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In the Town of Mount Desert, the final vote on Maine statehood took place on July 25, 1819, at the home of Davis Wasgatt, Esq., a landmark building that still stands on Beech Hill Road. The town's voters rejected statehood by a margin of 13–0. *Photograph by Tim Garrity*

Mount Desert Island and the Long Struggle for Maine Statehood

By Liam Riordan

It seems obvious to us today that Maine should be independent from Massachusetts. After all, thanks to pesky New Hampshire, there wasn't even a physical land connection between the Old Bay Colony and its District of Maine. Yet one of the most important lessons that history offers us is that many things that seem "natural" are actually the product of human effort, contention, and commitment.

The bicentennial of Maine statehood in 2020 prompts us to focus our attention on the separation from Massachusetts with the landslide popular vote in favor of independence in July 1819 and the state's official birthday on March 15, 1820. However, the drive for statehood began in the 1780s, and the motivations to participate in the long statehood movement changed significantly over time. The initial separation movement was spearheaded by conservative Federalist elites in the Falmouth area. At one of the earliest conventions to advocate for separation in 1793, no delegates attended from Hancock and Washington counties, which had only been created in 1789. Fearing that distant parts of the District would not support statehood, the convention proposed that those easternmost counties remain part of Massachusetts, while the longer settled and more populous three counties to the west should move forward as an independent state.[1] One wonders how such a course might have set Downeast Maine on a very different path — perhaps as another independent state in New England or even as a British province. Could the British military presence in the region at the end of the War of 1812 have led Downeast Maine to become part of New Brunswick via a renewed vision of Acadia, or might it have been built on the legacy of New Ireland, the short-lived refuge for Revolutionary War loyalists east of the Penobscot River? Of course, no such division of the District of Maine occurred in 1793, but the popularity of separation in Hancock County, and on Mount Desert Island especially, would persistently lag far behind that of other places in Maine even as the movement changed in fundamental ways.

While the early separation cause had been championed by Maine Federalists, the creation of an independent state became a central rallying cry for Jeffersonian Republicans early in the nineteenth century. Republicans held a notable majority in the District as early as 1805, which stood in stark contrast to Federalist strength in most other parts of Massachusetts. Given this new party balance, partisanship and geography could work at cross purposes with one another. Maine's strong Republican majorities gave Federalists good reason to oppose separation, while their brethren in the older parts of the state warmed to the idea of not having to contend with Republican majorities from the District.

Through all the partisan changes and complexities during the Maine statehood struggle, however, voters on the island and its adjacent towns consistently opposed separation, and their local consistency is a valuable reminder of the weakness of party politics in this era. Maine statehood cannot be

Six Maine Separation Votes, 1792 – 1819

County-Level Voting Data

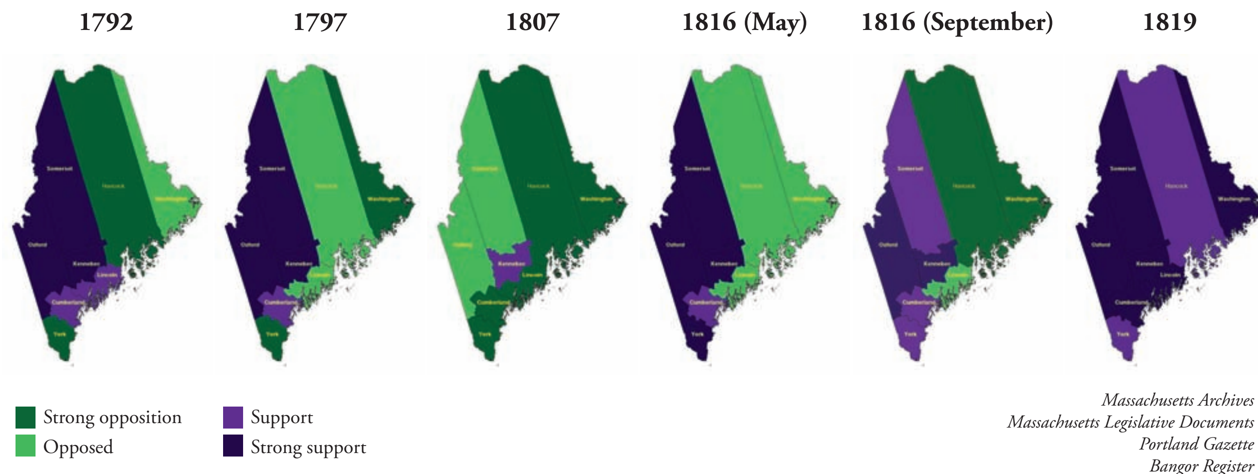

Figure 1. County-level Maine separation votes, 1792–1819, maps created by Patrick Womac (Grays Harbor College). The number and shape of counties changed over time. For the sake of clarity, boundaries of the eight counties established by 1809 are shown. There were nine counties at statehood, since Penobscot had been created from Hancock in 1818.

fully understood merely as a partisan issue. While we tend to imagine a modern two-party political system to be fully functioning in the statehood era, this was not the case. Parties suffered considerable disarray in the period, and the idea of permanent political parties as a "legitimate opposition" was doubted by most. In a fluid partisan context, nascent party organizations often used statehood as a means to gain institutional coherence. Once statehood was achieved, it became a vehicle to distribute patronage to party loyalists, as the spoils system was crucial to the viability of parties and even loomed as their principal *raison d'état*. For example, Mason Shaw had been the long-term clerk of Hancock County dating back to at least 1808. However, once statehood was achieved and Republicans held political power in the new state, he was denounced in partisan correspondence as "the most obnoxious federalist" and was "little esteemed ... even by the federalists themselves." The signatories of this letter to the new Republican governor of Maine called for Mason to be turned out of office and replaced by another man who could "further the republican interest," even if he resided outside the county![2]

Maine statehood most dramatically transgressed partisan boundaries when it triggered the Maine-Missouri Crisis that brought national politics to a standstill over the suddenly explosive issue of slavery. Five of Maine's seven Congressmen opposed statehood in 1820 because of Maine's forced connection to the admission of Missouri as a slave state.

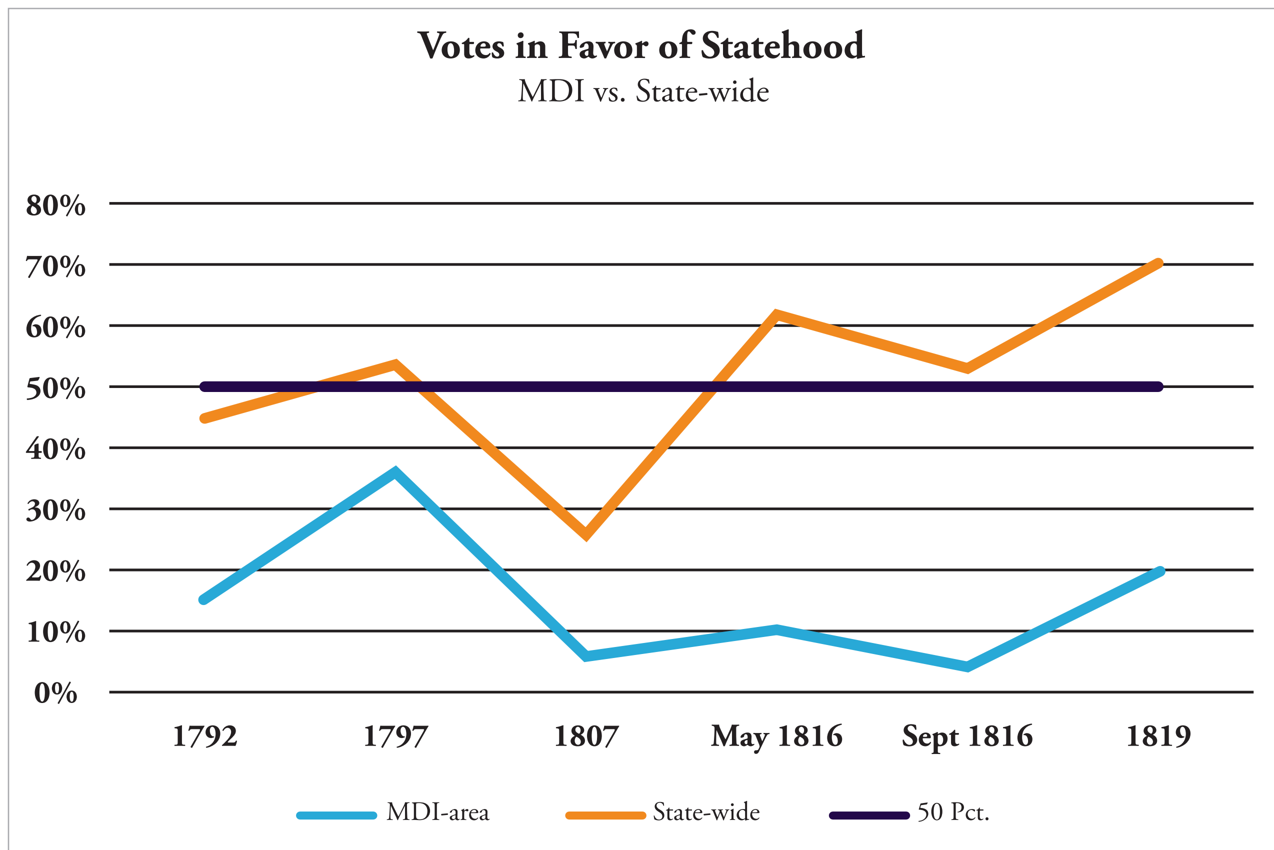

Figure 2. MDI-area separation votes compared to all Maine voters, 1792–1819.

The bipartisan and decidedly northern anti-slavery politicians lost the vote in the Congress by the narrowest of margins: 90 to 87. Imagine if those two Maine politicians, both ardent Republicans, had voted for the other side! For the majority of Congressmen from Maine, and perhaps for their constituents as well, anti-slavery was more important than statehood in 1820.[3]

The long arc of the Maine separation movement can be seen in the six popular votes on the issue from 1792 to 1819. As shown in county-level voting maps (Fig. 1), the hard-fought campaign was highly contested and sunk to its nadir in 1807 (all that green on the map), when only Kennebec County voters delivered a majority in favor of separation. By contrast, voters in the final successful separation vote in 1819 provided a majority in favor of statehood in every county, and it passed with more than 70 percent of the overall vote (all that purple on the map). Yet, from the perspective of island residents, it is notable that Hancock County provided the weakest county-level support for independence in 1819. Voters there supported independence at a rate 20 percent below the District average.[4] Moreover, voters

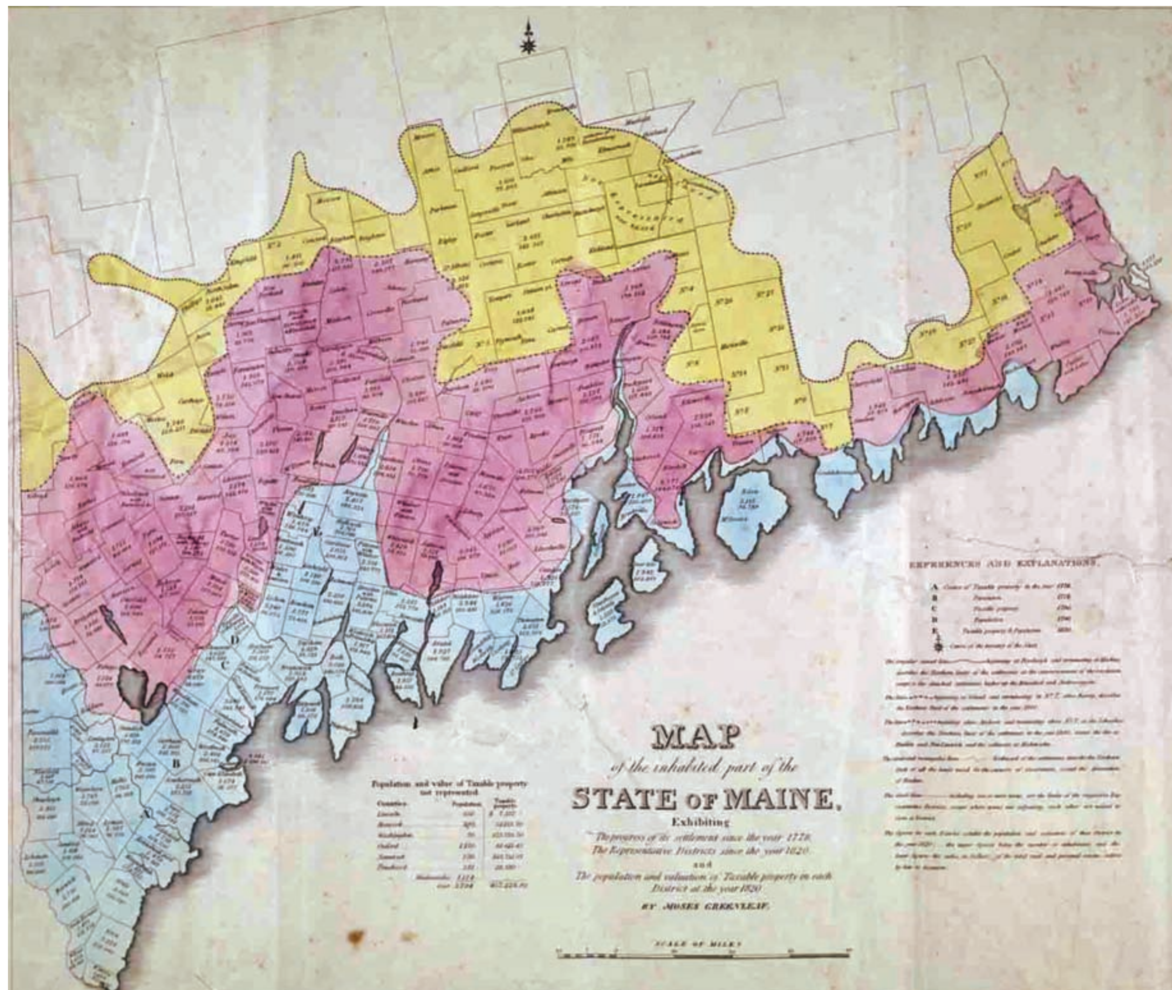

Figure 3. Moses Greenleaf, Map of the inhabited part [sic] of the State Maine (1829), which highlights the spread of English-speaking settlement from the American Revolution (blue) to the presidential election of Jefferson in 1800 (red), and to statehood in 1820 (yellow). *Courtesy of the Osher Map Library, University of Southern Maine*

The Digital Commons at the University of Maine's Fogler Library has collected and digitized a wide range of material about the statehood era as well as its legacy and commemoration. To access free documents, images, and videos online, visit: https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/me200/

from MDI-area towns overwhelmingly opposed separation from Massachusetts, with an anemic 20 percent of local voters favoring Maine independence (Fig. 2). Indeed, MDI-area voters never cast a majority in favor of statehood in any of the six votes on the issue.[5]

As this local voting data makes plain, statewide votes and even those at the county level can obscure local political variation. Furthermore, the images of Maine in Figure 1 misleadingly suggest that voters were distributed throughout the current boundaries of the state. In fact, English-speaking settlements in the statehood era remained limited to the coast, the southwest, and moved slowly up the river valleys. Separation votes were only held in these areas and voting was limited to adult white men who owned property, though at a modest enough level that about 80 percent of them were qualified voters in most places.

The interpretive map that Moses Greenleaf created in 1829 (Fig. 3) shows the gradual spread of English-speaking settlement in Maine from the time of the American Revolution (blue), to the presidential election of Thomas Jefferson in 1800 (red), through statehood in 1820 (yellow). Greenleaf was very conscious of the significance of place, and when he made this map he lived in Williamsburgh (near Milo today). This small community was at the northern edge of Anglo settlement, about a two-day journey northwest of Bangor, just below the compass arrow at the top of the 1829 map.[6]

Greenleaf's splendid map can lead us into some of the complexities of the Maine separation movement from the perspective of voters on the island and nearby towns. Yet, before narrowing our focus, it is important to stress that this map has its own distortions starting with its claim to show the "inhabited parts" of Maine. Wabanaki people and communities as well as large numbers of French speakers in the Saint John River Valley were not represented in the 1829 map. This cartographic silencing reinforces that these groups received no attention from statehood voters or from the separation movement's leaders, even though statehood would have far-reaching (and mostly negative) consequences for these groups.[7]

The Greenleaf map does usefully call our attention to where Maine voters lived during the statehood era and vividly shows how English-speaking areas of the District changed from the 1770s to 1820. As a general rule, older settlements on the coast opposed separation in the nineteenth century, while newer ones in the interior advanced the vanguard of statehood. This was not just a matter of geography and wealth (coastal areas usually were more affluent), as it also marked sharp political and religious differences. Federalists had a stronger presence in older coastal settlements, while Republicans dominated interior places. More newly settled areas also had greater numbers of Baptist and Methodist residents who objected to paying mandatory state taxes that almost always supported Congregational ministers.[8]

Just as the bold strokes of partisanship do not fully explain Maine in the statehood era, so too, the broad characterization of a sweeping coastal vs. interior division in Maine is overstated from the perspective of Mount Desert Island. As noted earlier, MDI-area voters strongly and consistently

opposed the separation of the District of Maine from Massachusetts. The island remained a frontier region throughout the period and while its residents had strong ties to maritime trade and commerce, its other traits were not consistent with that of the coastal region. Mount Desert was not affluent, it did not have a strong Congregational presence, and partisan activity on the island remained elusive.

The importance of local developments is suggested by the 1797 separation vote, when voters in the island's two incorporated towns dramatically diverged from one another, the only time when they are known to have done so, and the high point of local separation sentiment in the entire period. While all eleven voters in the town of Mount Desert rejected separation in 1797, those in Eden (modern-day Bar Harbor) were nearly perfectly divided on the issue, with fifteen favoring independence and eighteen opposed. Rather than look to partisanship as the root of this split (separation was still largely championed by Federalists at this point, and no Republican stirrings are known to have occurred in Eden), the division of the towns on the statehood issue likely stemmed from changing religious commitments.

Eden had a growing Baptist presence that may have spurred its development as an independent town, set off from the northern portion of Mount Desert township in February 1796. Thus, the statehood vote the following year marked one of its first expressions of civic identity. Thomas Wasgatt was the constable in Eden charged with organizing the election, and he, along with two women named Hannah Wasgatt (perhaps his wife and daughter), was among the thirty charter members of the Eden Baptist Church in July 1797. Two years later, a Baptist church was built in Eden, often identified as the first Baptist congregation in all of Hancock County.[9]

While the Mount Desert Congregational Church had formed in October 1792, the first settled Protestant minister on the island, according to historian George Street, was the Baptist Enoch Hunting, who was installed in Eden in May 1818, which helped it to become the official tax-supported church in the community. Whereas religious dissenters from the established Congregational church likely supplied the pro-separation votes in 1797, by 1819 the thriving Eden Baptist church had secured its status as the town's tax-supported church. The success of local Baptists to adapt to what were elsewhere strongly pro-Congregational religious establishment laws helps to explain the strong opposition to separation in the MDI area as late as 1819.

The failure of Massachusetts authorities to mobilize against the British occupation of Downeast Maine in the War of 1812 was an important catalyst for the growing embrace of separation after 1815. As other articles in this issue of *Chebacco* note, local attitudes toward the wartime British presence ranged from armed resistance to pragmatic acquiescence, so the consequences of island residents' wartime experiences for the statehood cause are uncertain. It is clear, however, that in the two immediate post-war separation votes of 1816, MDI-area voters offered negligible support for separation, a full 50 percent lower than the District-wide figures. The war must have intensified local feelings of isolation from all of Massachusetts, including more-fully settled areas in the District. When John Comings, who commanded Maine troops at Castine, was ordered to march them to Eastport prior to the British occupation, he expressed concern about the lack of popular support for the war to the eastward, as we "must

rely on people enroute, and they are not very friendly to volunteer troops."[10]

Voter data from sparsely settled towns in Washington County offers a valuable counterpoint to voting results on the island. In 1819, eight of the nine towns in Washington County favored independence. This strong support in easternmost Maine in makes MDI-area opposition to separation at this late date all the more unique. The standard reason for the disappearance of significant coastal opposition to statehood hinges on reforms to the federal coasting law in 1818. Previously states had been protected from clearing customs in adjacent states, meaning that an Eastport ship could sail all the way to New Jersey before stopping to register as a result of the unusual bounds of Massachusetts territory. Under the old coasting law, anyone in Maine whose livelihood was tied to the sea had strong reasons to oppose separation from Massachusetts prior to 1819.

MDI-area towns, of course, were reliant on commerce as the occupational categories recorded in the 1820 census clearly show.[11] While agriculture was the leading category across Maine (82 percent of those reporting), commerce in MDI-area towns made up an unusually large 17 percent versus just 6.5 percent statewide. Only three of the nine counties in Maine reported more than 10 percent of its population to be engaged in commerce in 1820: Washington at 16 percent, Hancock at 15, and Lincoln at 12. Whereas Washington and Lincoln County voters strongly approved of separation by 1819 and have strong indications of Republican partisan alignment, especially in Lincoln County, where the influential separation leader William King resided in Bath, no such inroads occurred in the MDI area. The circumstances of the coasting law may have changed, but unlike the strong majority of Maine voters elsewhere, and even unlike their near neighbors in similarly commercial Washington and Lincoln counties, MDI-area voters strongly opposed statehood even in 1819.

The slow emergence of visible partisan activity in the MDI area may well be related to its relative lack of large-scale migration that transformed midcoast Maine in the statehood era. Whereas Kennebec County had been at the vanguard of the famed conflict between Great Proprietors and Liberty Men at the turn of the century and would also ardently champion separation, places to the east of the Penobscot River took a different course. After the American Revolution, large-scale land speculation in the Downeast region had survived in profoundly colonial form, with the descendants of Massachusetts Bay Colony governor Francis Bernard and of French explorer Cadillac still possessing major tracts on the island. Along with other massive landholdings east of the Penobscot, much of this would be conveyed to the Philadelphia land speculator William Bingham in 1799 and his heirs, and its management was principally handled by land agents in Gouldsboro and Ellsworth. These powerful interests sought to avoid changing the political status quo that might expose their failure to place settlers on their massive holdings, as required by their terms of ownership, another likely factor in MDI-area voters' contentment with remaining part of the state of Massachusetts.[12]

Examining Maine's long statehood struggle from the perspective of Mount Desert Island highlights its distinctiveness as a place that ardently opposed separation from Massachusetts. Partly this reflects the still modest degree of settlement by English-speakers east of the Penobscot River, which may

have given the area a Federalist political cast that feared being overwhelmed by strong Republican majorities elsewhere in Maine. Yet these regional and partisan factors were largely been shared with voters in Washington County, who by 1819 supported statehood more wholeheartedly. Downeast Maine, like interior areas of the District, was a stronghold for Baptists and Methodists who had powerful reasons to favor independence as a means to escape the legal establishment of Congregational churches in Massachusetts. Yet a strongly Baptist community like Eden thrived and even took advantage of establishment, which seems to have terminated local voters' fleeting interest in separation in 1797.

In the end, we know that island voters adamantly opposed Maine independence, but we do not yet fully understand why they did so. More intensive local research will hopefully begin to explain the persistence of large-scale, and largely unsuccessful, land speculation in the region, the pace of religious change Downeast, and if partisan leaders were more active on Mount Desert Island in the statehood era than we currently know. The 2020 bicentennial should spark new attention to local developments in our distant past. Just as today, local circumstances reveal unique dimensions of everyday life and experience. Not only were these events often more meaningful for ordinary people, they can play counterpoint to more celebrated themes of state and national histories.

Liam Riordan is professor of history at the University of Maine, where he has taught since 1997. He specializes in the American Revolution and has an ongoing project about loyalists. He has focused on the Maine statehood era for several years, and has given many talks about it across the state, including at the MDI Historical Society's annual bean supper in 2020. He is co-editing a volume about statehood and its commemoration with his retired UMaine colleague Richard Judd. To explore a range of material about Maine's statehood and bicentennial, including videos from a summer 2019 conference in Orono, please visit: https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/me200/

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1. Minutes of the convention of 1793, reprinted in appendix to Jeremiah Perley, *The Debates, Resolutions, and other proceedings, of the Convention of Delegates, assembled at Portland… October 1819* (Portland, ME: A. Shirley, 1820), 293–294.

2. Benjamin Hook, lead signer with eight others, to Governor William King, Castine, October 12, 1820, box 7, folder 2, *William King Papers*, Maine State Library, hereafter MSL.

3. For a recent account from a national perspective, see John R. Van Atta, *Wolf by the Ears*: *The Missouri Crisis, 1819–1821* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2015). For close attention to key Maine political leaders who favored statehood and slavery, see Matthew Mason, "The Maine and Missouri Crisis: Competing Priorities and Northern Slavery Politics in the Early Republic," in *Journal of the Early Republic* 33 (Winter 2013), 675–700. Unfortunately, the anti-slavery stance of Maine politicians at this key juncture has not been well studied, though their public letter explaining their abhorrence of slave power provides a rich starting point, see *The Portland Gazette*, March 21, 1820. The one Downeast Congressman at the time, Martin Kinsley of Hamden, who also served as a longtime Hancock County judge, joined the anti-slavery majority but has no known surviving personal papers.

4. The standard work remains Ronald F. Banks, *Maine Becomes a State: The Movement to Separate Maine from Massachusetts, 1785–1820* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1970). A later reprint edition omits the original's very valuable appendices of primary sources. The source for county and town-level voting data (unless otherwise noted) is Appendix V of Banks, which can be downloaded from the Digital Commons of the University of Maine's Fogler Library at https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mainebicentennial/127/

5. In addition to Eden and Mount Desert, the MDI area includes voters in the towns of Gouldsborough, Ellsworth, Sullivan, Surry, and Trenton. Local voting data is from Banks, Appendix V as corrected by town records from Eden in 1797 and Mount Desert in 1816 and 1819. A detailed table of this local data is available from the author.

6. For a careful assessment see Walter M. MacDougall, *Settling the Maine Wilderness: Moses Greenleaf, his Maps, and his Household of Faith, 1777–1834* (Portland, ME: Osher Map Library and Smith Center for Cartographic Education, 2006).

7. For a valuable corrective to such oversight, see the award-winning maps in *The Historical Atlas of Maine* eds. Stephen J. Hornsby and Richard W. Judd (Orono: U of Maine Press, 2015), especially Plates 20–23 and 27 on the statehood era and related themes.

8. This pattern informs Alan Taylor, *Liberty Men and Great Proprietors: The Revolutionary Settlement on the Maine Frontier, 1760–1820* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina Press, 1990) and James Leamon, *Revolution Downeast: The War for American Independence in Maine* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts Press, 1993). On the durability of church establishment, see William G. McLoughlin, *New England Dissent, 1630–1833: The Baptists and the Separation of Church and State* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1971).

9. On the founding of Eden and the prominence of Baptists there, see George E. Street, *Mount Desert: A History* (Boston and NY: Houghton, Mifflin, 1905), 204–211, 236–244, available online at https://archive.org/stream/mountdeserthisto00stre#mode/1up. Eden Town Record Book for Eden, April 26, 1797, Bar Harbor Town Office. Also see Brittany Goetting, "'He has Abundantly Poured Out His Holy Spirit in Eden and Mount Desert': *The Baptist Connection on Mount Desert Island, 1790–1840,* Chebacco *20* (2019): 54–65 and Ronald S. Baines, "Separating God's Two Kingdoms: Regular Baptists in Maine, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick, 1780–1815" (PhD dissertation, U of Maine, forthcoming 2020), esp. Chapter 4.

10. John Comings to William King, US Barracks, Castine, January 25, 1813, box 7a, folder 10, King Papers, MSL.

11. Census for 1820 (Washington, DC: Gales and Seaton, 1821).

12. Large-scale land speculation Downeast has not received the scholarly attention that it deserves. For a basic gloss on its large landholders, see Street, Mount Desert, 128–132. Rich sources that call for study include: Eastern Lands Papers, 1717–1860, Massachusetts State Archives (online guide: https://www.sec.state.ma.us/arc/arcpdf/eastland.pdf), two volumes of Frederick Allis, Jr., William Bingham's Maine Lands 1790–1820, fully online at https://www.colonialsociety.org/node/935, and the little-known business papers of land agent John Black at the Woodlawn estate in Ellsworth. I appreciate Todd Little-Siebold calling my attention to the Black papers.