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Author(s): Stephen J. Hornsby

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# THE GILDED AGE AND THE MAKING OF BAR HARBOR\*

STEPHEN J. HORNSBY

**ABSTRACT.** In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, an American urban elite created an extensive North American pleasure periphery, with seasonal resorts that dramatically reshaped local economies and landscapes. Bar Harbor, Maine, exemplified this type of resort. Affluent New Yorkers and Bostonians developed an exclusive, picturesque resort, with a local service economy almost completely dependent on tourism. They also managed to surround the town with a national park.

**D**URING the second half of the nineteenth century, or the Gilded Age as it is sometimes called, elites in the main cities of the United States created an extensive pleasure periphery. The old mineral spas scattered through the Appalachians that had served planter and mercantile families during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were replaced by new resorts in peripheral areas of the eastern seaboard, the Appalachian Mountains, the Canadian Shield, the Rocky Mountains, and the Pacific coast that catered to the newly emergent urban-industrial moneyed class. Although Newport, Rhode Island, was considered the leading resort of this type, Bar Harbor, Maine, was a close rival that set a pattern of resort development copied along much of the northern New England coast.

Three reasons account for the rise of the North American pleasure periphery during the Gilded Age. The rapid rise of industrial capitalism created a vastly expanded affluent elite that increasingly saw itself as a class, even a caste, and sought to insulate itself from the rest of American society. Practical concerns about health and social problems of the inner city, combined with the ideological influence of the romantic movement and its celebration of nature, encouraged the elite to move to the country (Fishman 1987; Schmitt 1990). Rapid improvements in transportation technology, especially the railroad and the steamboat, allowed the increasing differentiation and specialization of space. Though remaining an intensely urban class, the elite created a series of interconnecting social spaces in the countryside: suburban estates, country clubs, prep schools, college campuses, and, at the farthest remove, seasonal resorts (Zelinsky 1980; Wyckoff 1990). Class segregation went hand in hand with spatial exclusion.

The penetration of the elite into the remote parts of the continent in search of an authentic experience amid nature led to the rise of an extensive pleasure periphery. Along the east coast, this zone stretched discontinuously

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● DR. HORNSBY is an associate professor of anthropology and associate director of the Canadian-American Center, University of Maine, Orono, Maine 04473-1591.

from Cape May on the Jersey shore through the Hamptons on Long Island, Narragansett Bay and Cape Cod, along the Maine coast to Campobello and St. Andrews-by-the-Sea and around to Murray Bay. The heat and humidity of eastern summers made the northern New England coast especially attractive. With its cold currents offshore and breezes onshore providing cool summer weather and its rugged scenery satisfying the romantic desire for nature, the area was considered the perfect physical setting for summer vacations. Moreover, the coast was relatively undeveloped, and the local population was old-stock Yankee. A "hard, bold Northern landscape" (Schauffler 1911) combined with racial purity proved irresistible to an elite fleeing the city and its immigrant population.

Bar Harbor is situated on the eastern side of Mount Desert Island overlooking island-studded Frenchman Bay and backing onto the granite massif of Cadillac Mountain, the highest point on the American eastern seaboard. In 1840 Bar Harbor was a small community of a few hundred residents, dependent on fishing, farming, lumbering, and shipbuilding. Artists of the Hudson River school discovered the island in the mid-1840s, and landscape paintings of Bar Harbor and Mount Desert Island were soon appearing in the fashionable galleries of Boston, New York, and Philadelphia (Wilmerding 1988, 1991). Accessible only by trading schooners and a weekly coastal steamer in the 1850s and even more difficult to reach during the Civil War, the island attracted only a few "rusticators." After the war, steamer connections improved, and increasing numbers of summer visitors came to the island. By 1885, there was a railroad terminus at Mount Desert Ferry; within a few years, the all-Pullman Bar Harbor Express provided overnight service from Boston and New York to the ferry, and the service was later extended to Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington (Buettell 1967). A sparsely settled corner of Maine was then within easy reach of some of the most populous cities on the continent.

The influx of tourists transformed the landscape, the economy, and the society of Bar Harbor. In the 1870s and 1880s, the old fishing village became a tourist town, complete with steamer wharf, commercial strips, boarding houses, and large, wooden-framed hotels (Savage 1971). Most of the local population shifted from farming and fishing to employment as laborers, teamsters, or domestics. By the mid-1880s, wealthy visitors were building summer cottages. Twenty years later, cottages dominated the residential landscape, and several large hotels had been razed. Long before, the population of Bar Harbor was demarcated between summer people who owned or rented cottages and townspeople who served the summer visitors.

#### THE COTTAGERS

According to a social register for 1909–10 (Island 1909), two hundred twenty-one families had summer cottages in Bar Harbor. The cottagers came from as far away as New Orleans, St. Louis, and Chicago, but most came

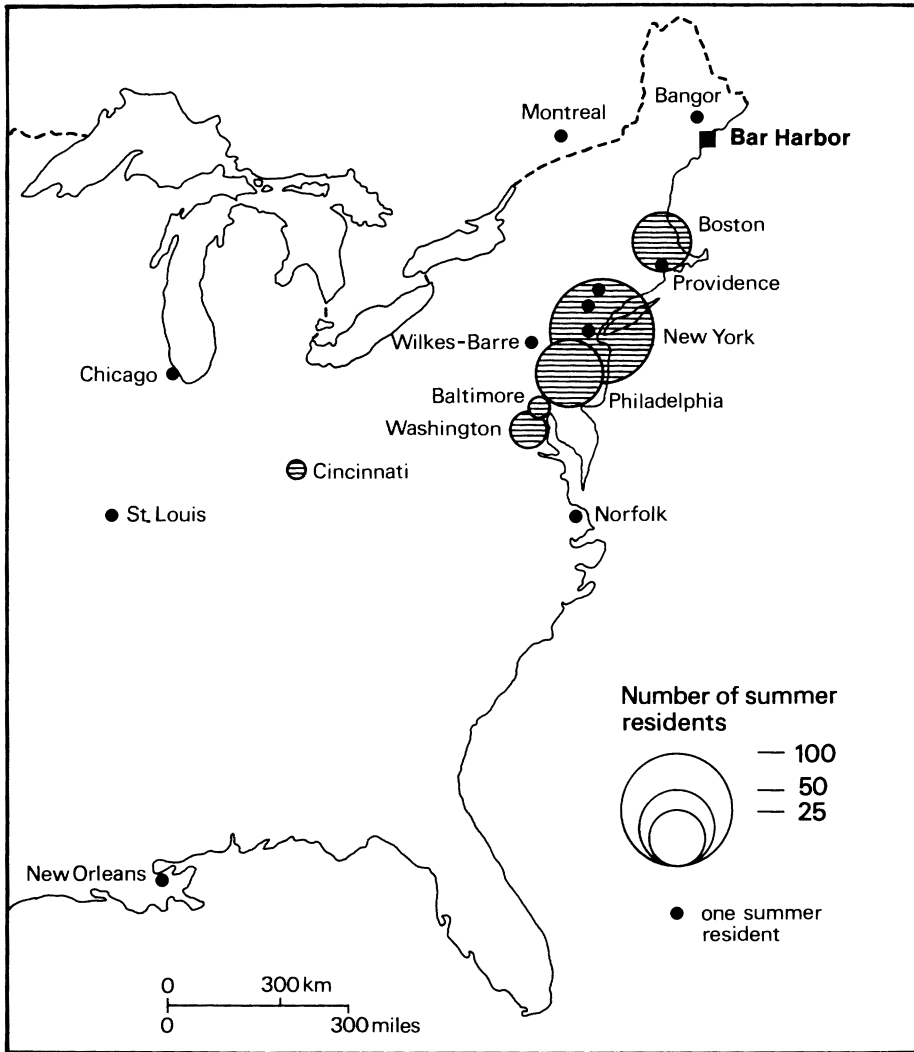


FIG. 1—Bar Harbor and its summer residents in the early twentieth century. *Source:* Data on residents from Island 1909. (Cartography by Ray Harris)

from the main cities along the eastern seaboard (Fig. 1). Nearly one-half were from New York City, with most of the rest from Boston, Philadelphia, and Washington. Only one family came from Maine.

The cottagers comprised a cross section of the east-coast elite. Of the families listed for 1909–10, data on social and economic background (*Dictionary of American Biography 1928–1958*) are available for only fifty heads of household, or 23 percent of the total. The largest group, 30 percent, were in the medical professions as physicians, surgeons, or professors of medicine. Another 20 percent were bankers or businessmen, several with railroad interests. In this group were Harris C. Fahnestock, vice-president of the First

National Bank of New York; George Bowdoin, a partner in Drexel, Morgan & Co.; Jacob Schiff, who was also well known as a philanthropist; and John Stewart Kennedy, a backer of the Union Pacific and the Canadian Pacific railroads, as well as a principal shareholder in the Northern Pacific and Great Northern railroads.

A further 14 percent were lawyers or judges, and another 8 percent were retired military officers. In addition, there were publishers, politicians, foreign-embassy staff, educators, social reformers, and clergymen. Cottage owners not listed in the register that year included publisher Joseph Pulitzer and George W. Vanderbilt, the builder of Biltmore, a fabled country house near Asheville, North Carolina. Though not a cottage owner, J. P. Morgan frequently spent summers at Bar Harbor aboard his yacht. Later cottage owners were soap manufacturer William C. Procter, radio manufacturer A. Atwater Kent, and banker E. T. Stotesbury. At nearby Seal Harbor, John D. Rockefeller Jr. and Edsel Ford established summer homes.

That elite group quickly created an exclusive enclave. Drawing inspiration from the English picturesque, the dominant landscaping style in the United States, the cottagers bought much of the waterfront and the high ground overlooking the bay and mountains (Figs. 2 and 3). There they laid out elaborate villas set in landscaped parks, similar to the romantic suburbs surrounding many eastern cities (Duncan 1973; Pattison 1976; Watkin 1982; Archer 1983; Hugill 1986). Prominent architects and architectural firms in New York, Philadelphia, and Boston designed many of the cottages (Aslet 1990; Hewitt 1990). Sophisticated international styles replaced local building traditions. In the 1880s, the Queen Anne style gave way to the shingle style that for a decade or more prevailed as the leading cottage style and became almost synonymous with the Maine coast (Scully 1955, 1989; Reed 1990). By the beginning of the twentieth century, the eclectic movement was in full favor. Cottages were built in the Italian, French Renaissance, chateausque, Tudor, or colonial revival style, an indication of the heterogeneous character of the elite and the absence of a single standard of taste. With no common tradition, the newly wealthy wanted the trappings of old money, and an appropriate architectural style was a statement of social ambition, if not standing.

Many so-called cottages were huge. Point d'Acadie, built for George W. Vanderbilt, had nine living rooms on the first floor, eight bedrooms with four baths on the second, and ten servant rooms. Elsewhere on the estate, two cottages housed guests (*Country Life* May 1921). Some owners built family compounds with small residences allotted to branches of the family. Virtually every cottage had ancillary structures, such as gatehouses, stables, coach houses, and servant quarters. One estate contained a commercial nursery; another included outlying model farms (*Bar Harbor Record* 8 May 1901; Helfrich and O'Neil 1982).

The English picturesque dominated the landscaping of estate grounds. The picturesque emphasis on irregularity, variety, and roughness was es-

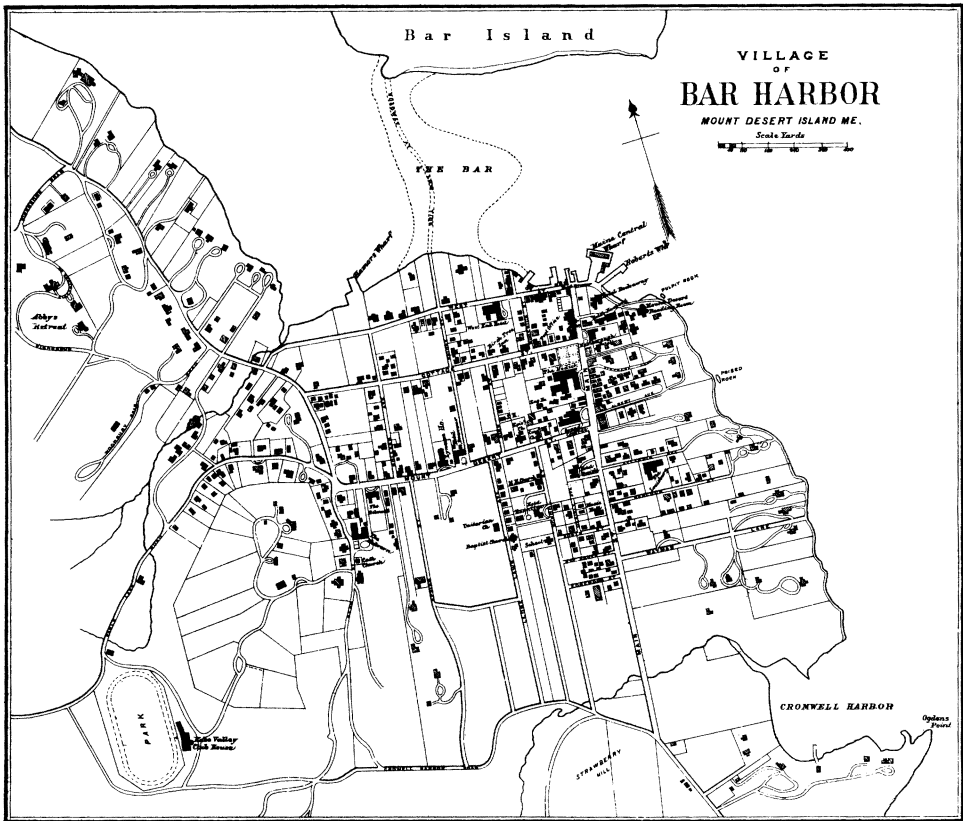


FIG. 2—Bar Harbor, Maine, 1890. Source: Stuart's atlas 1890.

pecially suitable to the broken terrain, rock outcrops, streams, and fine stands of trees found along the Maine coast. Frederick Law Olmsted, the master of the picturesque in the United States, designed several Bar Harbor estates, including Point d'Acadie, and emphasized the naturalistic look. Sinuous drives and irregular plantings allowed changing views of house and grounds as well as glimpses of surrounding mountains and sea (Fig. 4). For example, Baymeath was "approached through a long avenue of maple trees, about a quarter of a mile in length, and as the stone gates [were] reached, the first glimpse of the house [was] seen. A winding road ascend[ed] the hill through magnificent beds of shrubbery and velvet lawns, and end[ed] in a broad sweep at the main door of the house" (Wylie 1907). Although the general principles of the picturesque guided landscaping, many of its stylistic details did not transfer successfully to the Maine coast. Coniferous species native to Maine, such as spruce, pine, and fir, were substituted for the English deciduous varieties. Carefully manicured lawns, similar to those surrounding many English country houses, were difficult to maintain on the thin-soiled ledges of Bar Harbor and were usually replaced by shrubs and trees.

Formal landscaping surrounded many cottages. Terraces and flower beds combined the geometric layout of the Italian garden with the picturesque

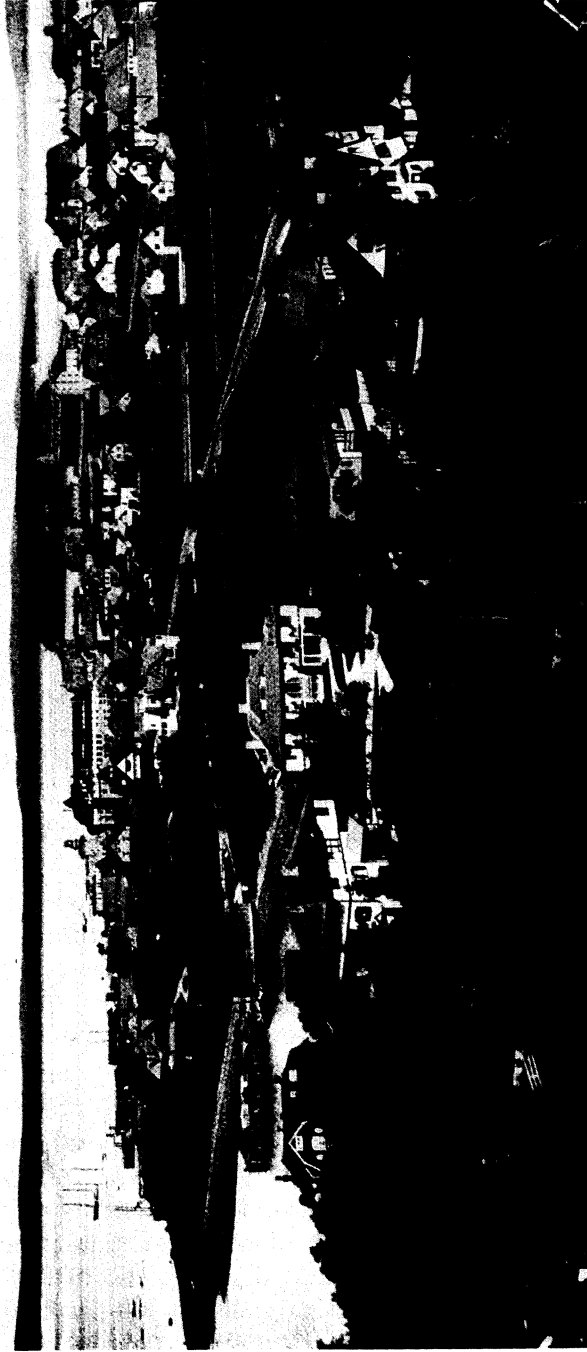


FIG. 3.—Bar Harbor in the early 1900s, looking east from Abbys Retreat shown on Fig. 2. Lavish cottages filled prime locations along the waterfront, and the commercial nucleus of stores and hotels clustered inland. (Reproduced by courtesy of the Maine Historic Preservation Commission)

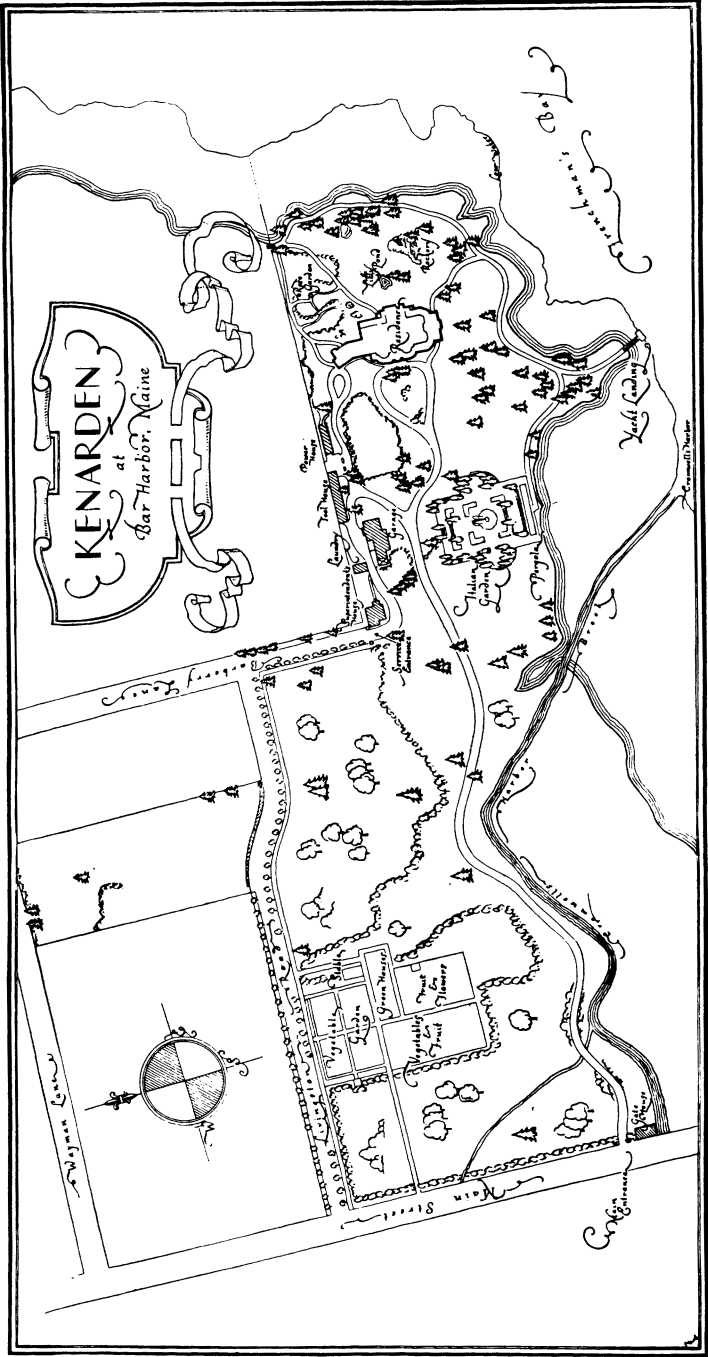


FIG. 4—Kenarden estate at Bar Harbor. Beatrix Farrand designed the formal Italian garden near the center of the drawing. Source: *Country Life* June 1931, 13.



plantings of the English cottage garden (Jones 1906; Riley 1913; Curl 1921; Griswold and Weller 1991). Beatrix Farrand, a leading landscape gardener in the United States during the early twentieth century and a summer resident of Bar Harbor, designed several such gardens, in which she juxtaposed herbaceous borders and plantings of spruce and pine (Balmori, McGuire, and Peck 1985). The result was "a little gem of landscape-architecture at once formal and natural, breaking perhaps into wildness and running down to the rugged shore, or set for a surprise beside a sweep of rocky meadow, or held in the heart of a tangled thicket" (Schauffler 1911). The combination of English and Italian gardening, set in a physical landscape far different from the English lowlands or the Tuscan hills, created a uniquely Maine garden style.

Beyond the granite walls and *arborvitae* hedges that enclosed the estates, the cottagers tried to control the landscape of Bar Harbor and Mount Desert Island. In 1889, they established the Bar Harbor Village Improvement Association to ensure a healthy resort and to beautify the area. Although it had no legal power of coercion, its influential membership, including Kennedy, Vanderbilt, Weir Mitchell, and Farrand, was a lobby that the town government could not ignore. Among health improvements that the association campaigned for were a sewer system, garbage incineration, regulation of stables, and inspection of water and milk supplies. Fearing that contagious disease was no respecter of class, the association had shacks belonging to Passamaquoddy Indians at Squaw Hollow, a site adjacent to cottages on prestigious West Street, condemned on sanitary grounds and the inhabitants moved to the outskirts of the town (*Bar Harbor Record* 13 October 1892).

To create a picturesque village, the association planted shade trees along the main streets; tended the town cemetery; laid out a village green, complete with bandstand, clock, and an ornate Italian fountain, and paths to scenic spots; paid local businesses to remove commercial hoardings; and encouraged townspeople to maintain their houses and gardens (Fig. 5). Mrs. Cadwalader Jones, mother of Farrand, was especially zealous about litter. She visited the town schools and "bespoke the aid of the children in keeping the streets clean and the grounds about their houses neat and tidy. Each pupil was given a V.I.A. badge and a card containing rules for his or her guidance in the matter" (*Bar Harbor Record* 21 September 1898). For summer 1901, the association employed a boy to pick up litter, but after seven weeks he "tired of what would have been a pleasure if there had been no idea of work connected with it, and he refused to go on, nor could the committee fill his place" (*Bar Harbor Record* 18 September 1901).

Yet the modern world, rather than litter, was the serious threat to the pastoral idyll of Bar Harbor. The improvement association deplored the erection of poles by the electricity, telegraph, and telephone companies and lobbied for the underground placement of utility lines. Association members thwarted an attempt by local businessmen to build a trolley line to Bar



FIG. 5—Main Street, Bar Harbor in the early twentieth century. To the left of the clock was the village green with newly planted shade trees; to the right were the stores on Main Street. Visible are the telegraph poles that so exercised the Village Improvement Association. (Reproduced by courtesy of the Maine Historic Preservation Commission)

Harbor by setting up a rival company that bought the best route but did not develop it. Many cottagers owned automobiles for city use but preferred carriages at Bar Harbor. Through state laws and town ordinances, automobiles were banned from village streets and town roads until 1913, long after the vehicles had been accepted elsewhere in the United States (Savage 1975).

As the development of Bar Harbor and other resorts on Mount Desert Island expanded, the cottagers undertook to preserve the island. Under the guidance of Charles W. Eliot, the president of Harvard University and a summer resident of Northeast Harbor, and his son Charles, a landscape architect and partner in the Olmsted firm, the improvement societies in the communities on the island formed a charitable trust in 1901 to purchase and preserve land (Eliot 1903, 1914; Collier 1978). By 1914, the trust held between 5,000 and 6,000 acres (Dorr and others 1914). Two years later the trustees, threatened by property taxes, gave the land to the federal government as a national monument. Soon afterward, it became a national park, the first such park east of the Rocky Mountains.

The successful enlistment of the federal government on the side of the cottagers depended as much on their Washington connections as on shrewd arguments about the aesthetic, scientific, and historic importance of the island. The cottagers persuasively argued that their aesthetic vision, derived from the romantic movement, should be embraced by the rest of society. Elitist concepts of beauty and nature overrode local concerns about jobs and

modern amenities (*Bar Harbor Record* 27 April 1904). With the preservation of the "freaks and wonders of nature" (Lowenthal 1968, 84) in the American West as a precedent, the lobbyists emphasized the uniqueness of the island's physical environment in the east. Influenced by the colonial-revival movement, they also stressed the European past of the island. George Dorr, summer resident, Boston Brahmin, and first superintendent of the park, literally rewrote the map of Mount Desert Island by replacing Yankee names with ones from the colonial era (Dorr 1992). To show solidarity with the French during World War I, the park was named Lafayette. Later it was renamed Acadia, the original French name for the area. Green Mountain, the highest point on the island, became Cadillac, and the name of Newport Mountain was changed to Champlain. Similar arguments won over John D. Rockefeller Jr., who funded much of Colonial Williamsburg. He purchased more land for the park, financed the layout of an extensive network of carriage roads that was landscaped by Farrand, and built Norman-style gatehouses at the two entrances to the park (Roberts 1990). Through a combination of federal protection and private money, the cottagers had effectively surrounded Bar Harbor and other resorts on the island with a national park. Their enclaves were secure.

Every summer a sophisticated social world descended on Bar Harbor. With its "diplomats and society leaders of the old school, persons eminent in literature, professional life, and the arts," Bar Harbor society, asserted one Boston newspaper, was "the best to be found at any American resort. [Bar Harbor] is our summer social capital, if we have one" (*Boston Advertiser*, quoted in *Bar Harbor Record* 29 August 1906). After the decline of the hotels, much of the social activity revolved around the cottages, clubs, and churches. Clubs included the Mount Desert Reading Room, housed in a shingle-style building overlooking the waterfront, the Kebo Valley Club, the Bar Harbor Club, and the Yacht Club. Summer residents attended concerts at the Grecian Temple of Arts, patronized the library, and supported the arts and crafts society. The improvement association looked after the sanitation and appearance of the town, and the Summer Residents Association focused on local government, specifically tax rates and provision of services. Mostly Protestant and Episcopalian, many cottagers attended the large Episcopal church in the village: "the architecture is of the old English style, with Gothic doors and windows" (*Bar Harbor Record* 14 December 1898). With the powerful Pulitzer and Schiff as summer residents, society was not overtly anti-semitic, as was the case at some resorts, but neither did it encourage a large Jewish summer community. Bar Harbor was almost an exclusively Anglo-Saxon enclave and preferred to stay that way.

#### THE TOWNSPEOPLE

Between 1870 and 1910, the permanent population of the town increased from approximately 1,200 to almost 4,500 people. Virtually all the working

population served the summer cottagers and tourists. Of the principal male occupations, most men were in construction and landscaping trades such as day laboring, carpentry, house painting, plumbing, masonry, and gardening. The rest were in retailing and transportation. The main female occupations, too, were in the service sector. Most working women were in some type of domestic service or associated work as laundresses and dressmakers. There was also a significant seasonal working population. Some cottagers staffed their houses with their own maids, butlers, and liverymen. The servants arrived in late May or early June to prepare the residence for the family in early July. Several Boston merchants also opened stores in Bar Harbor during the summer months, and hotels added seasonal staff. After the end of the summer pogy fishery, fishermen from Newfoundland frequently worked on Bar Harbor estates and returned home with gardening skills to use on their tiny outport gardens. Construction on estates during the winter also drew laborers to the village (*Bar Harbor Record* 17 January 1900).

Compared with the populations of neighboring fishing villages, the inhabitants of Bar Harbor were of diverse origin. Although more than three-quarters of the working population were from Maine, there were significant numbers from Ontario, New Brunswick, Massachusetts, and Ireland. In addition, there were some French Canadians, English, Russians, Swedes, and American Indians. In contrast with the families summering in the cottages, most of the working population was young and single. Among the main occupations, 57 percent of day laborers and 83 percent of domestic servants were single.

Many permanent residents were unable to afford the high cost of property and thus lived in quarters provided by employers or in tenements on back streets and alleys. Their social life revolved around the boarding houses and saloons. Some cottagers complained and provided funds to build a YMCA and a YWCA. The cricket club, "organized by the men servants," was liberally supported "by some of the gentlemen who feel the effort to establish a hearty pastime for their servants ought to be encouraged" (*Bar Harbor Record* 21 August 1901).

Although the development of Bar Harbor provided seasonal employment that was an economic mainstay of the local population, relationships between townspeople and cottagers were sometimes difficult. The cottagers were paternalistic and expected deference in return. They owned much of the land in the town, paid most of the real estate taxes, and underwrote many of its services and charities. Most of the townspeople were used to a fairly independent life. Deference did not come naturally, and tension was never far from the surface. Cottagers referred to them as natives, and some were stereotyped as lazy, independent, and avaricious (Ives 1984). For example, a Chicago millionaire found "the work of the natives . . . somewhat slow" and observed that "every two or three days they were apt to get what we called 'that tired feeling,' and take the day off" (Bowen 1945). Cottagers complained

about high real estate taxes, discriminatory charges for water and electricity, and high prices for goods and labor (*Bar Harbor Record* 23 September 1903). The aesthetic vision of the cottagers was not widely shared. The signs that the improvement association installed to mark trails often were "deliberately pulled down, shot away, or carried off" (BHVIA 1922). Some cottagers complained about trespassing and vandalism (*Bar Harbor Record* 4 July 1889). After a spate of burglaries in 1892, the cottagers lobbied for efficient police protection and prevailed on the town to build a jail (*Bar Harbor Record* 13 July 1893). The elite received more respect among English and Irish servants, who had been raised in the Old World class system (Chilman 1972).

By 1914, the glittering years of Bar Harbor were numbered. The increased burden of taxation, the stock-market crash of 1929, and the Great Depression took their toll of family fortunes. The introduction of air conditioning and a trend away from sedentary vacations also lessened the lure of Bar Harbor. By 1940, many of the large cottages had been sold or were standing empty, their once-lavish gardens overgrown and untended. After years of decline, the end came quickly. In October 1947, a massive forest fire that raged across much of the island swept through the outskirts of the village and destroyed one-third of the more than two hundred cottages in the area. With the onset of mass tourism and general use of the automobile, motels and parking lots replaced many of the burnt-out properties. Yet the symbolic end of the Gilded Age at Bar Harbor came in 1955, when aged, fastidious Beatrix Farrand, pressured by property taxes and afraid that her great garden, Reef Point, might become a tourist attraction after her death, destroyed her most personal creation. She donated her library, which included the papers of the influential English gardener Gertrude Jekyll, to the University of California at Berkeley, tore down her shingle cottage, and dismantled her garden (Patterson 1985). It was the elite's last act of defiance against a changing world.

### CONCLUSION

In less than two decades, a metropolitan-based elite had created the summer resort of Bar Harbor. The elite financed much of the construction in the town, designed the cottages and landscape gardens, formed its institutions, dominated social life, and employed virtually all the working population. Initially, the resort was alien to the Maine coast. In the imperial language of the time, Bar Harbor was a summer colony and its local residents were natives. Yet as tourism supplanted the wood-wind-sail economy, the image of the Maine coast developed by the elite began to take hold. Coastal Maine became incorporated into an exurban world.

The rapid transformation of Bar Harbor into an elite resort during the Gilded Age anticipates the many larger tourism developments that have occurred across North America since the 1950s. The desire of urbanites to vacation back to nature remains strong, and many have second homes in

rural areas. Although few of them rival those in turn-of-the-century Bar Harbor, many reflect sophisticated urban fashion and taste. They also represent social and economic status. Tourism brings employment to peripheral areas, as well as conflicts over land use and provision of services and amenities. It also inflates land values, often beyond the reach of local people. The social and economic gulf between cottagers and townspeople in Bar Harbor can still be found in tourism areas today. The power of urbanites to reshape the landscapes, economies, and societies of the rural periphery remains enormous.

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