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Promoting Cultural Tourism

by Charles Calhoun



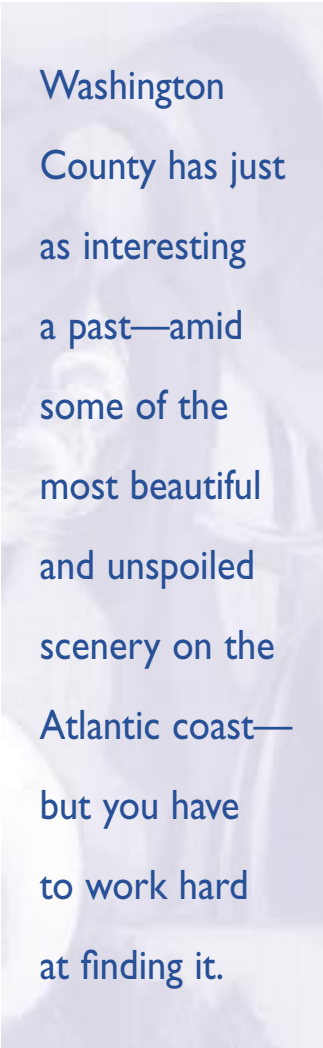
Cultural tourism is one of the fastest growing segments of the tourism industry, attracting visitors who tend to stay longer, spend more, and travel in the off-season. Yet, as Calhoun observes, the idea that Maine offers culture as well as scenery is still not part of the state's self-image. Calhoun urges regions to think creatively and comprehensively about their cultural resources. Among other things, Calhoun encourages the development of regional cultural trails where tourists are linked from one destination to the next. He argues that in the southern- and mid-coast regions, such an approach could help to alleviate coastal pressure by directing tourists inland. Calhoun concludes with eight recommendations for Washington County, where tourism is vital to a more prosperous economic future. 🐉

Heritage,” or “cultural,” tourism is so nebulous a phrase, it may be better to suggest an exercise in lieu of a definition. Drive all the way downeast through Washington County and take the bridge at Lubec over to Canada. Stop for a moment at the New Brunswick tourist welcome station, where you will find stacks of intelligent and attractively designed guide books to the area’s cultural and environmental amenities, then continue along the well-marked roads to Campobello and the Roosevelt cottage. Maybe have lunch at the woodsy nearby inn. Then turn around and head back to Maine. You will pass through the scenic little fishing village of Lubec. Except for a handful of bed and breakfasts and a one-room museum (devoted to the area’s traditional and now largely vanished sardine industry), there won’t be much to detain you. There is a tinge of sadness to the place, for the economic boom that much of the rest of America has been enjoying has not reached this far corner of Maine. Unless you happen to know someone who lives there and can “interpret” the town for you, Lubec may seem like one more place you passed through on the way to somewhere else.

This was brought home to me last year when I helped to organize a Maine Humanities Council “heritage tourism” trip to Washington County. I mean no disparagement of Lubec, where the members of its historical society have struggled to put together an interesting museum on a shoe string, but the contrast with Canada was dramatic. There was a country whose provincial and federal governments obviously take cultural tourism seriously and are willing to spend serious money on it—this year, \$11 million (U.S.) in New Brunswick alone, compared to Maine’s tourism budget of \$4.5 million. There are any number of reasons for this contrast—complicated linguistic politics, a keen awareness among Canadians that they have to define and protect their distinctive heritage or risk being swallowed by a made-in-America culture, an absence over the border of the American fetish for privatization. The result is that energetic promotion of tourism is regarded as a legitimate function of government. This was brought home again when, not far from Calais, we stopped to view St. Croix Island, where Champlain

in 1604 had established the first French settlement in North America, three years before Jamestown. This is not a fact encountered in many American school books, which may explain why United States Park Service recognition of the site seems rather skimpy. In fairness to the Park Service, there are plans afoot to improve interpretation of the site, and their interpretive brochure is excellent. Still, the contrast with Canada is striking: on their side of that once much-disputed river is a major museum complex with a replica of Champlain’s short-lived colony and a gift shop. You can write this off as local pride or local politics (New Brunswick being the most genuinely bilingual and bi-cultural of the provinces), but the fact remains that the Canadians recognize that the area has an interesting story to tell—and one that will draw people to it. Washington County has just as interesting a past—amid some of the most beautiful and unspoiled scenery on the Atlantic coast—but you have to work hard at finding it.

The previous year, we made a similar trip to Aroostook County, traveling as far north as Fort Kent and staying overnight at Presque Isle, and had also found a part of Maine virtually untouched by tourism (save for a few snowmobiling and white-water rafting operations). But we noticed that at least in the St. John Valley, the presence of a long-settled French-speaking population had produced some small, but well-maintained cultural tourist attractions. We admired eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Acadian furniture at the Centre Culturelle de Mont Carmel and tasted the wonderful ployes, or buckwheat pancakes, at the Acadian Village historic site. A local historian and preservationist performed traditional songs and dances; we heard the history of the settlements, after the expulsion from Nova Scotia, and



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learned as we drove along the river of the traditional patterns of dividing and bequeathing farm land. After a short visit, we left with some knowledge of the St. John Valley's history and religious culture and with a very real appreciation of the uniqueness of this little-visited far corner of the United States. Cultural tourism is in its infancy there, but its roots have been planted (notably by the extraordinary Donald Cyr, a one-man cultural tourism industry himself). Recently, the Maine Acadian Heritage Council published a small guide to welcoming visitors to the region—its intended audience is not the visitors themselves, but the local population, many of whom have rarely had to deal with tourists' questions.

I hope these two trips help to bring a definition of cultural tourism into focus. (The current fashion is to speak of "heritage" tourism for fear that any reference to "culture" will scare people away, notably state legisla-

food restaurant, the designer clothing store, the multiplex cinema—are virtually identical from Ellsworth to Albuquerque, this is a kind of travel that is going to have more and more appeal.

If you want a more formal definition, here is what the 1995 White House Conference on Travel and Tourism concluded:

Cultural tourism—travel directed toward experiencing the arts, heritage, and special character of place—is an important component of the United States' travel and tourism industry. America's rich heritage, rooted in our history, our creativity and our diverse population, provides visitors to our communities with a wide variety of cultural opportunities, including museums, arts and crafts, historic sites, dance, music, theater, festivals, historic buildings and neighborhoods, landscapes, and literature.

Cultural tourism is one of the fastest growing sectors of this industry, attracting visitors who tend to stay longer, spend more, and travel in the off-season.

tors, but I use the older term because it assumes that culture is a living phenomenon, not just a nostalgia trip.) Perhaps we can gain further clarity by saying what cultural tourism is not. It isn't just recreation (however enjoyable it may prove). It isn't outlet shopping (though a good gift shop and bookstore can prolong the memory of the visit). It isn't looking at much-photographed scenery (though it involves an informed appreciation of the landscape). It isn't escapism (though it can lift the visitor out of the humdrum and every day). I would define it as travel whose purpose is to experience some human aspect of the country which cannot be found anywhere else. This may be as dramatic as Mount Rushmore, or as unassuming as a nineteenth-century Acadian farmhouse. In a culture whose favored venues—the mall, the fast-

The only thing missing from that list is local food—the taste of those butter-drenched ployes remains in my mind—for even an amateur anthropologist knows the link between culture and cuisine. (One further note on definitions: the tourism industry distinguishes between "heritage" tourists—those who travel to visit a specific historic site, say a house or a battlefield—and "cultural" tourists—those who travel to attend cultural events—say, a festival or a concert. In truth, people travel for any number of reasons, including just getting out of the house, and a typical trip is likely to be inspired by more than one motive.)

However you define the phenomenon, cultural tourism is big business. According to industry statistics, by 2010 tourism in general will be the world's largest industry. It already is the second largest industry in Maine and has the potential to be the first; it currently generates more than \$200 million a year in state and local tax revenues. Domestic travelers to Maine spend over \$3 billion each year on food, lodging, and leisure activities, in the course of more than eight million overnight trips into the state. Cultural tourism is one of the fastest-growing sectors of this industry, attracting

visitors who tend to stay longer, spend more, and travel in the off-season. They are better-educated, more affluent, and tend to be older, and they spend an average of \$62 a day more than other travelers. Along with seasonal residents, they form a major audience for Maine's 1,600 arts organizations, and are a mainstay of its historic houses and museums. According to an economic impact study made at Northeastern University, in 1995-96 the state's cultural institutions counted 6,832,330 admissions to events (about 5.5 times the state's population), about a third of them by non-state residents; these organizations had a total economic impact of \$146.6 million, including indirect and induced spending.¹

In fact, the state has a long history of cultural tourism, going back to private efforts starting in the 1890s in coastal towns like York to rescue seventeenth- and eighteenth-century houses from dilapidation. Such efforts were largely the work of prosperous summer people with a heavy ideological commitment of colonial revivalism; the public was rarely welcome to visit, but these efforts did help preserve the traditional townscape, and soon the arrival of the motor car brought a new wave of visitors in search of "old" Maine. With mixed success, the local preservation effort was taken up by a myriad of local historical societies across the state, most of them kept going by volunteers; they were joined, over the course of the last century, by art museums, theaters, private galleries, music festivals, and the like, to form an ad hoc "culture industry" in Maine. With the exceptions of the New Deal-era historic road markers and superb WPA guidebook, there was virtually no government involvement in any of this, and even the private activities tended to be fragmented, poorly financed, under-publicized, and generally under-appreciated.

Given the intensely local nature of the state, these cultural institutions tended their own gardens, acting for all practical purposes as if they were scarcely aware of each other's existence. This was a perilous situation, given the pressures of commercial development in the more popular tourist destinations, the aging of the cultural institutions' physical plant, the lack of sympathy for their goals on the part of tight-fisted and unimagi-

native local officials, and the appearance of a new generation after 1970 that did not seem at first to have the civic commitment or cultural idealism of its parents and grandparents. The state's official tourism effort never amounted to much—even today Maine ranks forty-sixth in the nation in the size of its official tourism budget—presumably on the assumption that everyone knew the state was here and sooner or later would turn up to eat some lobster.

Tourism promotion of Maine was privatized in the sense that it largely depended on the hotel and restaurant industry's own advertising—joined more recently by the ski resorts—and on *Down East* magazine, with its evocative pages of real-estate ads, and indirectly benefitted from such nationally distributed cultural phenomena as the L.L. Bean catalogue and the TV series *Murder She Wrote*. The one major exception to this policy of privatization was the successful effort to erect in Augusta a cultural building, which, since 1971, has housed the Maine State Museum, Maine State Library, and Maine State Archives. But little effort was made to publicize the center, and the superb state museum remains an underappreciated cultural resource.

What snapped the state out of this long period of relative neglect was the realization in the 1980s of just how much money, including sales tax revenue, could be generated through tourism, which suddenly was no longer seen as a junior partner in the "real" business of Maine, which had traditionally been taken to be the state's extractive industries—lumber, fish, electric power. The late twentieth-century economy proved a nomadic one, with Americans in every economic bracket seeking not one but several vacations a year. The cultural institutions—led by a new generation sophisticated in the ways of marketing and publicity—were quick to react.

In 1995, a Cultural Tourism Workshop sponsored by the Maine Arts Commission with the support of the Maine Office of Tourism attracted more than one hundred people and led to the formation of a Cultural Tourism Task Force. It was charged to find ways to link the cultural organizations with the public and private sector. By 1996, the Maine Office of Tourism included cultural tourism in its Five Year Marketing and

Development Strategy. Nathaniel Bowditch, the Office's assistant director, reported that "Maine's cultural, artistic and heritage communities are some of the most important elements that make Maine the desirable destination it is." The five-year plan, he added, "recognizes the importance of developing and marketing this rich resource." Further state endorsement came in 1999, when the Governor's Conference on Tourism was devoted to "Sharing Our Treasures—Arts and Heritage Tourism and Outdoor Recreation."

The notion that culture had to share the bill with snow-shoeing and jet-skiing suggests that perhaps there is still some way to go in full acceptance; the shelves of the state's tourist information bureau just south of Freeport have far more brochures for shopping and moteling than museum and concert going. That may or may not reflect the degree of public interest in such things; the idea that Maine offers culture as well as scenery is still not a part of the state's self image. Still, a number of recent developments—some of them growing out of tourism workshops and conferences—suggest a change is in the air.

Visually, the most striking development is surely the new Maine Art Museum Trail brochure, a full-color promotion of seven of the state's museums, from Ogunquit to Orono. The notion behind it is that a significant number of visitors to the state might actually plan a trip linking several, or even all, of these sites. From a tourist promotional point of view, the most original feature of this plan is that it draws visitors inland. The Portland Museum of Art, the Bowdoin College Museum of Art, and the Farnsworth Art Museum were already on many visitors' U.S. 1 itinerary, but how many of them would have known that, not too far away, Bates and Colby had important museums (the latter of rapidly growing national importance), and that in passing through Bangor, the art museum at the nearby University of Maine might be worth the detour. The concept—which goes against Maine's long-standing tradition that cultural institutions studiously ignore each other's existence—has already produced an unexpected result. In early September, most of the front of the *New York Times*' "Weekend" section was devoted to what the headline called, "Treasure Trail

in Maine, A Rugged Muse." While this made I-95 sound a bit like a mule path, the long article was well illustrated in color and authoritatively written by a major art critic, Grace Glueck. It was publicity no Maine museum could have bought.

Printing and design costs for the brochure were underwritten by the Stephen and Tabitha King Foundation, the Davis Family Foundation, the Maine Arts Commission, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Maine Office of Tourism, and the Maine Humanities Council—a case study in itself of the linkage of private, public, and non-profit money usually needed today to produce so complex a project.

Other brochures join the Art Trail on the shelf. The Office of Tourism, for example, has published a handsome Maine Maritime Heritage Trail map, highlighting maritime museums, historic coastal houses, and the fishing and shipbuilding industries, while celebrating Maine's preservation of "a sense of place." This project, too, seems exemplary, in this case by reminding visitors that historic sites do not just "happen" but are linked in intricate ways to the local economy, past and present. The Maine Garden and Landscape Trail map serves to remind visitors that not all of the gardens and public parks worth visiting are on Mount Desert Island but can be found in South Paris, Caribou, and North Lubec, among many other locales. It, too, represents a collaborative effort, with funds coming from the Maine Humanities Council and the Maine Arts Commission (through their New Century Community Grant Program), as well as from the Maine Department of Agriculture, Maine Office of Tourism, Maine Olmstead Alliance for Parks and Landscapes, McLaughlin Garden and Horticulture Center, People, Places & Plans Magazine, and the Pine Tree State Arboretum.

What is noticeably lacking on this cultural tourism shelf is a Literary Trail, along the lines of the well publicized Literary Trail of Greater Boston, which takes visitors (by "trolley," if they prefer) from the Parker House Hotel downtown to Walden Pond at Concord and back. Such a map could show Maine's coastal visitors the way from Celia Thaxter's Isles of Shoals and Sarah Orne Jewett's South Berwick through Longfellow's Portland, Hawthorne's Raymond, Stowe's

Brunswick and Harpswell, Rachel Carson's Pemaquid, Millay's Camden, E.B. White's Blue Hill Bay, Margaret Yourcenar's Northeast Harbor, Ruth Moore's Penobscot Bay Islands, all the way to Lura Beam's Machias region—or even Audubon's Dennysville. Already in the works are Wabanaki, Acadian, and ethnic history trails, and a driving guide to outdoor sculpture in the state has just appeared.

The notion of a visitor finding her way along a regional “trail” and making unexpected connections between places is also at the heart of a cultural tourism initiative in Maine's western hills and mountains. Conventionally, tourism is based on reaching a destination; on the other hand, travel in the most imaginative sense is a process of moving on with no particular destination in mind. In this latter sense of the journey mattering more than the arrival, there is no part of the state so rich in little-traveled and inviting rural by-ways, or so confusing to the first-time visitor, as western Maine. Hence, the importance of the work of the Mountain Counties Heritage Program, which grew out of the Western Mountains Alliance and which represents Oxford, Franklin, Somerset, and Piscataquis counties. Its current projects include the Franklin Loop and the Kennebec Chaudiere Heritage Corridor, to which the Maine Department of Transportation has pledged \$200,000 in development funds.

According to Anne Ball, a consultant working with the Maine Office of Tourism, the program is already being recognized nationally as a pilot project, notably for its success “in bringing everybody together in one room.” This means not only the traditional participants, but agencies like the Maine Department of Transportation concerned with signage on roadways and the Maine Department of Agriculture, whose concern for family farms complements the preservationists' interest in protecting rural landscapes. Too often, says Ball, rural parts of the country feature “little pockets of culture”—here a local historical society, there an historic farm—but seem to the visitor disjointed, as if there's no way to understand how all of it fits together.

The western mountains partnership is an attempt to overcome this, beginning with an intensive effort to identify the region's attractions and resources. Judging from the national conferences she has attended, Ball says that today Maine seems ahead of the rest of the country in such well-coordinated regional efforts. “There are some states where the arts people and the humanities people just don't speak to each other. Here everyone comes to the table.” Cultural tourism, she adds, is more than reaching a small audience. You'll know you have succeeded at it when the local gas station attendant has the knowledge to say to a visitor, there's a great museum just down the road.”

New cultural tourism initiatives can take some of those visitors away from downtown Camden or Bar Harbor or other overcrowded spots and convince them there are many other places worth seeing.

Such efforts help to relieve the pressure on coastal Maine, the one part of the state which sometimes seems to have more visitors than it can handle. But what of those coastal or near-coastal areas that are off the trail? New cultural tourism initiatives can take some of those visitors away from downtown Camden or Bar Harbor or other overcrowded spots and convince them there are many other places worth seeing. An interesting case in point is the success of the Pejepscot Historical Society's Joshua Chamberlain House in Brunswick. The home of the now famous Civil War hero was “just spluttering along in terms of visitors” until Ken Burns' landmark television series brought Chamberlain back to national renown in the late 1980s. According to Erik Jorgensen, the society's former director, and today a project officer at the Maine Humanities Council in Portland, the sudden flood of visitors brought new economic life to Brunswick.

Coastal tourism has depended so heavily on Acadia National Park as its ultimate destination, that there is a feeling, not at all unpleasant, if you turn left and north at Ellsworth rather than driving straight on, that you are entering a very different Maine.

“People would stay and attend a performance at the State Music Theater or visit the Bowdoin museums. Some out-of-state visitors came back year after year, just to watch our progress in restoring the house. A few of them even moved to Brunswick permanently.” One result by the 1990s was the Brunswick Area Cultural Alliance.

“It was an attempt by an arts and cultural coalition to convince the local establishment that what the area really had to sell was its culture and history,” says Jorgensen. An important step was the day the local Chamber of Commerce bought into this. They discovered themselves that it was Bath and Brunswick’s unique heritage that made the area enticing, that made people want to live and work there.”

Cultural tourism initiatives may not seem particularly urgent along the I-95/U.S. 1 corridor, given that most of Maine’s cultural attractions are known to be found there. But coastal tourism has depended so heavily on Acadia National Park as its ultimate destination, that there is a feeling, not at all unpleasant, if you turn left and north at Ellsworth rather than driving straight on, that you are entering a very different Maine. Charming as this experience can be for anyone who can go back, after a weekend visit, to the boom economy, it must be a very different story if you live and work there. To be blunt, tourism is about the only hope for Washington County.

There are a few signs of activity, notably at the historic Ruggles House in the hamlet of Columbia Falls. Built in 1818-20 and considered one of the finest examples of federal architecture in New England, it stands

midway between the Black Mansion in Ellsworth and the Roosevelt cottage at Campobello. Yet few people visited it until recently, when a \$500,000 capital campaign suddenly brought the site unprecedented local television and newspaper coverage. “This is a part of Maine that really is going to have to depend on tourism for an economic boost, and the Ruggles House can serve as a magnet,” says Sarah Gallagher, a Brunswick-based consultant. She and Hillary Bassett of Portland are advising the Ruggles House trustees on the fundraising effort, a significant part of which will go to expanding the site’s education and outreach programs. “One week we already had two hundred school children visiting, from Steuben to Jonesport to Machias, probably as a result of the television coverage,” Gallagher reports. (Interestingly, the fundraising is being focused not just on Washington County, but on the Mount Desert Island, Castine-Blue Hill, and Greater Portland communities.)

But where do you dine in Columbia Falls? There are some bed-and-breakfasts tucked away in the neighborhood, but they can accommodate, at full occupancy, only a few dozen visitors. Only Eastport and Machias seem to have much of a tourist infrastructure, and only in the most modest way.

Based on what is happening elsewhere in Maine, here are eight suggestions for what Washington County could do over the next five years to tap into this new cultural tourist economy:

- 1) Join forces with Hancock County in a regional Downeast cultural tourism alliance. The idea is not to let Mount Desert Island siphon off all the visitors and their money; persuade them instead that mainland Hancock and relatively unspoiled Washington counties are “the real Maine.” This will require a public-private partnership, with the partners including not only commercial tourism providers, but also local historical societies and museums and representatives of local industry, such as aquaculture, lumbering and blueberry production. *Destiny 2000* (see pgs. 104-5)

is a step in the right direction but needs a bolder cultural heritage component.

- 2) Take more aggressive steps to attract and promote a tourism infrastructure—inns, restaurants, up-market gift shops. This probably means persuading a major resort facility to come in. Easier said than done, I know, but there are important lessons to be learned from Nova Scotia's success (a hint: German tourists).
- 3) Combine cultural tourism with the industry's other big new success story—ecotourism. The desire to see uncommon landscapes and study wildlife, on sea or land, is going to fuel the new "grand tour" of an increasingly environmentally conscious traveling public—aging baby boomers with money to spend.
- 4) Market Washington County not just as a destination, but as the gateway to the Maritimes. On a foggy day on the Eastport waterfront, it is easy to feel you are on the very edge of the world. When the sun comes out, you see a lot of Canada a short sail away. As New Brunswick becomes more and more popular with Americans bored with over-crowded national parks and strip motels (the exchange rate doesn't hurt, either), there must be a way to persuade them to linger on the United States side, coming or going. (An analogy is in the number of tourists—small but locally significant—who visit the St. John Valley in northern Maine because they are driving from New Brunswick to Quebec). Be shameless, in other words, in piggy-backing on Canada's tourism promotion.
- 5) Find someone to write a new book about Washington County. Look what John Berendt did for Savannah's economy with his bestseller *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. Meanwhile, everyone should read

Lura Beam's classic "A Maine Hamlet," recently republished in paperback.

- 6) Make the 2004 celebration of Champlain's St. Croix colony not just an international but a statewide event. Involve the state's major museums and schools in the project.
- 7) Make sure Washington County plays a part in the campaign to reauthorize the \$3.2 million New Century Community Grants program, which the legislature passed in 1999. The sum was modest, considering that it has to be spread across the state, but the link between economic revitalization and cultural preservation was finally officially recognized. After all, if the cultural infrastructure is allowed to deteriorate, what will cultural tourists have to see? We need to be more "Canadian" in recognizing the role of state government in such efforts.
- 8) Don't mess it all up in the process. Relatively unspoiled, Washington County includes some of the most beautiful landscapes on the Atlantic coast, and that ultimately is what people will travel far to enjoy. 🐟



Charles Calhoun lives in Portland. He is the author of Maine, a cultural guide in the Compass American Guide series (Fodor/Random House), and of the forthcoming biography, Longfellow: A Rediscovered Life (Beacon Press, Fall 2001).

ENDNOTE:

1. These figures come from the recent "Arts and Heritage Tourism Plan" produced by a partnership of the Maine Arts Commission, Maine Historic Preservation Commission, Maine Humanities Council, and Maine Office of Tourism.