

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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The Magazine of the Mount Desert Island Historical Society

Volume XX
HARBORING RELIGION:
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2019
Mount Desert, Maine

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

This publication is made possible by the generous support of

Peter and Sofia Blanchard


George and Nancy Putnam

Members of the Mount Desert Island Historical Society

and

The participating organizations of the History Trust, who are working to create a collective digital archive and hand down the region's historical collections intact, cataloged, digitized, and fully accessible to future generations. The History Trust participants are the Bar Harbor Village Improvement Association, College of the Atlantic, Great Harbor Maritime Museum, Great Cranberry Island Historical Society, Islesford Historical Society, Jesup Memorial Library, Maine Seacoast Mission, Mount Desert Island Historical Society, Seal Cove Auto Museum, Southwest Harbor Historical Society, and Tremont Historical Society

We would also like to acknowledge the Southwest Harbor Public Library Digital Archive and the assistance of Charlotte Morrill and George Soules in obtaining many of the historical photographs that illustrate this issue.



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 "Shabbat," 1986,
Nancy O'Neal. *Beth Abraham*
Orthodox Synagogue, Bangor

The Jewish Presence, or Absence Thereof...

By Judith S. Goldstein

American history is an essential part of our national enterprise, embracing a unique identity, mission and culture of unlimited opportunities. Within that history, land was the prize. It was the basic source of wealth, prosperity and mythology on a continent inhabited by Native Americans before the insatiable incursions from European countries. This magisterial national vision purports to benefit all as pioneers, settlers, frontiersmen and women, and preservationists wrested America's democracy and power from the land. In practice, the land has been used to benefit some at the often-dire expense of others. Violence and unequal access to resources resulted in compromises and contradictions in the national ethos.

Mount Desert Island, starting in the late 1800s, has a special place in the American narrative of land-based exclusion and inclusion, particularly in regard to a Jewish presence — or absence thereof. The summer social colonies that flourished from the 1880s into the mid-twentieth century provided the island with its first taste of national prominence. Its reputation, and eventually its idealized history, was founded on a blend of old and new wealth and society. Despite its glitter, the summer colony drew much of its force from a pessimistic view of America's future. Paradoxically, the dual seeds of wealth and despair contained a

new bounty of democratic practices. As a testing ground for both conservative and progressive ideas, Mount Desert Island fostered one of America's great conservation efforts that ultimately benefited an inclusive national and international public.

In *Landscape and Memory*, the historian Simon Schama linked "continental expansiveness" with "the heroic destiny of the New World." This was a macro American perspective of national pride and identity. He also invoked the micro: "the landscapes can be self-consciously designed to express the virtues of a particular political or social community." The history of Mount Desert Island partakes of both perspectives. Rusticators — the summer residents — populated an exquisite island to reinvigorate America's "heroic destiny" as well as built a community based on Anglo-Saxon culture and Protestant faith.¹

According to the seminal American social and political historian John Higham, summer colonies reflected a loss of faith, particularly among a cadre of Boston's Brahmin intelligentsia, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.² Urbanization, industrialization, advances in transportation, and the unwanted presence of millions of new immigrants from eastern and southern Europe, especially Jews, drove the desire to escape from fetid summer cities. At the edge of the Atlantic Ocean, Mount Desert Island attracted patricians, the new rich, academics and professionals, mainly from eastern cities.

By the turn of the century, the presence of millions of poor Jews threatened the confidence of upper class Protestant society. Escaping restrictive, impoverished and often violent societies, Jews sought refuge in America. By 1914, in New York

alone about 1.3 million Jews lived in tenements and slums with a distinct religion, language and culture, meager economic assets, and strikingly different physical appearances.³ Included among the "new immigrants" of Slavs and Italians, Jews were deemed of lesser value than America's "old immigrants" and as un-American and destructive of the founders' work and mission. Among the new immigrants, Jews were the most visible, upwardly mobile and aspiring as they sought to tap into the country's resources and established societies.

Within the inter-city aristocracy, fear and competitive tensions led to xenophobia, nativism, and new forms of racism. "For the New Englander," the historian Barbara Miller Solomon wrote, "the immigrant, like the Southern Negro and the rude Westerner, was a semi-barbarian, outside 'the pale of civilization.'"⁴ She further observed that "Four generations removed from New England's prime, these Brahmins entered adulthood in the 1890s with the conviction that neither the economic nor the social promises of democracy seemed to work in the divided society of rich and poor, native and foreigner, educated and illiterate, Anglo-Saxon and the scum of Europe."⁵

Designed to reinforce Anglo-Saxon wealth, prestige and dominance, the Mount Desert Island model of escape spread throughout the country. At a propitious time, Bar Harbor, Northeast Harbor, and Seal Harbor entered the national narrative as three jewels in the competitive and socially stratified constellations of the Gilded Age. The wealthy invaders — the rusticators — fit their new communities into the Protestant foundations of hardworking, resourceful, white "colonial settlers." They built modest villages after having eliminated the claims to the island's land from Native Americans, French and British explorers, and land-hungry entrepreneurs. The settlers and their descendants, however, did not maintain their

dominance and authority for long. The local economy, along with much of New England's rural population, stagnated in the post-Civil War period. Then, in another reversal of fortune, the island residents found new sources of income and work as the rusticators constructed their communities of exclusion and Anglo-Saxon renewal. Much of the local population converted itself, absent the labor strife present in cities, into a service economy to erect and maintain the lavish physical and social infrastructure required for summer colonies.

The perfect combination of a stunning, cool natural landscape and Anglo-Saxon foundations produced new value and social investments on the island. The acclaimed summer colonies of the late nineteenth century pioneered in land-based prejudice. "It was after all at the beaches and watering-places," wrote Harvard historians Oscar and Mary Handlin, "that the putative aristocracy was most anxious to withdraw to itself so that appropriate groups' feelings would be cultivated and so that the proper friendships among the young people would grow into proper marriages. ... As the century drew to a close, the pattern of exclusion spread back from the resorts to the cities, penetrated the clubs and societies, and even the philanthropic associations."⁶

Louis Marshall, a brilliant legal mind and leader of the newly established American Jewish Committee, testified to the efficacy of the exclusionary strategy in summer resorts. Referring to an incident of discrimination, Marshall wrote:



In 1881, the humor magazine *Puck* illustrated the segregation of Jews in resort communities.
Courtesy of the Library of Congress

This is but one of hundreds of incidents of like nature which have occurred not only in New Jersey but in New York and New England during the past ten years, and conditions are now such that there is scarcely a hotel in Atlantic City, in the Adirondacks, Catskills or on the New England coast which does not make it most uncomfortable for any Jew who desires accommodations. Of recent years this abuse has

been carried to such an extent that printed advertisements and announcements appear in the newspapers, circulars, letters, cards, railroad literature etc., announcing that the owners of various hotels and places of amusement do not solicit or cater to Hebrew patronage, or have exclusively Christian patronage, or in other offensive ways discriminate against Jews.⁷

As the forces of discrimination against Jews intensified in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, patrician snobbery and prejudice started to morph into pseudo-scientific beliefs based on racial categories. Eugenics sought to preserve northern European, Anglo-Saxon white society. The new theories, constituting an ideology, not only reinforced perennial anti-black and anti-Native American racial attitudes but also expanded these attitudes to include Jews in America. Through sterilization, miscegenation laws, and restrictions on immigration, eugenicists sought to stem social contagion and the deterioration of the American democracy.

The American eugenics movement, in concert with European scientists and ideologues, developed roots in New York, Boston and soon, nationwide. Eugenicists touched down on Mount Desert Island through three leading figures of the American Eugenics Society: Dr. Clarence Cook Little, founder of the Jackson Laboratory, Madison Grant, author of the *The Passing of the Great Race*, and David Starr Jordan, the first President of Stanford University. The three could be sure that on Mount Desert Island they would not mix with Jews, whom they considered undesirable and inferior. In fact, there was hardly a Jewish presence. Over several decades, only a few Jews had come to the island: peddlers who traveled from Bangor to the island; a small number of store owners in Bar Harbor; and a few distinguished men such as Jacob Schiff and Henry Morgenthau, who reached heights of financial power and sought



Clarence Cook Little sat for this portrait in 1951, when he was President of the University of Michigan. *Courtesy of the University of Michigan*

entry into the summer colony on Mount Desert Island. But the island's reputation held firm as a refuge from diversity.

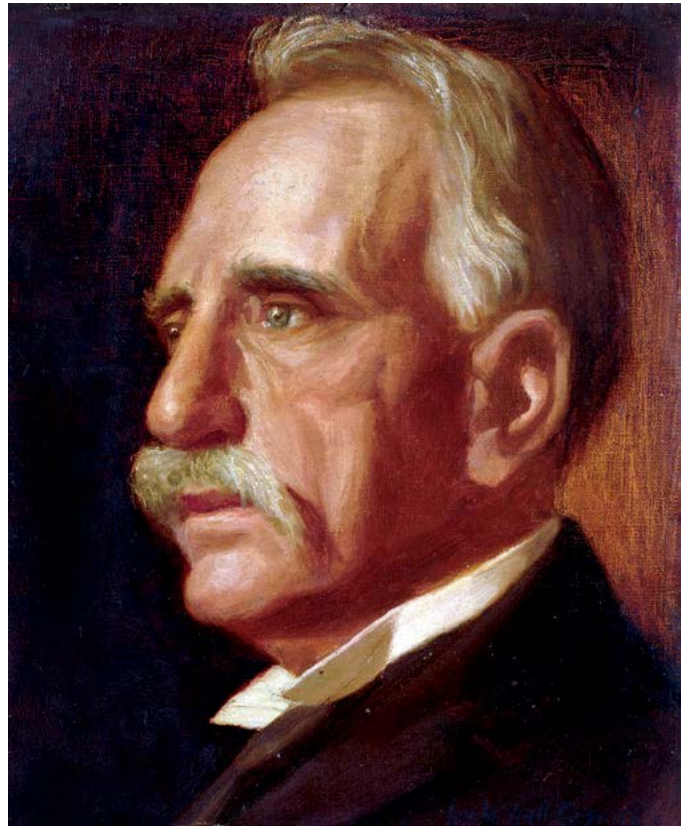
Of the three, Little left the strongest impression on the island. George B. Dorr, a Boston Brahmin who dedicated his life to protecting the island's landscape and promoting it as a site of scientific and cultural distinction, invited Little to establish the Jackson Laboratory in 1929. Although the Lab, under Little's strong leadership, apparently never focused on eugenics research, he consistently maintained his strong credentials in the eugenics movement. He was a founding member of the Eugenics Committee of the United States of America, and served as President of the American Eugenics Society from 1928–1929. He remained on its board as an active advocate from 1923 to 1935.⁸

David Starr Jordan, president of Cornell and then Stanford, was an established educator and scientist who enjoyed a prominent public role and distinction as an island visitor. While Starr did not endorse the extreme measures of sterilization or immigration restriction as did Little, Jordan thought the new immigrants incapable of meeting American standards. In 1924 he wrote: "It is easy to recognize that the Irish, the Greeks, the South Italians and the Polish Jews contain largely elements permanently deficient in the best traits we hope for in America. ... They are controlled by emotions, animal instincts, subliminal tendencies and the like, instead of by brains and will. A republic can be successful only to the degree in which men of self-control, governed by their minds, are in the lead."⁹

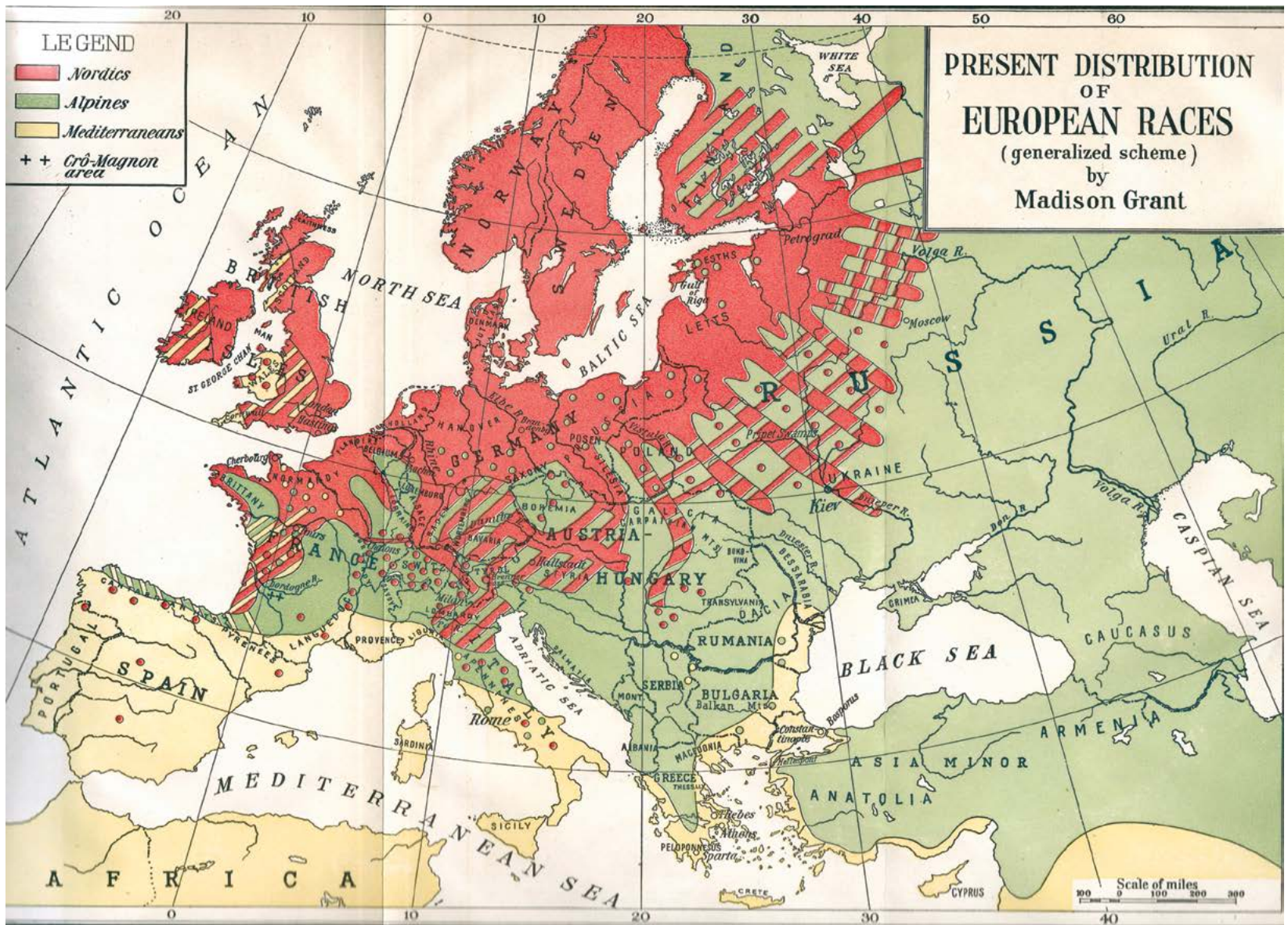
The third prominent eugenicist summer visitor was Madison Grant. A rich member of New York society, he emerged as the impassioned leader of the American and international eugenics movement supported by scientists, politicians, educators and journalists. Grant's major work, *The Passing of the Great Race*, published in 1916 and again in 1923, was the handbook of the anti-immigrant movement that Hitler referred to as "my Bible."¹⁰

Mount Desert was the perfect place for Grant to nurture two of his passionate causes: promoting the Anglo-Saxon heritage through eugenics and protecting America's landscape. He was a prominent figure in the Save the Redwoods League, several national parks, the American Museum of Natural History, and the New York Zoological Society. In Grant's mind, eugenics and conservation stemmed from the same source. The dual goals were, in Grant's words, "attempts to save as much as possible of the old America." According to his biographer, Jonathan Peter Spiro, the two objectives meshed perfectly — a superior white race was the protector of blessed American landscape.¹¹

While most conservationists were wealthy and patrician — and many were deeply disturbed by the "new immigrants" — not all conservationists shared Grant's racist exclusionary views as a justification for protecting America's landscape. In fact, guardians of land, as David Brooks referred to them, discovered new frontiers of the spirit.¹² On Mount Desert Island, the spirit emerged through the perseverance of Charles W. Eliot, one



David Starr Jordan, island visitor and President of Stanford University, wrote: "It is easy to recognize that the Irish, the Greeks, the South Italians and the Polish Jews contain largely elements permanently deficient in the best traits we hope for in America." *Courtesy of Bancroft Library, University of California*



Madison Grant's *Passing of the Great Race* described "Nordic" people as the "blue-eyed, fair-haired peoples of the north of Europe" and "Alpine" people as the "dark-haired, dark-eyed" of southern Europe. His book was known as the Bible of the anti-immigrant movement.

of New England's greatest progressive thinkers. His inspiration came in part from his son, also Charles Eliot, an imaginative and strategic-thinking Boston landscape architect who worked to preserve the city's landscape to meet the needs of a growing public. Starting in the early years of the twentieth century, Charles W. Eliot, George B. Dorr, and John D. Rockefeller Jr. contrived to keep major parts of the island's landscape free from balkanized private ownership and commercial development. In 1916, thousands of acres of the island's mountains and forests were donated to the federal government to establish the first national park east of the Mississippi River. In exchange for protection of the landscape, the national public gained ownership and access irrespective of race, religion, or national ancestry.

Such were the cross-currents of American democracy. While conservationists opened the land to the public on Mount Desert Island and elsewhere in the country, the nation closed itself off to immigrants from eastern and southern Europe. Grant, Little, and others in the American Eugenics Society had triumphed. In 1924, Congress finally passed the long-sought objectives of the Boston-based Immigration Restriction League and national supporters of eugenics. A quota system, based on the eugenic ideology of racial distinctions, severely restricted immigration from places other than northern Europe.¹³ In a decade of suspicions and fears, discriminatory practices against Jews already settled

in the country intensified in employment, residential housing, educational institutions, medical practices, and cultural associations.

By the 1920s and into the 1930s, Mount Desert Island was no longer the thriving summer center of an intercity Christian aristocracy or the front line of prejudice. The Depression cut through the old wealth, although many families remained committed to the island. The aura of exclusion and prejudice prevailed as the summer colonies supported clubs and hotels that held tightly to the keys of exclusion. The local population of the island proved to be fertile ground for the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s. Two of the largest popular demonstrations in the island's history took place in Bar Harbor and Northeast Harbor in 1924.¹⁴ Although drawn from different classes, the Klan, with 30,000 members in Maine, and the eugenics movement were agents of white supremacy intersecting on the island.

It was only after the Second World War that the powerful grip of patrician anti-Semitism and eugenic beliefs began to break down throughout the country. The war transformed America: it became the leader of the democratic world, an economic behemoth, a country able to absorb and reward the hard work of its diverse populations — except for blacks and Native Americans. The racist ideology, taken to its genocidal extreme in Germany, was no longer acceptable in Europe or applicable to Jews in America. Grant and his eugenicist friends were discredited for having given outspoken support for the racial policies of the Nazis and the crafting of the Nuremberg Laws.¹⁵

The war was transformative for Jews in America. The devastation in Europe and the defeat of the Fascists deepened the attachment of Jews to the country. No one has described that Jewish adoption of American identity better than the writer Philip Roth — the prejudice so prevalent

before the war; the sense of belonging after it; the transition from exclusion to inclusion in the American imagination, culture, and language.

One's American connection overrode everything, one's American claim was beyond question... . There had been a great disturbance to the old rules. One was ready now as never before to stand up to intimidation and intolerance, and, instead of just bearing what one formerly put up with, one was equipped to set foot wherever one chose. The American adventure was one's engulfing fate.¹⁶

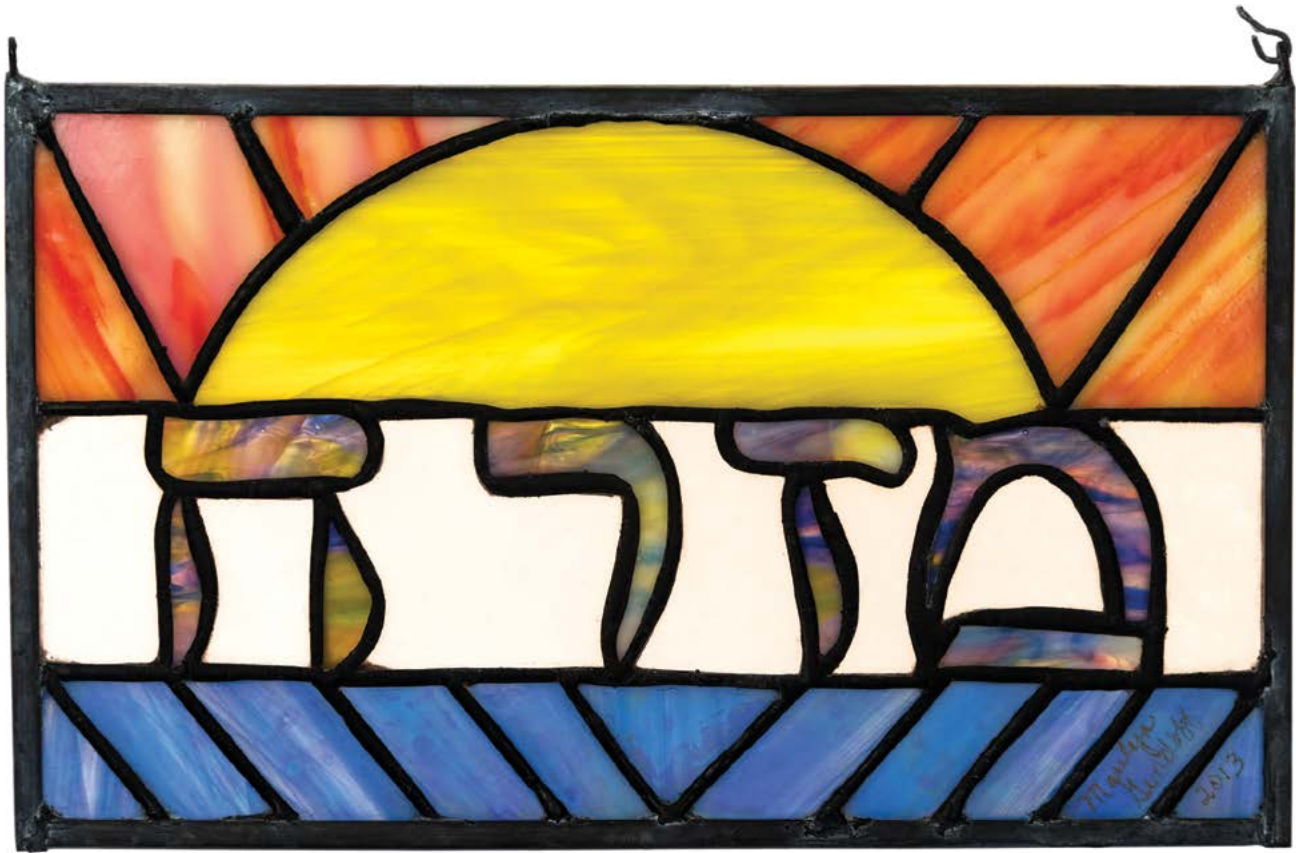
It was a sense of participating in the American adventure that brought a small number of Jewish refugees from Europe to Acadia National Park in the late 1940s and '50s. They built modest camps for summer use on the western side of the island miles away from Bar Harbor, Northeast, and Seal Harbor. They were hardly noticed except by those who sold them land and houses. While the refugees established the first communal Jewish presence, they built no synagogue to claim a place among Christian churches. The refugees sought no recognition — just the pleasure of the landscape as a summer haven. In the 1950s and 1960s, hotels in Maine gradually gave up their discriminatory practices against Jews. The hold of the Christian patrician class on corporations, medicine, professional practices, and legal and financial institutions gradually abated. Colleges and universities slowly abandoned their quota systems. Research centers such as the Jackson Laboratory and the Mount Desert Biological Laboratory attracted the attention of Jewish scientists and students and threw off the aura of exclusionary practices. Other Jews found their way to the island.

The Jewish refugees, scientists, and others shared Roth's claim to belong to America and its land. "As a novelist," he wrote, "I think of myself,

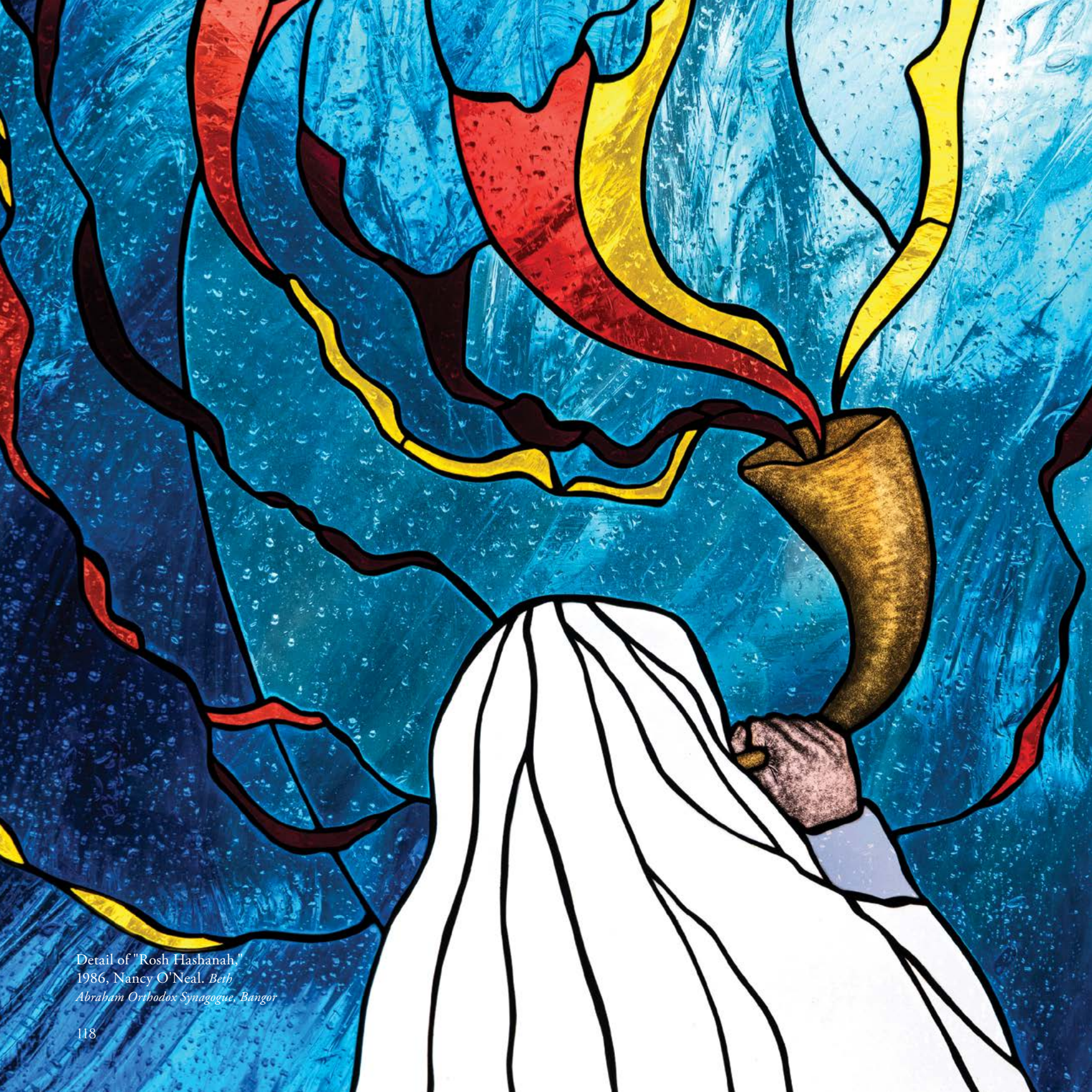
and have from the beginning, as a free American and — though I am hardly unaware of the general prejudice that persisted against my kind till not that long ago — as irrefutably American, fastened throughout my life to the American moment, under the spell of the country's past, partaking of its drama and destiny, and writing in the rich native tongue by which I am possessed."¹⁷ Mount Desert Island's history belongs to that "drama and destiny" with its particular history of land, community, and American dreams.

In 2017 and 2018, President Donald Trump and many in the Republican Party and their supporters referred longingly to the late nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth centuries, when white America suppressed Black and Native Americans, and immigration from Asia, eastern Europe, and southern Europe was radically restricted. Incendiary language — raw and coded — in the 2016 election and afterwards sought to pit white America against immigrants and racial and ethnic minorities. Verbal violence and actual acts of violence were powered up in the ongoing contest for political power. In the summer of 2017, events in Charlottesville, Virginia, evoked tensions seemingly left behind after World War II and the civil rights movement. The shootings in Pittsburgh in November 2018 made many American Jews conscious of both the preciousness and precariousness of their lives in America's liberal democratic and pluralistic society.

The President and his party cast America's pluralistic society as a danger



This Mizrach hangs in the home of Helene and Murray Tuchman in Bernard. According to Helene Tuchman, "Mizrach,' meaning 'east' in Hebrew, is a piece of ritual art which is placed on the east wall or window of a home to indicate in which direction to pray. Jews try to face east towards Jerusalem when praying."



Detail of "Rosh Hashanah,"
1986, Nancy O'Neal. *Beth
Abraham Orthodox Synagogue, Bangor*

to the country's mission and greatness. In despair, David Brooks asked: "So what are the resources we can use to pull ourselves together?" For solace he turned to the land as an idealized foundation. "Throughout our history, the American identity has been shaped by nature, by how our wilderness molds, inspires and binds us. ... From the nation's founding, Americans had a sense that their continent's vast and beautiful abundance gave their nation a unifying destiny and mission."¹⁸ In these troubled times, the American narrative of this beautiful island — from exclusivity to inclusivity — is part of our country's liberal democratic promise.

Judith S. Goldstein is the founder and Executive Director of Humanity in Action, which since 1997 has organized international educational programs in seven countries focused on liberal democracies, pluralism, and human rights. She received her Masters and PhD in history from Columbia University. She has published several books and articles about European and American history, art and landscape architecture. She is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, the Frances Perkins Center, and the Somes Pond Center Boards.

Acknowledgement: With thanks to Betsy Hewlett who read closely and advised well.

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The Mount Desert Island Historical Society is a nonprofit, 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization. All donations are tax-deductible to the amount allowed by law.

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.



Published annually by the Mount Desert Island Historical Society, Mount Desert, Maine