush unseen," wrote Gray. "Full many

a gem of purest ray serene, The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear." Not the gem of John Gilley. Eliot would rescue his memory from those ocean caves.

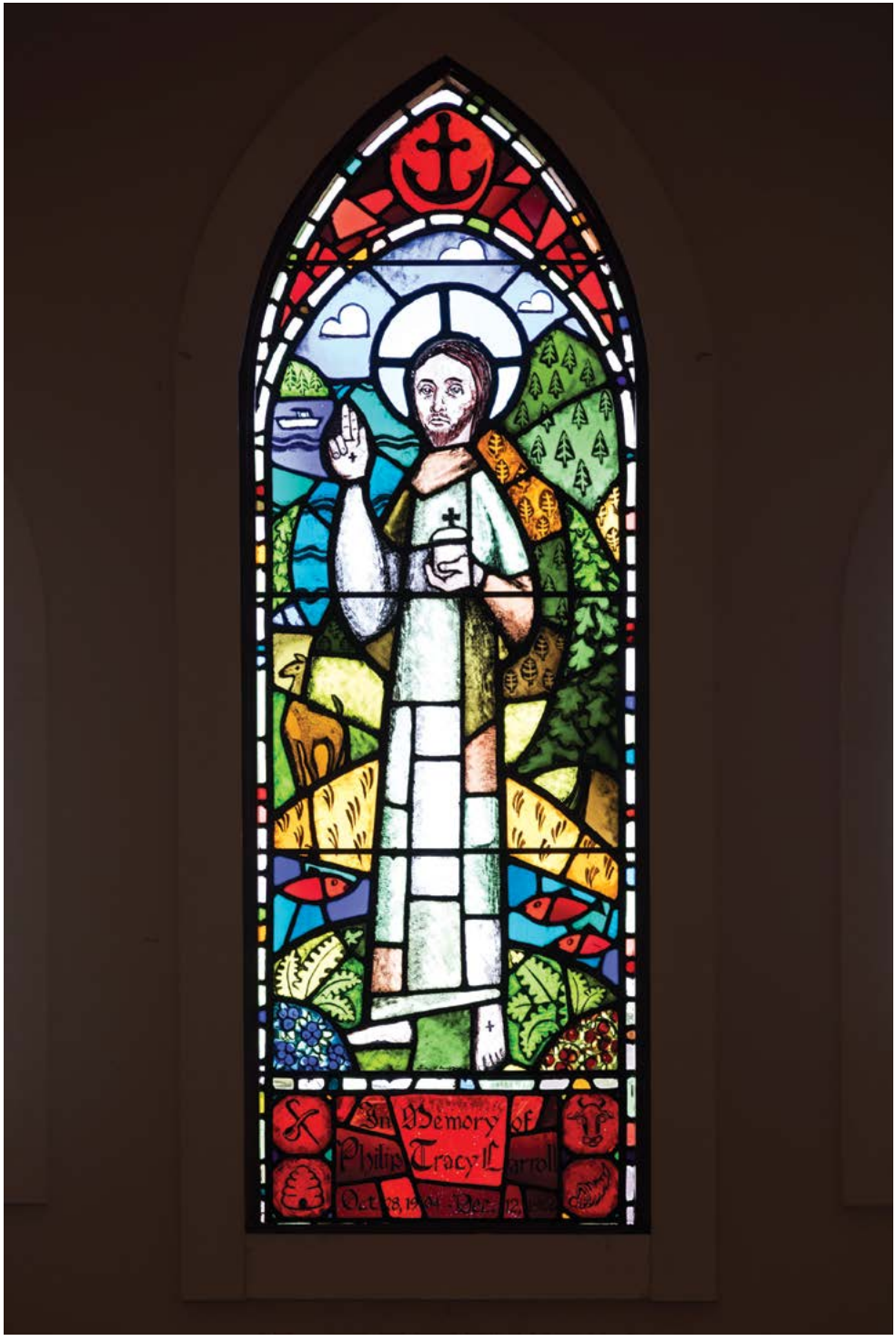
Eliot wrote at the same historical moment that Frederick Jackson Turner voiced the worry that American democracy might suffer because the frontier was disappearing. Only six years before Eliot wrote his memoir of Gilley, the young Wisconsin historian published "The Significance of the Frontier in American History."[17] There is no reason to suppose that Eliot was thinking about Turner, or about the end of the era of "free land" in the American West. But Eliot's uncertainty that modern, urban life could mold the personal character he thought Americans needed was evident throughout his lament for a way of life found in the Eastern Seaboard's closest equivalent to a frontier. No land was more virgin than Baker Island, and no American pioneer more easily admired than John Gilley.

Yet Eliot's vision was broader than Turner's, and his engagements more enduring. Turner offered a narrow understanding of American history that altogether ignored slavery and the Civil War on the one hand, and the power of English-derived institutions on the other. Turner's ideas were ascendant during the era of Jim Crow, from the 1890s through the 1940s, after which they were resoundingly discredited. The "Frontier Thesis" appealed to generations of white Americans who did not want to think about race and

John Gilley is pictured here with his second wife, Mary Jane (Wilkinson) Gilley, at home on Sutton Island. *Courtesy of Southwest Harbor Public Library Digital Archive, image 9564*

who often regarded the Civil War sentimentally, as a conflict between moral equals. Eliot was certainly sentimental about John Gilley and his kind, but among wealthy Anglo-Protestants of his generation, Eliot was a vigorous egalitarian.[18]

Charles W. Eliot fought against many of the prejudices of his own class and culture. After retiring, he opposed the anti-Jewish quotas brought to Harvard by his successor, A. Lawrence Lowell. *John Gilley of Baker's Island* shows Eliot to have been a man of his time and place, but in his actions as a university president and public figure, like Hannah Lurvey Gilley in her religious journey, he critically assessed inherited belief.[19] Eliot tried to bridge the gap between the future of Boston and the past of Baker Island. It was a stretch, but not a bridge too far.



Window above altar, ca. 1967, Susan Dunlap. *St. John the Divine Episcopal Church, Southwest Harbor*

David A. Hollinger is Preston Hotchkis Professor of History Emeritus at the University of California, Berkeley. He is a former President of the Organization of American Historians, and has been elected to the American Philosophical Society and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. His most recent book is Protestants Abroad: How Missionaries Tried to Change the World but Changed America *(2017). His previous works include* After Cloven Tongues of Fire *(2013), and* Science, Jews, and Secular Culture *(1996). He has served as a Trustee of the Institute for Advanced Study and of the National Humanities Center.*

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1. Charles W. Eliot, *John Gilley of Baker's Island* (Eastern National Park and Monument Association, 1967), 4, 72. I cite this edition of piece, first published in book form in 1904 by the American Unitarian Association but originally published as an article in *The Century Magazine*, 1899. Modern usage is Baker, not Baker's, and I will follow the modern practice except when quoting Eliot.

2. Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950), remains after nearly seven decades one of the most influential scholarly works ever written about the culture of the United States.

3. Eliot, *Gilley*, 5, 8, 71.

4. Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877–1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), esp. 44. Prior to his death in 2000, Wiebe owned property near Bernard and spent many summers there.

5. For evocative hints of what life was really like on Baker Island about the time Eliot wrote and shortly thereafter, see the remarkable collection of photographs, "The Gilley-Stanley Family on Baker Island," in the Public Library of Southwest Harbor, Maine: https://swhplibrary.net/digitalarchive/items/show/6673. Many of these photographs are displayed in a new, impressive effort to describe the life on Baker Island and the surrounding islands: Cornelia J. Cesari, *Baker Island* (Mt. Pleasant, SC: Arcadia, 2018).

6. Eliot, *Gilley*, 23, 26–27.

7. Eliot, *Gilley*, 24–25.

8. Eliot, *Gilley*, 10–11. Eliot's frontispiece included an inscription from the Water Gate at the Chicago World's Fair of 1893: "To the brave women who in solitude amid strange dangers and heavy toil reared families and made homes."

9. Eliot, *Gilley*, e.g., 39, 48, 57, 61.

10. Eliot, *Gilley*, 24–25, 36, 46, 57–58.

11. Eliot, *Gilley*, 34–35.

12. Longfellow's heavily didactic ("Thanks, thanks to thee, my worthy friend, for the lesson thou has taught," etc.) "The Village Blacksmith" is conveniently prominent on the website of the Maine Historical Society: http://www.hwlongfellow.org/poems_poem.php?pid=38. Longfellow was born in Portland, Maine and was an 1825 graduate of Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine.

13. Eliot, *Gilley*, 24.

14. Charles W. Eliot, "Address," *Popular Science Monthly* 7 (1878), 473. See also, for the proximity of clergy to scientists in Eliot's mind, Charles W. Eliot, "On the Education of Ministers," *Princeton Review* 59 (1883): 345–346.

15. Eliot, *Gilley*, 4, 71–72.

16. Gray's Elegy, written in 1750, was included in Eliot's famous *Harvard Classics*, vol. 40, 414. It is most easily accessible at https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44299/elegy-written-in-a-country-churchyard.

17. Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," first published in 1893, has often been reprinted. It is easily available from the American Historical Association in a slightly abbreviated text at https://www.historians.org/about-aha-and-membership/aha-history-and-archives/historical-archives/the-significance-of-the-frontier-in-american-history.

18. For Eliot's career, see Hugh Hawkins, *Between Harvard and America: The Educational Leadership of Charles W. Eliot* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972).

19. In a rarely noticed aside, Eliot reported that the Lurvey family of John Gilley's mother descended from a Jewish immigrant from Russia. Eliot, *Gilley*, 9.

Detail of "Angel of Praise," 1893, Louis Comfort Tiffany, USA. *St. Saviour's Episcopal Church, Bar Harbor*

MOUNT DESERT ISLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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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.

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

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