

JOSEPH CONFORTI

ELEANOR PICKERING SPRAGUE LECTURE SERIES

“ICE AND GRANITE”:
THE NEW ENGLAND CHARACTER*

I am delighted to be before you delivering the inaugural Eleanor Pickering Sprague Lecture. I am still trying to figure out how someone who has been in Maine only four months and whose last name is Conforti has managed to be so honored. During my first four months in the state I have learned new things about New England, including why some New Englanders eat pie for breakfast. Let me explain.

Before the start of each academic year, the University of Southern Maine has an opening breakfast. Among the items served is apple pie. When I asked why pie was served for breakfast, I was given the following answer:

For foreigners, the word Yankee refers to all Americans; for southerners, Yankee refers to northerners; for northerners, Yankee refers to New Englanders; and for New Englanders Yankee refers to people in a small Vermont town who eat pie for breakfast.

I have learned other lessons during my first four months in Maine. I knew before I arrived that southern New Englanders do not consider Connecticut part of New England but an extension of New York. But I have discovered that northern New Englanders tend to view all of southern New England as not “really” New England; and Mainers consider southern Maine not truly Maine or New England. We may, then paraphrase an observation of Neal Peirce, the journalist, and formulate an axiom of life in the region: “All New Englanders believe that everything to the south of where they live is corrupt and is not really New England.”¹

*The following essay is a shortened and slightly revised version of the Eleanor Pickering Sprague Lecture presented to members of the Maine Historical Society, the Maine Chapter of the National Society of Colonial Dames, and the Portland Chapter of the Maine Genealogical Society, November 10, 1987.



For generations Maine presented a variety of images to intrigue travelers and commentators: quiet down-east harbors, traditional rural pastimes, churches on village greens, diversified family farms. Are landscape features such as these the source of the "New England Character?" Photos in this article are from the Maine Historical Society Collection.

The title of my lecture suggests something hard, permanent, or recurring in the New England character, or more appropriately, in the character — the distinctiveness — of the region. I am going to focus on what I think are the three most important aspects of the New England experience in the twentieth century: 1) the long economic decline of the region and its recent economic revival; 2) the persistence of the Yankee myth or the *Yankee* magazine view of New England; and 3) the ethnic transformation of the region. Let me start with the first theme — the long economic decline of New England — by taking you back one year to the fall of 1986.

If you will recall, New England's beloved Boston Red Sox were one out away from winning their first world championship in seventy-five years. The champagne bottles had been

opened; the Shea Stadium scoreboard had already flashed congratulations. Then disaster struck — the kind of disaster that New Englanders in general and Red Sox fans in particular have learned from history to expect.

Well before the nightmarish collapse of the Red Sox, the *Boston Globe* had raised the specter of gloom and doom. On August 14, 1986, with the home team firmly planted in first place, the *Globe* ran a history of major late-season Red Sox collapses. “It’s August and the Red Sox are in first place. Is that contradictory?” the *Globe* asked. “Not to Red Sox fans with memories of mid-season dives. Ever since the Sox began to soar, their often jilted fans have been bracing for the fall.”²

The *Globe* speculated that New England’s Calvinistic roots might be a source of this “August gloom” and of a kind of fatalism among Red Sox fans. The *Globe* turned to no less of an authority on both the Red Sox and Calvinism than A. Bartlett Giamatti, the president of the National League and former president of Yale. “There’s an almost Calvinistic sense of guilt at success, that we must re-enact the Garden of Eden again and again,” Giamatti observed in speaking for fellow Red Sox fans. “Somehow the Sox fulfill the notion that we live in a fallen world. It’s as though we assume they’re here to provide us with more pain.”³

The *Globe*’s front-page article was, of course, tongue-in-cheek. But the sense of gloom that has hovered over the Red Sox from the departure of Babe Ruth to the great collapse of ’86 is not imaginary. The Red Sox, then, are a fitting team for New England because a similar sense of gloom has hovered over the region for much of the twentieth century. A prominent Texas-born New England businessman once remarked that he “used to tell New Englanders that the one thing you could touch, feel, and smell when you got off the plane at Logan Airport was apathy.”⁴

I want to start with the sense of gloom and doom that has influenced the New England character and the character of New England in the twentieth century. And, unlike President



Ice and granite: a way of life in New England for centuries.

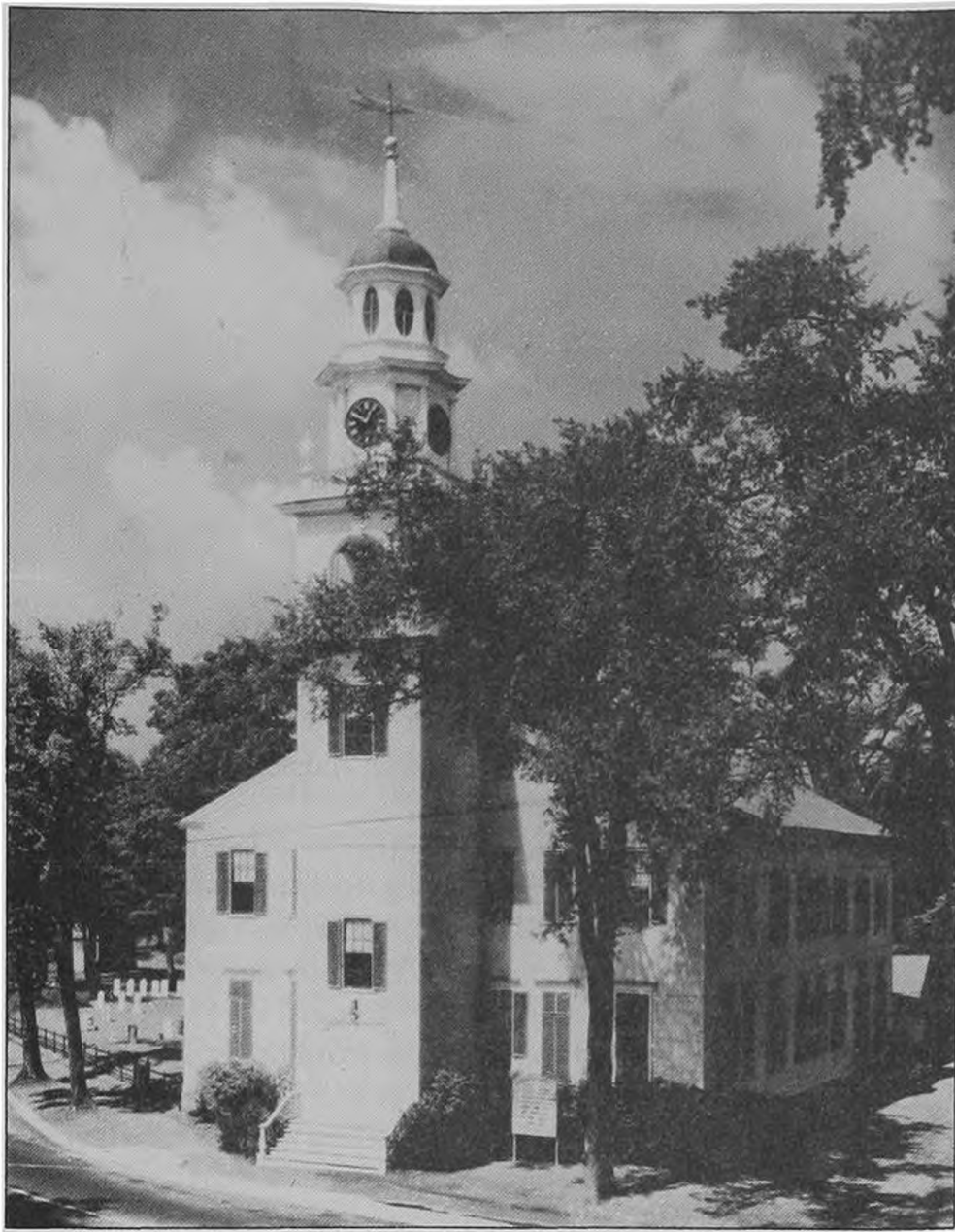


Giamatti, I do not want to blame the Puritans. They have borne too much of the historical burden for the sins of New England. Rather I want to point to the economic decline of the region as the principal source of New Englanders' fatalism and relatively low aspirations in the twentieth century. We are in the midst of a regional economic renaissance. New England, the region with the lowest unemployment and the highest per capita income, has led the way in the economic reconstruction of America over the last five years. But recent prosperity should not make us lose sight of the region's long history of economic decline.

We should remember that the last five years have been the only period of significant, sustained economic prosperity for New England in the twentieth century. Recall that only six years ago, unemployment was over 13 percent in Rhode Island and in the double-digits in Massachusetts. It was only a little more than a decade ago that a sharp decline in defense spending and the energy crisis conspired to create the most difficult time for New Englanders since the Depression.

If we move back from the early 1980s and 1970s to the 1960s, 1950s, and 1940s, we find several variations on this theme. For much of this period New England's unemployment rate was significantly higher than the national average. In 1950, for example, when the national unemployment rate was 4.9 percent, New England's was 6.3. Many of the region's major industrial communities had double digit unemployment.⁵ Earlier still, recall that the Great Depression had hastened the flight of the textile industry to the South, leaving behind wrecked local economies and shattered lives. In short, the history of New England in the twentieth century is a story of economic decline, high unemployment, personal hardships, and low aspirations.

This economic history — not Puritanism — forged the sense of gloom and apathy that the Texas-born New England businessman claimed to feel as soon as he stepped off the plane in Boston. More important, the economic decline of New England shaped the character of the region and the behavior of its



people in the twentieth century. Studies have shown, for instance, that mid-twentieth century New Englanders were less likely to change jobs than workers in any other part of the country, and that the average number of days lost to work stoppages in New England was less than half the national average.⁶ We all know that historically women have been a larger share of the workforce in New England than in any other region of the country. Each of these patterns of behavior offers



evidence of how economic decline and hardship have shaped the region's distinctiveness.

An interesting interpretation of the New England character appeared in *Harper's Magazine* in the midst of the Depression. The essay was written by journalist, literary critic, and historian Bernard DeVoto. In 1927, DeVoto moved from Chicago to Cambridge, Massachusetts. "The choice [of New England]," he wrote, "at once expelled me from the guild to which I had impeccably belonged — that of intellectuals who have right ideas about America. For according to the right ideas, New England was a decadent civilization." Puritanism was once again invoked as an all-purpose explanation of New England's woes. Indeed, as DeVoto documents, Puritan-bashing (and thereby New England bashing) has been a major recreational sport of America's intellectuals in the twentieth century. DeVoto quoted one commentator who intoned "that nothing was left to 20th-century New Englanders but the slag of Puritanism — gloom, envy, fear, frustration." To America's right-thinking intellectuals, DeVoto noted, "New England was a rubbish heap of burnt-out energies, suppressed instincts, bankrupt culture, social decay, and individual despair."⁷



DeVoto's essay, "New England: There She Stands ...," written in the depths of the Depression, was the result of visits, not only to the hillside farming communities of northern and western New England, but also to the "ulcerous growths of industrial New England — Lowell, Lawrence, Lynn, Pawtucket, Woonsocket, Chelsea." I was born and raised in Fall River, Massachusetts, and I want to share with you what DeVoto said about my hometown: "To spend a day in Fall River is to realize how limited were the imaginations of the poets who have described hell."⁸ In intellectual circles, New England's disrepute emerged from its perceived cultural repressiveness — from the "slag" of Puritanism. DeVoto had discovered the economic core in New England's fatalism.

Interestingly, DeVoto discovered that the New England character remained intact, and surprisingly, he praised major elements of that character. DeVoto saw a sense of realism embodied in New Englanders which gave them an ability to deal with hardships. "How could hard times like the Depression terrify New England?" he asked. "New England had had hard times, in one way or another, for 300 years." The region had the poorest natural resources in the nation as well as a

geography and climate that required strenuous effort simply to survive. "By the granite they [New Englanders] have lived for three centuries, tightening their belts, and hanging on by the sense of what is real." The people in the region, DeVoto believed, were coping with the Depression better than other Americans. "New England had to find a way to endure a perpetual depression, and had found it." Perhaps New Englanders had lessons to teach other Depression-era Americans.⁹

In addition to a sense of realism born from a history of economic decline, DeVoto discovered a tradition of public service still alive in New England and an accompanying old-fashioned but admirable restraint on acquisitiveness and materialism. "In New England if you have a Buick income you do not buy a Cadillac to keep your self-respect," he observed. "You buy a Chevrolet, and uniquely in America, you keep it year after year without hearing that thrift is a vice."¹⁰

Throughout his essay, DeVoto repeatedly invoked the image of granite to describe the New England character and the character of the region. New England's past was the source of a strong, enduring, granite-like quality in the region's character, institutions, and values. From the perspective of contemporary New England, DeVoto's interpretation provokes a question: If economic hardships have been so influential in shaping the character and behavior of New Englanders, how is the recent, unprecedented prosperity of the region changing traditional character and behavior? Given the history of the region, are New Englanders better able to deal with adversity than with prosperity? In any case, DeVoto rediscovered New England in the midst of the Depression. He recognized that economic decline brought physical decay, but it saved the region, he thought, from the kind of moral and spiritual decay that afflicted other parts of America.

DeVoto's views represented a larger rediscovery of New England in the 1930s. The most distinguished academic historian of New England Puritanism, Perry Miller, began publishing his monumental works during the 1930s, for example.



Todd Farm, Washington County. New England's past is the source of a strong, enduring, granite-like character, Bernard De Voto said. Economic hardship etches enduring qualities into New England's generations.

Moreover, the 1930s witnessed the birth of *Yankee* magazine, the organ that has done more than any other publication to perpetuate what I would call the Yankee myth of New England in the twentieth century — the second theme that I want to address.

In the mid-1930s *Yankee* magazine established as its main goal the preservation of Yankee culture. For most, if not all of its publishing history, *Yankee* magazine has had a significantly larger readership outside of New England than within the region. It has propagated and perpetuated images that captured many of the "New England" values and characteristics that DeVoto described admiringly. Indeed, the title of my lecture, "Ice and Granite," and the images it conveys are drawn from *Confessions of a Yankee*, the autobiography of Judson Hale, the editor of *Yankee* magazine.¹¹ I would venture to say that only Robert Frost, the poet laureate of the Kennedy administration, and perhaps L. L. Bean come close in influence to *Yankee* magazine as national popularizers of the Yankee myth.

And what is the Yankee myth? It is the notion that New England is essentially English, Protestant, and rural. It is the idea that the important cultural icons of the region are beautiful town greens, white-steepled churches, red barns, stone



walls, maple syrup, pumpkins, and so on. It is the romanticized, mythologized view of the region that historian George Wilson Pierson labeled an “obstinate concept” more than thirty years ago. Pierson himself was struck by the diversity of New England, by the differences between northern and southern, rural and urban, coastal and interior, and Yankee and ethnic New England. Pierson conceded that New Englanders possessed a coherent regional culture and distinct character at earlier points in its history. But he doubted that such cultural coherence and distinctiveness survived in the mid-twentieth century. Yet, he admitted, in myth and romance it



remained a distinct region; Yankee culture persisted — remained “obstinate” — in part because there were “grave-stones” of old culture.¹²

Pierson did not identify the role of *Yankee* magazine as a caretaker of the region’s cultural gravestones, but it is clear that the material culture of old New England was preserved in the pages of *Yankee* magazine. Indeed, *Yankee* magazine was established to preserve images, objects, and values associated with old New England culture because that culture was in the process of being altered. This force for change — New England’s ethnic transformation — is my third theme.

The ethnic diversification of New England may be as important in understanding the character of the region in the twentieth century as the history of economic decline and hardship. DeVoto almost completely ignored this important aspect of New England culture in his Depression-era report on the region. In 1927, the year DeVoto moved to Cambridge, more than a quarter of New Englanders were foreign-born. By 1940, New England had more foreign-born per thousand than any other region of the country. Consider Connecticut, for example, the home of the historically famous Connecticut Yankee.

In 1940 only three out of ten residents of Connecticut could claim a native ancestry that extended back two or more generations. As the following chart indicates, nearly half of the population of three New England states in 1950 was comprised of foreign-born and their children; and four New England states remained the most immigrant and ethnic in the entire country.

White Foreign-born and Their Children					
1950			1960		
Rank	State	Percent	Rank	State	Percent
1	Rhode Island	49.9	1	New York	41.2
2	Connecticut	49.5	2	Massachusetts	40.5
3	Massachusetts	49.5	3	Connecticut	40.2
4	New York	49.2	4	Rhode Island	40.1
5	New Jersey	44.8	5	New Jersey	37.7
6	North Dakota	39.6	6	North Dakota	30.5
7	New Hampshire	36.1	7	New Hampshire	29.2
8	Minnesota	34.7	8	Illinois	26.9
9	Illinois	33.4	9	Michigan	26.6
10	Michigan	33.3	10	Minnesota	25.8

As Pierson put it in 1955, "New England is no more the home of the Yankee, rather it is the Yankee Ghetto."¹³ From a social perspective, change and diversity, not granite-like permanence, have characterized New England in the twentieth century. Still, the popular images of the region remain frozen in time.

What, then, is left of the old Yankee culture of New England? Given the ethnic transformation of the region in the twentieth century, can we still talk meaningfully about an enduring, granite-like New England character and culture? Or does old New England simply persist in myths, symbols, and feelings — physical and emotional gravestones — in the twentieth century?

We might now return to contemporary New England and relate the three themes I have examined far too superficially: the economic history, the ethnic transformation, and the mythological themes. Let me briefly consider these three themes and their relationship to the current economic revival of New England.

If DeVoto is right, as I think he is, that New England has a long history of economic decline, how do we account for the unprecedented economic resurgence of New England over the last five years? We might explain the economic rebirth of New England by an appeal to the Yankee myth. We might, as some people have, cite Yankee ingenuity as an explanation of the region's economic renaissance. We could summon up all the convenient symbols and images that we associate with Yankee ingenuity and old-time New England.

The problem with this sort of mythical explanation is that Yankee New Englanders seem to have had relatively little to do with the economic revival of the region. The highly respected journal *The Economist* published a lengthy article last summer on New England's economic rebirth. It concluded:

It is wrong to think of Yankee ingenuity as the mainspring of New England's economic revival for the simple reason that most of New England's successful entrepreneurs are not New Englanders. They arrived there as university students and stayed.¹⁴

While only 5 percent of the American population lives in New England, the region educates and employs a disproportionate number of professional, technical, and scientific specialists. To cite just two examples: in 1984 10.7 percent of all computer scientists who received doctorates and 11.9 percent of biochemists with Ph.D.s worked in New England. Such a "concentration of talent" that has migrated from outside the region helps account for New England's economic rebirth, according to *The Economist*.¹⁵

Yet the view that talented "outsiders" are largely responsible for the economic resurgence of New England has recently been criticized as an oversimplification. In an article published recently in *Connection: New England's Journal of Higher Education*, John C. Hoy argues that impressive talent has emerged from the diverse immigrant communities that transformed Yankee New England in the twentieth century. The educational and professional aspirations of second and third



Those who write about the New England character are slow to appreciate the region's economic and ethnic complexity. The convenient symbols we associate with Yankee values will not explain New England's response to sweeping changes in the modern world. Still, some things about the New England character will always remain the same.

generation immigrants have given New England a vitality and talent pool that are lacking in other parts of the country. "Yankee ingenuity," Hoy writes, "has been revived by fresh waves of corporate and political entrepreneurs of ethnic origin, including, for example, An Wang, Ira Stepanian, Ray Stata, Edson deCastro, Gabriel Schmergel, Jack Welch, and the Dunley and Kennedy clans."¹⁶

Of course, the political leadership of the region in recent years has also reflected the aspirations of assimilated second and third generation New England ethnics. It is not necessary to recite a long list of ethnic congressmen, senators and governors. One need only listen to how the region's most prominent governor has, in his quest for the White House, expropriated the ethnic issue from Mario Cuomo. Michael Dukakis repeatedly refers to his immigrant father's rise from the mills of Manchester, Lawrence, and Lowell to Harvard Medical School. Urban, ethnic twentieth-century New England was the



crucible, Dukakis suggests, that groomed him to preside over Massachusetts' economic rebirth and that prepared him to lead the nation.

Dukakis is a representative of the *new* New England that has emerged in the 1980s. This New England is "new" not only because it is prosperous but also because it is a "de-Yankeefied" New England whose professions, businesses, and politics are being increasingly influenced by descendants of the immigrant groups that overwhelmed the region. The new New England has even produced a highly successful magazine that complements *Yankee* magazine's commitment to preserving regional tradition. *New England Monthly* captures the prosperity, the sophistication, and the diversity of the new New England.

But in spite of sweeping change and the emergence of a new New England, some things will remain the same in the region. The Yankee myth will, and perhaps should persist, in part because, as someone has observed, "New England is a region, in a most fundamental sense, because its people think it

is.”¹⁷ In addition to the persistence of such regional self-consciousness, we can be assured that pie will continue to be eaten for breakfast in New England and that the Red Sox will continue to break New Englanders’ hearts.

NOTES

¹Neal Peirce, *The New England States* (New York, 1976), p. 25.

²“Is It Calvinism or Realism,” *Boston Globe*, August 14, 1986.

³*Ibid.*

⁴Quoted in Peirce, *The New England States*, p. 37.

⁵Larry Savers and William K. Tabb, “Regional Restructuring and ‘Good Business Climates’: The Economic Transformation of New England since WWII,” in *Sunbelt and Snowbelt* (New York, 1984), pp. 48-96; Peirce, *The New England States*, p. 28.

⁶See Savers and Tabb, “Regional Restructuring.”

⁷Bernard DeVoto, “New England: There She Stands ...,” *Harper’s Magazine* (March 1932), pp. 405-406.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 411.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 407.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 414.

¹¹Judson Hale, *Confessions of a Yankee* (Boston, 1987).

¹²George Wilson Pierson, “The Obstinate Concept of New England: A Study in Denudation,” *New England Quarterly* (March 1955). See also, Oscar Handlin and Howard Mumford Jones, “The Withering of New England,” *Atlantic Monthly* (April 1950) pp. 12, 15.

¹³Pierson, “Obstinate Concept of New England,” p. 12; Pierce, *New England States*, p. 25. The figures in the chart are derived from Robert W. Eisenmenger, *The Dynamics of Growth in New England’s Economy, 1870-1964* (Middletown, Conn., 1967), p. 7.

¹⁴Quoted in John C. Hoy, “Hard Facts About New England’s Mainstream,” *Connection: New England’s Journal of Higher Education* (Summer/Fall, 1987), p. 7.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷Quoted in Peirce, *The New England States*, p. 24.

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