

The Center of Our Stories

By Virginia Mellen

In this seventeenth volume of *Chebacco*, we have endeavored to offer fresh perspectives on the history of Mount Desert Island and the surrounding region. For this issue, entitled *The Acadian Borderland*, we have asked authors to explore Mount Desert Island's past through the lens of borderlands history.

Originally pertaining to the Western frontier, and later to the space where Mexico and the American frontier converged, the term “borderlands” has often been applied to historically contested colonial spaces. However, “frontier” and “borderland” are not synonymous. In his article “Unsettled Mount Desert Island” in this volume, historian John Gillis provides the origin of the English word “frontier,” which derives from the Latin word for “front.” Gillis tells us that frontiers are therefore places of movement, physical thresholds begging to be crossed. Borderlands, however, represent relationships—they are created from the interaction of contrasting forces. In the most basic sense of the term, borderlands are physical or figurative spaces where different peoples and perspectives meet. More than a place to be passed through or an edge to be traversed, a borderland is also a *center* where interactions take place and stories unfold.¹

Pekka Hämäläinen and Samuel Truett describe borderlands history as more than an account of contested physical spaces, but rather as “a new way to navigate the past.”² Today, borderlands history has evolved from an investigation of disputed spaces to a versatile lens through which to view the world.

There may be few better environments to which the borderlands lens can be applied than islands. As bodies of land surrounded by water, islands are defined by their borders, “naturally and visually distinct from any other land spaces.”³ Islands are spaces of opposing forces: water and land, isolation and connectedness, tourism and tradition, myth and reality. Those who live on islands take pride in living apart, while those from mainlands romanticize island life. For the millions of visitors who come to Mount Desert Island annually, crossing the Trenton Bridge represents a geographic as well as

psychic transition—arriving on the island triggers a particular state of mind. The relationships between the contrasting forces of land and sea, private and public lands, tourism and labor industries, local residents and those “from away,” etc. are central facets of MDI’s unique identity.

This volume of *Chebacco* examines several significant ideological and physical borders. John Gillis challenges the notion that islands are static, isolated places, and he argues that Mount Desert Island has historically been a transit point, represented by dynamism and connectedness. Betsy Hewlett and Natalie Springuel both trace different cultural and social boundaries in their articles: Hewlett explores how horticulture joined summer and island residents and crossed gender lines in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; and Springuel presents a broad view of the island’s working waterfront, revealing diversity as a critical characteristic for its survival. Duane Braun shows how conceptions of the geologic shatter zone have changed since the early nineteenth century. Two authors examine the borderlands of blended cultural groups: Using excerpts from Charles Eliot’s “Note VI: The English Explorers,” Paige Melin investigates how Eliot the historiographer portrayed the mixing of French fur traders and fisherman, early British explorers, and Native Americans; and Tim Garrity illustrates the challenges early-twentieth-century immigrants to Mount Desert Island faced and how they persevered to make a place for themselves in the community. In a photo essay, Jennifer Booher shares her observations of the intersections of natural and cultural history she has discovered while circumambulating the island’s coast by foot. Bill Horner poses ideological questions about history itself: “Is history a commodity that someone can own? Or are we merely its stewards?” Tim Garrity and Catherine Schmitt explore a borderland of time, viewing the present of Acadia National Park from the perspective of those in the late nineteenth century and forecasting what our successors may see upon the park’s bicentennial, one hundred years from the publication of this volume.

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Acadian Borderland stands out more than ever not as a fringe or marginal space, but as the center of our stories.

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Virginia Mellen is the Mount Desert Island Historical Society's outreach coordinator. She graduated from College of the Atlantic in 2012 and later received an MA in arts and heritage management from Maastricht University in the Netherlands. She currently lives with her husband, Eli, and their son, Avi, in Southwest Harbor.

¹ Pekka Hämäläinen and Samuel Truett, "On Borderlands," *Journal of American History* 98, no. 2 (September 2011): 338–361.

² *Ibid*, 361.

³ Godfrey Baldacchino, "The Lure of the Island: A Spatial Analysis of Power Relations," *Journal of Marine and Island Cultures* 1 (2012): 57.