

THE FOUNDING OF MAINE, 1600-1640
A COMMENT

by
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This is a good paper and an important one. This audience is fortunate to have an early glimpse of work which, together with that of John Reid and Helen Camp, and I would hope others soon to come, will illuminate a very murky topic indeed. I am sure that all of us are delighted, as I certainly am, that Ed Churchill is turning his hand to trying to fathom the origins of Maine. We have never known enough about it, and it is time that a scholar in our generation got down to doing some original work with it. Not since the days of Henry S. Burrage more than sixty years ago, really, has there been better promise than Ed and some of his colleagues are giving us right now of gaining some new light on how, why, and indeed when the settlement of Maine by Englishmen took place — together with fresh details. It is also, I might add, good to see someone, in this case Ed, bringing Maine within what I suppose must now be something like the mainstream of early American research in his pursuit of “the basic dynamics of the society” of early Falmouth by means of a “sociological structural-functional analysis.” I only hope that he does not, like some of his brothers and sisters in such pursuits, lose either his sense of humor or his sense of history in the process. I’m sure he will not.

Ed calls his interpretation of the founding of Maine a “revisionist” one. He has certainly challenged some presumed facts, and challenged them effectively. He has also altered some emphases that have been more-or-less standard for some time now, and he has brought to his consideration of the usual documentary sources for the four decades of his interest a somewhat more analytical

frame of mind than most of his predecessors. All of this has resulted in a sharper focus on some of the details of his topic, and thus has served to further truth. To the extent that his findings will cause us to think differently about the founding of Maine, Ed is entitled, I suppose, to call his essay "revisionist." My own inclination, however (especially since presumably I am one of the culprits who has been guilty of accepting and blithely passing on what Ed calls the "standard portrait," and therefore must be subject to "revision" myself), is to regard the label "revisionist" a bit overdrawn in this case, if not perhaps pretentious. I say this for two reasons. First, it seems to me that Ed had indeed presented an effective criticism of some of our received ways of thinking about the subject, but he has not yet really taken the next step and offered his own explanation of the settling of Maine as a substitute for the "model," as he calls it, that he criticizes but does not entirely reject. Therefore, he has at best, it seems to me, offered notes toward a revised interpretation of the founding of Maine, but has not yet formulated a revisionist interpretation. Second, and somewhat more bothersome, this effective criticism I mentioned a moment ago is never so effective as when he is criticizing a version of the "standard portrait" that so far as I can make out was never really held by most of his predecessors. That is, Ed makes the contrast between his own partially-formed view and that which it is presumably to replace more vivid than it really is. And that is the second reason that I think the word "revisionist" may be a bit too big for the job.

My first objection to the word "revisionist" needs little further elaboration, and what little it needs can wait for the end. So let me pursue my second objection at this point, and then go on to discuss some other aspects of Ed's argument. I have little quarrel with the summary statement of what I suppose may be the conventional picture with which Ed begins his paper. Eight or ten years

ago, I could have written most of it myself, in not far from the same words. But notice I said most, not all. And one thing I would not have said is that by 1600, "the coast was dotted with small but unrecorded fishing camps and in the summers the coastal waters were alive with similarly unrecorded fishing vessels." Andrews talks of busy Maine waters, but does not claim that the gathering of ships began before sometime between 1608 and 1614, and strongly implies that the busiest fishing years came after the settlement of Jamestown, Plymouth, and even Massachusetts Bay, since vessels from those colonies presumably contributed to the numbers. R. V. Coleman, whose *First Frontier*, (1948), Ed cites as one of the books that accepts the traditional formulation, speaks of "thousands of fishermen from France and Spain and the west of England" who had been aware of the possibilities of wealth from fishing for perhaps 200 years before John Smith, but he doesn't necessarily place them in Maine. It is true that Charles Knowles Bolton, in *The Real Founders of New England*, (1929), uses Ed's phrase almost exactly, and commits exactly the error, or presumed error, that Ed quotes in the summary: "At the time of the voyage of Gosnold in 1602, and even before his coming to the New England coast, we see the harbors and rivers alive with shipping." And he documents that, more or less, by extending a description of the scene in Newfoundland in 1615 to New England.

The point is that although many writers, myself included, have accepted the probability of English fishermen in Maine waters by about 1600 and have speculated as to how wintering-over experiments may have begun at some point prior to documented instances, not all of us by any means have argued for a dotted coastline or teeming waters at any time much before Edward Winslow of Plymouth found "above thirty sail ships" at Damariscove in 1622. And yet it is precisely upon

this point of “fleets of fishermen, so often described by historians,” and “numerous vessels” prior to 1600 that Ed pounces in constructing his initial attack upon the “standard portrait.” His argument against widespread fishing in New England waters prior to documented instances is an extremely sound one, and I accept it with few reservations. The trouble is that the argument is directed against the one part of the traditional story of Maine’s beginning that most historians have treated with far more care than Ed will acknowledge. And there goes some of the “revision.”

It is perfectly true, however, that on another aspect of Ed’s “standard portrait,” most of us who have written on seventeenth-century Maine over the past several decades have agreed. We have agreed on the image of the tough, hard-drinking fisherman, and on the relative lack of order and stability in the Maine villages of the seventeenth century. In the portion of his paper that addresses this aspect of early Maine, Ed seems to me to have added variety and detail to the picture rather than turned it around. Clearly, his analysis of the Richmond Island community, of which I presume we see here only the tip of the iceberg, gives promise of yielding a far better understanding of the sociology of that fascinating operation than we could possibly have had without the kind of treatment to which Ed evidently has subjected the data. We shall now, I presume, have something more like a passport photo than the caricature with which we have been content up to now.

Ed has also performed a valuable service — and this is potentially even more interesting — by hinting at the difference between fishing stations and “settler plantations” and at the relationships between them. I have been nagged by the unsatisfactory state of our understanding of this point for a long time. Were there, for example, “plantations” at places like Pemaquid and

Damariscove, along with the fishing and trading stations? If so, how and why did they get there, and what was their precise relationship with the commercial operations next to which, if they did, they existed? A greater development of this distinction and this relationship may, in the end, be the real key to clarifying the origins of Maine and the nature of its first English communities and people.

Implicit in some of Ed's observations and conceptual assumptions is the notion that a reordering of emphasis is now in order. For a couple of generations, historians have tried to emphasize the differences between the settlement of Maine and the settlement of Massachusetts in order to counter even earlier assumptions than Ed is now trying to modify and in order to set the stage for depicting social change under Massachusetts influence.

Ed is now saying, if I read him right, that we may have overdone the differences. He is also, of course, as a good behavioralist, looking for models of settlement and community-building that will prove useful in asking questions of his material, and quite naturally finds them where nearly all of this kind of work with early American materials has been done to date, namely in Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay. As perhaps the last to have deliberately set out the differences between the origins of northern and southern New England in a definitive way, I might, I suppose, be expected to protest such a reordering of emphasis with some vehemence. That, however, is not the case. If, in fact, I were to have done what I did nearly a decade ago only a few years later, I would have drawn the division with a softer brush, not because my view of Maine would have been any different, but because of what we were then just beginning to learn about Massachusetts.

But Ed is going beyond that, I think, and suggesting that the origins of his "settler plantations" may have had something in common with the origins of at least some of

the towns of Massachusetts Bay. If he is going to develop that line in inquiry — and this touches again on my suggestion that we do not yet find here anything like a fully-developed “revision,” but only notes and hints — I hope he searches his data file to discover whether, for example, the farmer families of his “settler plantations” shared West Country origins with the fishermen and traders or whether any of them shared places of origin with some of the emigrants to Massachusetts. Does he find any religious dissenters among them? Can he discover anything definite about motivation? He has not, apparently, yet found anything that would suggest that groups larger than family units settled the Maine plantations, but that would be another interesting question. All of this, depending upon the answers, might indeed provide the stuff for a real “revision.”

But to return, first to the picture of the untamed fishermen and then to that of the troubled and disordered communities of the seventeenth century. Ed pretty much hangs his case for a more civilized fisherman than we have assumed in the past on his analysis of the Richmond Island scene, a relatively large and well-organized one, and then either overlooks the written descriptive evidence regarding unruly fishermen, treats it as exceptions, or relegates it to footnotes. In other words, I am not sure that the amount of alcohol consumed by fishermen (which is almost the sole question Ed addresses) is either central to the traditional account of the origins of Maine or effectively challenged in this paper. The evidence that I collected several years ago supports at least a tentative view of early lawlessness, and I do not find that Ed has done much to convince me that it is wrong. And incidentally, I do not know that anyone has ever denied that some of those who ran or settled at fishing stations were as much interested in religion as Ed says they were — which wasn’t much. The point, though, is that there is a difference

between the acceptance of religious norms and institutions and having an actual religious purpose for one's society, which I presume we still accept as an accurate assessment of Plymouth and Boston but not of Kittery, York, or Pemaquid.

With regard to troubled communities, I should like first to make a point about the use of court records. Ed is of course correct in pointing out what many historians have pointed out, namely that the crimes and offenses punished by the court are precisely those offenses that the community finds contrary to its standards — and that there has been a temptation in the past to use court records to prove the preponderance of the offenses that are prosecuted rather than the standards of the community. I think, however, that in the case of Maine, the greatest use of court records by historians has not been in the relatively few pages that cover the government under Ferdinando Gorges during the period of Ed's interest, but rather during the attempt to impose Massachusetts law upon the Maine population later in the century. Yes, the preoccupation of the courts in the 1690s and 1710s with liquor and sex offenses certainly shows that society did not condone these offenses — of course it didn't. But it also shows that the authorities considered these to be a serious problem, and I think that the historian who uses those records cannot help but agree that by Massachusetts standards at least, the authorities were right. I think, too, that Ed's objection to using the court records for evidence overlooks the immense insight that can be drawn from the language of the depositions, including assumptions that are revealed there about the prevalence of certain kinds of conduct.

The very earliest court records, in their concern for dealing with Indian thievery and murder, also disclose one important *source* of social disruption in the 1630s. If Ed's study had taken him further, he would have found that

the presence of wartime conditions in Maine in 1675 right on up through a good part of the eighteenth century had a similarly disruptive influence. As far as I know, most of the explanations for a relatively wild and disordered Maine have had to do with such external causes, not with charges about the unusually sinful nature of the population against which Ed, I think, tries to defend it. Indeed, even in the period of his interest, the willing acceptance of provincial government to which he attests is evidence that there was very much a felt need for government. And the desire for ministers attests to a felt need for the kind of social control that institutional religion provides. Conversely, the presence of a felt need both for government and for social control must indicate a relative absence of both.

To summarize, I should say that we have an extremely interesting and even tantalizing paper, but one which is not fully formed. Ed has given us a sample of what is obviously a most important piece of work, one to which we should all be looking forward with great eagerness. If, as seems likely, he will lay some old errors to rest, he will earn our gratitude. But even more to the point, it seems that his work will add clarity, detail, and variety to the obscure topic that is the settlement of Maine. But to qualify as a "revision," I think, the alternate scheme he wants to develop will have to take a fuller form than it does here.