



East Bunker Ledge. *Photograph by Bob Thayer*

A Cloud of Witnesses

Tim Garrity

The noted environmental historian William Cronon wrote, “All too often, historians study the human past without attending to nature. All too often, scientists study nature without attending to human history.”¹

In this sixteenth volume of *Chebacco*, we have attended to the land, sea, and the human story. We call this issue *Waves of Change* and have asked writers of natural and human history to report on the mutable land and seascape of Mount Desert Island.

The testimony of history is all around us. Documentary evidence abounds in island libraries, museums, and historical societies and, increasingly, online. Yet, even if all our archival collections of documents and images were suddenly lost, the island would shout out her story: in this place there were tall mountains covered in ice piled four times the height of Cadillac Mountain, a frozen mass so heavy and inexorable it pressed the land down into the sea, scraped the mountains bare, carved out Somes Sound and the island’s deep ponds, and plowed the rubble out to Cape Cod and Georges Bank.

The sea would yield her evidence too. She would declare that after ice, there was abundance: five-foot cod, and lobsters scattered on the shore at low tide, whales, seals, and porpoises, and for a time, walruses and mammoths. There were runs of smelt, herring, and alewives that turned streams to liquid silver—as if you could cross on their backs. In

the air were flocks of passenger pigeons so vast they blocked out the sun for hours and sounded like a thousand threshers flailing the sky.

From natural and historical evidence we know this: soon after the glacier melted and withdrew, humans moved in and called this mountainous place *Pesamkuk*.² More time passed, and a European declared the name of the place would be *Isle des Monts-Déserts*, the island of barren mountains. The mountains are barren because they are topped with granite, a name that comes from the Latin *granum*, or grain, for the crystals of quartz, feldspar, and hornblende that collected before the molten rock slowly cooled to a solid, insulated by hundreds of meters of earth. Why is all that earth no longer there? Moving glaciers plowed it away, leaving polished stone and scratches and gouges that show the southerly direction of travel.

For the document you hold in your hands (or the set of pixels that glows before you), we have gathered and interpreted evidence of a changing environment. Hellmut Juretschke challenges the great jurist, Oliver Wendell Holmes. The mountains are eternally fixed, says Holmes. No, they move like waves of the sea, says Juretschke. Caitlin McDonough MacKenzie explores her close friendship with Edward L. Rand, a man 124 years her senior. David Hackett Fischer weighs the environmental gains and losses in island history and offers inspired solutions to some difficult issues. Catherine Schmitt traces the evidence and thoughts that led Louis Agassiz to conclude that glaciers shaped Mount Desert Island's topography. Marina Schaufler describes golden summers when campers and scientists lived in their own time zone on Hardwood Island. Ham Clark follows the evolution of Bartlett's Island through wilderness, to settlement, to permanent conservation. Natalie Springuel, Bill Leavenworth, and Karen Alexander focus on a single species—cod—and consult customs records and oral histories to describe its decline. George Neptune begins "When the world was created," relying on the oral traditions of the People of the Dawn and peering into Passamaquoddy place names for the historical clues they hold. Polly McAdam's elm trees stand sentinel, silent and noble over the human parade, while Mary Holway contemplates the meaning of her island home and the people who made it possible.

Chebacco's authors and editors, with the help of generous donors and the members of the Mount Desert Island Historical Society, have created this document to mark the year 2015. They have recorded what they see

in this place and time, and what they have learned from a cloud of witnesses. Like a poet of the American West,

*They saw the silences
Move by and beckon; saw the forms,
The very beards, of burly storms,
And heard them talk like sounding seas . . .
They saw the snowy mountains rolled
And heaved along the nameless lands
Like mighty billows; saw the gold
Of awful sunsets; saw the blush
Of sudden dawn, and felt the hush
Of heaven when the day sat down
And hid his face in dusky hands.³*

—Joaquin Miller

¹ William Cronon, “American Environmental History,”
http://www.williamcronon.net/handouts/H460_Syllabus_Fall_2007.htm.
Accessed January 21, 2015.

² George Neptune, “Passamaquoddy Place Names on Mount Desert Island,” in this issue of *Chebacco*.

³ Joaquin Miller, quoted in Theodore Roosevelt, *The Wilderness Hunter* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1900), 5.



“Beacon Off Mount Desert,” Frederic Church, 1850. *Courtesy of a private owner*