



George B. Dorr, ca. 1940.

*Courtesy of Acadia National Park and the National Park Service*

## **Superintendent Dorr and the Mountain Naming Controversy**

*Ronald H. Epp, Ph.D.*

A public controversy arose on Mount Desert Island early in the Great Depression that had its roots in the closing years of World War I. Working at his “Oldfarm” residence in Bar Harbor in 1918, a gentleman “from away” initiated requests for federal approval to rename prominent natural features of his adopted island home. This gentleman was George Bucknam Dorr (1853-1944), the central figure in this controversy, one of the eight Incorporators of The Hancock County Trustees of Public Reservations, and its chief executive officer. Dorr was the first administrator of federal land on Mount Desert Island, and his renaming of the mountains would be

challenged in the public domain. The outcome would determine whether the ballot box or federal authority reigned supreme on public lands.

Regional historians agree that the Wabanaki who visited Mount Desert Island to feast on the bounty of the seas called its range of mountains Pemetic. They also concur that when Samuel de Champlain explored the waters of this *Isle des Monts Deserts* in 1604, the names he assigned certain features came to dominate culturally to this day. Certainly Champlain was aware of the presence of native seasonal inhabitants.<sup>1</sup> More to the point, it is likely that members of this northeastern Algonquin-speaking tribal nation guided Champlain to Pemetic.<sup>2</sup>

Cartographers, anthropologists, and historians might ask whether Champlain's island naming constituted a renaming. Few would argue that demonstrating the origin of geographic names has little value. Yet what constitutes a sufficient, or even necessary, reason for a historically accepted geographic name to be altered? In the absence of written documentation—as was the case with the Wabanaki prior to the mid-nineteenth century—does an oral tradition carry sufficient authority? Prescriptively, whose authority should dominate: the accepted originator, local custom, a renaming advocate, or a legally-recognized authority?

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It is well known that Mr. Dorr's energetic stewardship was responsible for most of the donations to the Trustees of Public Reservations and the first gift of more than five thousand acres to the federal government, establishing in 1916 the Sieur de Monts National Monument. For the next twenty-eight years, Dorr had federal authority in the conservation of an expanding national asset on Mount Desert Island. Yet as "custodian" of this new national monument, Dorr's authority was severely limited and federal policy required all proposed topographical name changes to be routed through an authoritative agency.

To counter nomenclature anarchy and confusion relating to geographic names, an agency of the Department of Interior, the United States Board on Geographic Names ("USBGN"), was established in 1890 to apply criteria and render decisions binding on federal agencies.<sup>3</sup> From 1918 through 1934 Dorr submitted name change proposals, awaiting decisions that customarily took a few weeks. Much later, after the mountain naming controversy subsided, Dorr wrote in his *Memoirs* that "none of the mountain names on the Island were old when we came down in 1868. There was no need for them till summer folks came down and began to climb. For the

Indians and the early settlers alike they were simply a hunting ground, roamed over by deer and bear.” And their names? “The names given them had no background in local usage or tradition or interest in themselves.”<sup>4</sup>

Following federal acquisition of the Sieur de Monts National Monument in 1916, the new park custodian stated that it was suggested to him by an “unnamed” party that it would be “better” if these new federal lands were related to “the old French occupation of the coast and its early history.” Mr. Dorr collected, organized, and carefully studied the historical, linguistic, and geological evidence before initially developing arguments for changing the names of nearly a dozen natural objects within Monument boundaries. He concluded that “the mountains acquired names only from the summer visitors . . . none going beyond living memory.” Armed with National Park Service endorsements, he made formal application to the USBGN on September 15, 1918 and within two weeks the first nomenclature application was authorized. While his motives for mountain renaming were complex, Dorr argued in part that the conventional names—e.g., Brown, Dog, Dry, Green, etc.—were undistinguished.<sup>5</sup> That is, they were not imbued with connotations that resonated with worthy “historical associations,” a criterion that Dorr employed with fierce allegiance.

It is noteworthy that just prior to the 1916 federalization of donated lands, Dorr was elected Selectman of the Town of Eden (now Bar Harbor) and subsequently re-elected for two terms through 1917. This civic and political commitment surprised some of his contemporaries, for the demands of Dorr’s horticultural and quarrying businesses—when combined with the exhausting Monument initiative—appeared to leave little time for a new civic endeavor. Yet Dorr knew that he could use his leadership position to influence cultural development beyond the confines of the summer residents. Dorr was prescient enough to anticipate the dramatic social changes that would occur once Island acreage was federalized.

This larger cultural shift was identified by historian Judith S. Goldstein. As Dorr, Eliot, and Rockefeller “moved through intricate negotiations into the larger public domain of the federal government,” she writes, they “took over the leadership of the island. Slowly they stretched their concepts of public access beyond the privileged boundaries of the small Protestant summer colony.”<sup>6</sup> This enlarged concept of public access implied uncovering the historical roots of prominent natural features within the park. To what end? In order that new visitors drawn to the federal property would have their appreciation of the natural splendor of the Island increased.

For Mr. Dorr, name selection resulted from extensive study. The

641.5 UNITED STATES GEOGRAPHIC BOARD See work card

Adopted name } Cadillac Hancock Co., Me.

Thing named } Mountain - highest point in Sieur de Monts  
National Monument, Mount Desert Id. Maine.

APPROVED  
OCT 2 19 18

Names	Authorities
<u>Green Mtn</u>	<u>Designation since 1855</u>
<u>Mt. Newport</u>	<u>" prior to 1855</u>
<u>Cadillac</u>	<u>Name proposed by Geo. B. Dorr, representing the "Wild Gardens of Acadia," supported by the Sec. of the Intr., Bureau of Nat'l Parks, many Associations, and distinguished men, to commemorate early history and to honor France for her part in present war. Mount Desert Island deduced to Cadillac by Louis XIV,</u>
Local usage <u>Green Mtn</u>	

Submitted by Geo. B. Dorr, Ins. Dept. Cadillac

Date Sept. 15, 1918 " "

This card prepared by F " "

Recommendation of Executive Committee  
B  
1918

Official request form completed by U.S. Board on Geographic Names chairman Frank Bond, responding to a request from Interior Department custodian George B. Dorr to standardize the name of Cadillac Mountain, October 2, 1918. In Dorr's view, some of the conventional names were "undistinguished." *Courtesy of Executive Secretary, U.S. Board on Geographic Names*

National Archives, the Rockefeller Archive Center, the USBGN Archives, and the Sawtelle Research Center at Acadia National Park contain Dorr's arguments. He recognized that early settlers gave "excellent descriptive names" to the seacoast and harbored waters where names like Egg Rock and Otter Creek suggest visual associations given by settlers. But "mountains and paths, woods and lakes, must all have names for the sake of distinction and as points of visitor reference." As a new federal administrator, Dorr was also trying to conform to the USBGN principle of longstanding usage, yet as a scholar Dorr was compelled to seek historic precedent for the conventional names. Where the historical roots were shallow, Dorr saw an opportunity to develop alternative historical arguments that emphasized the role of the French emigrants as well as the indigenous populations. In this process he pressed for a more ancient lineage than what was customary among the rusticators and the Island's English and French descendants. Dorr realized that "the linguistic contour" of local usage for geographic features no longer matched the deepened historical standards of the new park service.<sup>7</sup>

To understand Dorr's arguments, it is helpful to appreciate the education received by this young man during the height of the Civil War. Following six years under the tutelage of Boston classicist Epes S. Dixwell, Dorr entered

UNITED STATES GEOGRAPHIC BOARD		64/
Adopted name } <i>Champlain</i>		See work card
Thing named	<i>Southeast of Flying Squadron Mountain, located East of Green (Cadillac) Mtn, in Sieur de Monts Nat'l Monument, Mount Desert Id, Maine. The most eastern Mtn. of the Island.</i>	
Names	Authorities	
<i>Newport Mtn</i>	<i>Designation since 1855-date unknown.</i>	
<i>Champlain</i>	<i>Discoverer of Mount Desert Island and who named the Id. Name proposed by Geo. B. Dorr, Custodian of the Nat'l Monument, representing the "Wild Gardens of Acadia" supported by the Secy of the Interior, Bureau of Nat'l Parks, many Associations, and distinguished men, to commemorate early history and to honor France for her part in the present war.</i>	
Local usage	<i>Newport Mtn</i>	
Submitted by <i>Geo. B. Dorr Ins. Dept</i>		Recommendation of Executive Committee
Date <i>Sept 15<sup>th</sup> 1918</i>		<i>Champlain</i>
This card prepared by <i>B</i>		<i>ARB</i>

Official request form to standardize the name of Champlain Mountain, October 2, 1918. The mountain was originally named for an English mariner, Christopher Newport. *Courtesy of Executive Secretary, U.S. Board on Geographic Names*

Harvard College at sixteen—in the class of 1874, the year after fellow Trustee Charles W. Eliot assumed the presidency. Dorr concentrated his studies in classical and modern languages, history and, despite a stammer, he showed equal ardor for elocution, oratory, and rhetoric. Before he was thirty, he lived in Europe for six years where his linguistic skills were well honed by current usage. One product of this worldly education was Dorr's development of an exceptional sensitivity to both "dead tongues" and the French language. His understanding of French pioneers in the New World was in part based on the "romantic" historical writings of his childhood neighbor on Jamaica Pond, the nineteenth-century historian Francis Parkman. Both men were aware that language is a medium that divides as easily as it unites but in the end the historian sits in judgment of the performance of men and their cultures.<sup>8</sup>

In some instances when a mountain carried a name with historical associations, Dorr succeeded in convincing the USBGN that another name should be substituted. Originally named for an honored English mariner, Christopher Newport, this mountain on the eastern side of the Island thus became Champlain. Green Mountain was referred anew as Cadillac, "Picket as Huguenot Head, Dry as Flying Squadron, Jordan as Penobscot, Brown as Norumbega, Little Brown as Parkman, Robinson as Acadia, and Dog as St. Sauveur." In a six-page September 15, 1918 letter to the

USBGN, Dorr explained at great length his methodology for proposing the name changes of “the dominant landscape features of the Monument,” including the importance of recognizing the indigenous peoples that used the Penobscot River for seasonal canoe passage to Mount Desert Island.<sup>10</sup> The fundamental rationale that runs through scores of documents spanning more than a decade is stated in a memorandum the USBGN received from the Superintendent: the renaming of “its noble granite masses . . . have become true historic documents that will record forever to succeeding generations the human background [of] the Park.”<sup>11</sup>

Following the 1919 elevation of the Monument to its new status as Lafayette National Park, additional geographic name changes were proposed to the USBGN. By 1929 approvals had been secured to rename ten of fourteen mountains—and Island maps reflected these changes. To this day, critics claim that Dorr’s decisions were arbitrary.<sup>12</sup> As new maps were drawn and distributed, it is likely that there was private grumbling, but there is no evidence that such grumbings were aired publicly.

In 1920, a supportive position was expressed for the decision-making process in the naming of trails. In the leading publication of mountaineering in the eastern United States, Appalachia Mountain Club trail maker and classicist Paul R. Jenks published remarks on “The Naming of Trails” that overlap and extend Dorr’s line of thinking. “Names should be given to trails for a single, definite, necessary reason, to-wit, for *identification*. This is the historical reason for all names, as properly applied.” Furthermore, Jenks argued that in the interests of proper nomenclature and “for the edification of future generations,” names should be adopted “only after consideration and action by a responsible committee.”<sup>13</sup>

Dorr’s superiors were consulted before action was taken and the Superintendent himself solicited endorsements from educational, historical, and conservation colleagues, including the weighty national support of the Trustees of Public Reservations President Charles W. Eliot. Town records, village improvement society minutes, the *Bar Harbor Times*, and the USBGN documents provide no evidence of local protests. Until the onset of the Great Depression, the renaming of mountains was not interpreted publicly as a conflict between federal and local power.

To the contrary, at the annual Bar Harbor town meeting in March 1919, a unanimous motion was passed: “That [the] inhabitants of Bar Harbor extend [their] most appreciative thanks to George Bucknam Dorr for his tireless, persistent, intelligent work, carried on under the most adverse circumstances. He has overcome obstacles that no other friend of the





George B. Dorr and his mountain re-naming ally Charles W. Eliot at Jordan Pond, 1922.  
*Courtesy of Acadia National Park and the National Park Service*

[Island] would have commanded the courage to overcome, and has finally secured for us and for our posterity the Lafayette National park on Mount Desert Island. We regard the achievement as a crowning event in a life, so much of which has been devoted to the interest of Bar Harbor.”<sup>14</sup> This public tribute resonates with the basic concept key to Dorr’s conservation ethos and mountain naming practice: “for us and our posterity.”

On August 29, 1929 the Trustees of Public Reservations conveyed “to the United States all lands owned by the Corporation on Mount Desert Island.” Over the next few years additional parcels were accepted and then conveyed to the federal government. Some Trustees wondered whether the organization had a future. Many founding members were either deceased or no longer involved, and new members—like Richard W. Hale and Samuel Eliot Morison—were emphasizing the museum potential of the Black House. Moreover, the Trustee who had been the key figure in land acquisition was now a federal administrator with considerable influence in the nation’s capitol.

The trigger for the ensuing controversy did not lie with local residents. It was someone “from away,” a partner in the Boston law firm of Hale and Dorr (no relation to the park superintendent), one of the largest law firms in New England. That attorney, Richard W. Hale, was the first chairman of the Black House Committee and as a Trustee, his priority was

in promoting the Black House (known today as Woodlawn Museum) as a premiere Maine tourist attraction.

But departing from this goal, he submitted a letter to the editor of the *Bar Harbor Times* on January 2, 1931—without sanction from the officers of the Trustees of Public Reservations—reporting that at the Trustees’ August 28, 1930 annual meeting he had entered a motion that at the next annual meeting the Trustees declare themselves in favor of the “well known [mountain] names.” Hale confidently announced in the paper that an informal Trustees poll showed that twenty-eight of thirty-six favored the names in use before the USBGN name-change approvals. Yet fellow Trustee Lincoln Cromwell had written to Dorr’s attorney Serenus B. Rodick several months earlier that he had “heard very little objection to the names except from a small group which has opposed consistently all of the Rockefeller developments.”<sup>15</sup> This implied that the land acquisition and carriage road construction program of John D. Rockefeller Jr., an ally of Mr. Dorr, could be at the heart of the matter.

Attorney Hale asked the *Times* to poll its readers. Over the next several weeks ballots were cast and the tally was overwhelming: 150 votes for the old names, three for the new.<sup>16</sup> Lest Mr. Dorr have any doubt about the position of those nearest and dearest to him, each voter name and preference was published. Letters to the *Times* editor emphasized the significance of place names due to their ancestry and emotional power.

There is no evidence that Hale re-entered his motion at the 1931 HCTPR meeting; moreover, the controversy was apparently not considered sufficiently newsworthy to receive additional press coverage. Nonetheless, Hale wrote to the USBGN on September 30, 1932 requesting relevant documentation of Dorr’s requests for these “darn-fool names.” Hale claims to “love [Dorr] for the great services which he has done but in this matter of names, I am his energetic enemy.”

So too, renowned naval historian and Trustee Samuel Eliot Morison wrote to the USBGN on May 27, 1933 requesting that the names used prior to 1917 be restored. He argued that signage still reflected old usage, that the old names were reflected in American literature, and that the new names had not been popularly accepted. Morison concluded that if we can change the name of the park to “the old French name of the region,” (“l’Acadie”) we can revert back to the old mountain names as well. Lacking support from the National Park Service, no action was taken by the USBGN in response to these requests.

Both Hale and Morison avoided making any reference to fellow



Trustee Dorr—as did the letters to the *Bar Harbor Times*. Nor is there any evidence indicating that the new name opponents collaborated. Superintendent Dorr did not respond publicly and his personal reaction to the Trustees and public disapproval is not known. Moreover, the controversy was confined to Mount Desert Island; comments on the matter do not appear to have reached the county, state, or national levels and the controversy does not compare with the magnitude of the automobile ban a decade earlier.<sup>17</sup>



Richard W. Hale, Dorr's "energetic enemy" in the mountain naming controversy. *Courtesy of Wilmer Hale, Boston, Massachusetts*

Mr. Dorr applied his scholarly expertise in referencing a more ancient European lineage than what was customary for the inhabitants of Mount Desert Island. Applying his well traveled historical and linguistic standards, Dorr found the indigenous and rusticator culture inadequate to the task at hand. He proceeded in this nomenclature revision without public discussion and without formal input from the Trustees of Public Reservations. His standing as a federal officer lent weight to his justifications, but some may fault Mr. Dorr for not seeking public input, for not bowing before the collective weight of his fellow Trustees.

Historians and anthropologists could interpret Dorr's renaming of landscape features as an act of dispossession or a form of cultural imperialism.<sup>18</sup> My goal here is not to challenge such an interpretation but to provide the background of an Island controversy that took place when the cultural implications of a strengthening federal presence on Mount Desert presented unique challenges and opportunities for all who resided here. Noteworthy is the fact that eight days after Mr. Dorr's death on August 6, 1944, fellow Trustee Judge John A. Peters offered a motion at the Trustees' annual meeting that was greeted with "enthusiasm and unanimously approved. . . ." Namely, that the mountain situated between Champlain and Cadillac mountains formerly known as Dry Mountain be renamed Dorr Mountain. Within ten months, the change was approved by the USBGN.<sup>19</sup>

Dorr was a conservation pioneer who took a philosophic view on the

evolution of names and risked disaffection from his contemporaries. It was his judgment that over successive generations the new names would provide lasting significance to the international body of visitors that would travel the roadways around—or traverse the trails of—the mountains of Acadia National Park. More so than any national park superintendent of his day, Dorr brought to his position in the new National Park Service a set of scholarly-imbued leadership skills remarkable by any standard. The National Park Service supported his efforts to locate historical precedent for natural features and to abide by the decisions of the USBGN. Cartographers placed new names on maps, though the old names still remained on earlier maps and in the minds of their loyalists.

Dorr's effort was motivated by his love of place, his passionate desire to substitute selected points of conventional reference with those having worthy historical associations. While more often successful than not, Dorr was “a party of one” petitioning for these changes.<sup>20</sup> He took this risk not for visitor amusement or to provoke local dismay when a place name disappeared from the most recent map. Instead, through the administrative processes available to him, Dorr provided the intellectual underpinnings to ensure that the seascapes, landscapes, and “noble granite masses” of the park would be perpetuated.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In an email of January 7, 2014, Island historian Jack Russell drew my attention to the varied activities of the explorer during the several days that Champlain spent in Pemetic waters. See David Hackett Fischer, *Champlain's Dream* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008), 174-77.

<sup>2</sup> Harold E. L. Prins & Bunny McBride, *Asticou's Island Domain: Wabanaki Peoples at Mount Desert Island 1500-2000* (Boston: Northeast Region Ethnography Program, National Park Service, 2007), vol.1.

<sup>3</sup> In 2003, Roger Payne, USBGN Executive Secretary, provided me with more than a hundred pages of copies of official documents regarding MDI place name changes initiated by Mr. Dorr.

<sup>4</sup> Dorr, *Memoirs*, March 29, 1933. Dorr Papers, Bar Harbor Historical Society; G.B. Dorr to USBGN, September 15, 1918. USBGN Archives. Reston, Virginia. See also Henry A. Raup, “Icy, Corkscrew and Whaleback: Descriptive Terms in the Placenames of Mount Desert Island,” *Chebeco* 6 (2004): 41-53.

<sup>5</sup> Sources for the quotations in this paragraph are as follows: Dorr to Lincoln Cromwell, February 19, 1917; Dorr to C.W. Eliot, May 7, 1919; C.W. Eliot to Dorr, May 9, 1919. Charles W. Eliot Papers, box 95, Harvard University Archives. Also, G.B. Dorr to Stephen T. Mather, December 10, 1917. National Archives and Records Administration. CP. RG79. CCF. Acadia. Misc. Reports.

<sup>6</sup> Judith S. Goldstein, *Crossing Lines: Histories of Jews and Gentiles in Three Communities* (New York: William Morrow, 1992), 185. An earlier and more limited version of this article appeared in “The Mountain Naming Controversy and the Mission of the Trustees,” *Woodlawn Museum Newsletter* 2 (2005): 3. My forthcoming study entitled *The Making of Acadia National Park* provides the larger context for the claims herein.

<sup>7</sup> (Paraphrasing the January 26, 2007 *New York Times* review by Charles Isherwood of Brian Friel's 1981 play, *Translations*.)

<sup>8</sup> See "Francis Parkman on Acadia." Accessed January 2, 2012. [www.wquercus.com/acadie/parkman.htm](http://www.wquercus.com/acadie/parkman.htm). I am also indebted to Mount Desert Island Historical Society Executive Director Tim Garrity for suggesting that this theme is theatrically developed in the aforementioned play, *Translations*.

<sup>9</sup> Margie Coffin Brown, Jim Vekasi, and Olmstead Center for Landscape Preservation, et al., *Pathmakers: Cultural Landscape Report for the Historic Hiking Trail System of Mount Desert Island* (Boston: National Park Service & Olmsted Center for Landscape Preservation, 2006), vol. 1, 98.

<sup>10</sup> The USBGN Archives also contain a nine-page April 9, 1919 letter explaining the cultural importance of recognizing the name "Penobscot" for the northern and southern portions then known as Sargent and Jordan mountains.

<sup>11</sup> "Memorandum," March 6, 1931, Mount Desert Island files, UBBGN Archives.

<sup>12</sup> In response to my editorial in *The Mount Desert Islander* of June 23, 2005, see Mark A. Preston's July 21, 2005 letter to the paper's editor claiming that Dorr "didn't understand or seem to care that the original names reflect [the] character of the early days of Mount Desert."

<sup>13</sup> Paul R. Jenks, "The Naming of Trails," *Appalachia* 15 (1920), 182-85.

<sup>14</sup> *Bar Harbor Times*, March 8, 1919.

<sup>15</sup> Trustees Lincoln Cromwell, L. B. Deasy, Charles W. Eliot, Samuel A. Eliot, William Draper Lewis, William O. Sawtelle, and F. J. Stimson were opposed to Hale's resolution, according to the front-page article in the *Bar Harbor Times* of January 9, 1931.

<sup>16</sup> September 11, 1930, Hancock County Trustees of Public Reservations Archives, I.2.c.1/2.1.A.3. See also *Bar Harbor Times*, January 28, 1931.

<sup>17</sup> See Bill Horner, M.D., "From Horses to Horsepower: Mount Desert Island's Ten-Year War for the Automobile," *Chebacco* 14 (2013): 86-106.

<sup>18</sup> I am indebted to Harold E. L. Prins for referencing this contention. See J.B. Harley, "New England Cartography and the Native Americans," in *American Beginnings: Exploration, Culture and Cartography in the Land of Norumbega*, eds. Emerson W. Baker, Edwin A. Churchill, Richard D'Abate, Kristine L. Jones, Victor A. Konrad, Harald E. L. Prins (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 287-313; email from Harald Prins, December 15, 2013; Harald E. L. Prins & Bunny McBride, "Asticou's Fjord or Somes Sound? Mythistory of Wabanaki Dispossession," *Chebacco* 12 (2011): 41-61.

<sup>19</sup> Approved June 15, 1945. "Dorr Mountain. Case Study # 641.5," Mount Desert Island files, USBGN Archives.

<sup>20</sup> I am indebted to Acadia National Park Ranger Maureen Fournier for this phraseology and her critical comments on a draft of this article.