

1904

# The Right Development of Mount Desert

Charles W. Eliot

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mainehistory>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

## Repository Citation

Eliot, Charles W., "The Right Development of Mount Desert" (1904). *Maine History Documents*. 85.  
<https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mainehistory/85>

This Monograph is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in Maine History Documents by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine. For more information, please contact [um.library.technical.services@maine.edu](mailto:um.library.technical.services@maine.edu).

M  
74  
195  
86e

THE  
RIGHT DEVELOPMENT OF  
MOUNT DESERT

BY  
CHARLES W. ELIOT  
"

PRIVATELY PRINTED  
1904

## THE RIGHT DEVELOPMENT OF MOUNT DESERT

**T**HE summer resort to Mount Desert is chiefly due to four things: the cool and equable climate, the beautiful conformation of the island itself, the availability for sailing and fishing of the waters which surround it, and the roughness and wildness of its hills and shores. The island is by far the handsomest piece of land on the Atlantic coast of the United States, its hills being the highest on the whole coast, and its valleys being cut low between the hills. The greater part of the island has never been inhabited or cultivated; so that the hills remain rough and wild, and are wooded wherever the characteristic spruces, alders, birches, maples, and mountain ashes can find soil for their roots. The population clings to the shores, and to some of the lower hill-sides which, when cleared, afford fields capable of bearing grass and other crops.

The support of the permanent population is now derived almost exclusively from the summer residents; and this support is a much better one than the people of the island enjoyed



before the advent of these seekers for health and recreation. One has only to compare the houses in which the permanent residents on the island now live with those they occupied twenty-five years ago to be convinced that the present condition of the population is decidedly superior to its former condition. Similar improvement appears in the roads and schools of the island, and in the churches.

Is this new prosperity to be maintained and increased? To answer this question one needs to understand thoroughly the sources of the prosperity. With the exception of the granite industry, which fluctuates much but is unchanged in character, the former industries of the island have for the most part been replaced by industries which relate to the wants of the summer population. A clear comprehension of the wants and wishes of the summer residents will lead to a satisfactory answer to the question before us.

(1). The summer residents want houses and hotels; and the building, altering, and repairing of these structures occupy a considerable number of mechanics the year round.

(2). They want good roads and a variety of loop drives. The summer residents are therefore interested in the appropriations annually made by the three towns of the island for roads and bridges, and in the manner in which these appropriations are expended. They do not want

wide roads, such as cities and the suburbs of cities are forced to maintain; but they do desire roads with moderate grades and smooth surfaces. A width of eighteen feet is ample, except in the villages. The habits of the Mount Desert road-makers were formed when the roads had to be made and repaired at the least possible cost. The spare stones, which were many, were thrown out upon the roadside, where they defaced and made barren what ought to have been the green borders of the road. The bridges were never thought of as possible objects of beauty, the only question being how the brook or gully could be spanned in the cheapest manner. When a bank beside the highway afforded some dirt comparatively free from stones, it was dug into in the most expeditious way, and left so steep that it could not clothe itself again with green. The roadsides, therefore, frequently exhibit ugly scars. The grades and surfaces of the roads have been greatly improved during the last twenty years; but as yet little attention is paid to the beauty of the roadsides. During the past winter and spring fifteen miles of road were defaced with rows of hideous poles carrying wires; and to accommodate these wires the trees bordering the road were cut away in many places to a width of from fifteen to twenty feet. This injury to the island was done without notice to any of the summer residents whose places were on or



near the roads defaced. To gratify the desire for good roads and pretty roadsides involves a large annual expenditure; so that the maintenance and progressive improvement of the roads of the island will always afford a considerable amount of employment for men and teams.

The summer visitors want good roads because they desire to drive all about the island. This desire gives employment to a large number of men, horses, and vehicles, and to blacksmiths and repairers of vehicles and harnesses. Here, again, the permanent population has very legitimate and profitable employments; for the drives of the island are numerous and beautiful, affording real delight to people who are forced to live in cities or their suburbs the greater part of the year, by the great contrast of the island scenery with city scenes. To protect and increase these employments it should be the constant endeavor of the three towns of the island — first, to improve the lay-out of the roads and their surfaces; secondly, to build new roads; thirdly, to preserve the beauty of the roadsides and bordering woods; and, fourthly, to exclude electric cars and automobiles from the highways, because these vehicles imply broad roads, noise, and city-like commotion. When a new road is made, it should be carried where it will afford beautiful prospects over the sea, a pond, the walls of a gorge, or a large

forest area. It would be a legitimate expense for all three of the island towns to undertake the watering of the public highways. Bar Harbor already waters its streets. Nothing would promote driving so much as keeping down the dust; and moreover a road made of mixed stone and gravel keeps its surface much better if it is watered during the hot and windy weather. Indeed the best macadamized road cannot be kept in good condition unless it be watered. The more frequented a road is, the more it needs watering to keep its surface good.

(3). The summer residents want fresh milk, eggs, chickens, and vegetables raised on the island, and fresh clams, scallops, lobsters, and fish drawn from its waters. The island traffic in these articles has been steadily increasing, and now furnishes good means of support for numerous families among the permanent residents. There is no more legitimate source of profit for them; inasmuch as these articles raised on the island, or taken from its waters, are much better than the same articles brought from far by railroad or steamboat. Moreover, the industries which supply this demand require intelligence and skill, and are on that account useful to the island population.

(4). A considerable proportion of the summer visitors want to go sailing, and to make excursions on the water in launches or sailboats; and



these desires are the foundation of an excellent industry for the permanent population. The sailboats used in summer for this purpose can be used in the fall and spring for lobstering or fishing. It is a part of this industry to provide and maintain convenient landings at numerous points in the harbors of the island.

(5). The advent of thousands of summer visitors gives profitable employment to many women who do laundry work; and this is a desirable source of profit because it is a household industry.

(6). Shop-keeping gives a summer profit to some of the permanent residents, the number of shops, or stores, for the sale of provisions, dry goods, hardware, groceries, and shoes far exceeding the needs of the winter population. The storage and delivery of coal, wood, and ice, and the raising of trees, shrubs, and flowers for sale are also sources of profitable employment.

(7). Lastly, the hotels and boarding-houses of the island give employment to a large number of young people, both male and female, during twelve or thirteen weeks of the summer.

To ask how Mount Desert is to be developed as a pleasure and health resort is equivalent to asking how these various profitable employments on the island are to be maintained and increased. To this end what sort of summer visitors is most desirable? Is a cottage population more desirable than a hotel and boarding-



house population ; and, if the cottage population is the more desirable, are very rich cottagers the most valuable, or is a mixture of the rich with professional people and other people of moderate means more likely to promote the interests of the permanent population? Or would throngs of excursionists be more valuable than either cottagers or boarders by the week at hotels? The last question may be confidently answered in the negative ; because there are no large cities near Mount Desert to afford an adequate daily supply of excursionists. To support a Coney Island a Brooklyn is necessary, and a Metropolitan Boston for a Revere Beach. There are no signs that any dense population is to live within two hours' ride of Mount Desert. It is easy, with or without deliberate design, to change the nature of the resort to any region by the sea or in the mountains, or to any place possessing valuable springs of water for bathing or drinking. For example, the resort to Saratoga, Newport, and Bar Harbor has changed in a very noticeable manner within the last twenty years. All three of these places serve to-day different classes of persons from those who formerly resorted to them. There are several places within sight of Mount Desert, and enjoying the same climate, which testify that it is hard to establish a successful summer resort, and easy to impair or degrade one already established.

For Mount Desert as a whole, the most desirable summer population is one which comprehends both cottagers and boarders; that is, both people who come for all summer, and people who come for a month or a week. A family which brings its whole establishment from a distance—horses and carriages, boats, yacht, and numerous servants—will probably contribute to the food-raising and building industries of the island, but not much to the industries connected with driving and sailing. The family and their guests get their pleasures through their own establishment; whereas people who live in hotels and boarding-houses hire all the means of these out-of-door pleasures. The laundry work also depends very much on the occupants of hotels and boarding-houses. It is a bad sign, then, for the prosperity of the permanent residents at any summer resort, if the hotels and boarding-houses cease to be numerous and well maintained. The transportation companies by land and sea also feel very much the withdrawal of the patronage of comparatively transient visitors. If, however, the prices at the hotels and boarding-houses rise to a level which practically excludes persons of moderate means, the transient visitors will not be numerous, and will no longer contribute to the prosperity of the island in any large measure. A few small hotels can be supported on the patronage of the very rich; but they will not



make any considerable addition to the summer population of the island.

It is an object, then, for the whole island to attract summer visitors who remain but a few weeks, and have no establishment of their own. Of course, cottagers are also an object, because almost every cottage, through the labor it hires, supports at least one family of permanent residents during a good part of the year. It is therefore important to the prosperity of Mount Desert that the sources of pleasure for temporary occupants of the hotels and boarding-houses be carefully kept in mind. They want, for example, access to the shore; for that is a seaside pleasure which they naturally seek. The occupation of the entire shore by private owners who close their places to the public will, in time, deprive the hotel and boarding-house population of one of the pleasures which used to attract them to Mount Desert. The disfigurement of the roads impairs another of their desired pleasures. Mount Desert cottagers have already suffered losses in both these regards, although some of them have their own bits of shore. The pioneer cottagers on the island had the privilege of roaming all the shores at pleasure. They have now lost that privilege, and there is no compensating gain. Twenty-five years ago the roads of the island were narrow and rough; but they were beautifully bordered by trees and shrubs, and were not

defaced by poles bearing wires. Walking is for many persons the most agreeable, as well as the most available, of the summer sports, particularly in a cool climate like that of Mount Desert; but for the enjoyment of this sport numerous paths through the woods and over the hills are necessary, and these paths should be kept narrow, rough, and wild. The foot-paths about the hills and valleys of the island have almost all been made by the summer residents, without any thought on the part of the permanent residents, or any action on the part of the towns. They constitute an important security for the continued prosperity of the island.

It would be only an act of prudence for the towns of the island to acquire portions of the shore and convenient landings for public use. The Legislature of Maine has now chartered the Hancock County Trustees of Public Reservations, and empowered them to hold, arrange, and improve, "for free public use lands in Hancock County, Maine, which, by reason of scenic beauty, historical interest, sanitary advantages, or for other reasons, may be available for the purpose;" and these lands, and improvements thereon, are to be exempt from state, county, or town taxation. This body of trustees ought to be enabled to secure large areas of land on the island for this free public use, particularly the hilltops, and narrow pieces of shore which lie between public highways and the sea. Better



care of the woods is needed in order to preserve the beauty of the island. To cut off large areas of the woods for immediate profit, and leave the hillsides to be washed by heavy rains without the protection of good-sized trees is to impair seriously the uses of the island for all summer residents. Great injury has already been done in this way to many of the hills. Forest fires have repeatedly done damage which fifty years cannot repair. Indeed, it would be good economy for the island population, as a whole, if the advice of skilful foresters should be taken, such as those the Bureau of Forestry at Washington now supplies, with the intent of guarding the woods against fire by the provision of suitable fire-guards, and of improving the woods by removing dead wood, ugly coppice, and deformed or starved trees.

Another mode of protecting the sources of pleasure for summer visitors is the ownership by hotels of considerable tracts of land and portions of the shore, kept open to the hotel visitors, and practically to the public, for walks and drives. This is a well-known European method of preserving the attractions of pleasure resorts. An excellent example of it in our own country is the large estate of the Monterey Hotel Company in California, an estate which affords many miles of interesting walks and drives. Another example is the great estate of the Smiley family at Lake Mohonk and Lake

Minnewaska in New York. This estate includes many hundreds of acres, and is provided with a great variety of drives and walks, and with two hotels having different scales of prices. In some parts of Mount Desert this method would still be available, were it not for the existing doubts about the future policy of the towns in respect to the taxation of such tracts. It would be easy for the towns to make it impossible for the hotels, or indeed anybody else, to hold considerable open tracts of land.

The whole island ought to be treated by every resident, and by the body of voters, as if it were a public park; that is, the beauty and convenience of the place as a health and pleasure resort ought to be kept constantly in mind to guide the policy of the towns and the habits and customs of the population. If the roads and village streets need lighting, let them be lighted with park lights, which require neither poles nor wires. If a new road is to be built, let the lay-out of the road be studied by a landscape architect, as well as by an engineer. In the villages and along the roads an extreme tidiness ought to prevail. There should be no visible piles of rubbish, scars on the roadsides, dirty streets, ill odors, or shabby sidewalks. The surroundings of the houses should testify that the occupants love beauty as well as utility. The grounds about the schoolhouses should be not only neat, but decorated with



trees, shrubs, and grass, instead of being barren wastes of gravel and weeds. The use of large areas for grass and crops will by no means interfere with the beauty of the island considered as a park. The landscape which contains a variety of woods, pastures, cultivated fields, gardens, barns, and houses, is on the whole more interesting than the monotonous sweep of an unbroken forest. No industry of the island would need to be abandoned if the island were treated throughout on the landscape principles which govern the management of parks. What needs to be forever excluded from the island is the squalor of a city, with all its inevitable bustle, dirt, and ugliness. Not even the appropriate pleasures and splendors of city life should be imitated at Mount Desert. It is to escape the sights and sounds of the city that intelligent people come in summer to such a place as this rough and beautiful island; and the short-season populations do not wish to be reminded in summer of the scenes and noises amid which the greater part of their lives is inevitably passed.

Whether Mount Desert is, or is not, to be developed as a prosperous pleasure and health resort for years to come depends on the amount of foresight, good judgment, and good feeling which the voters in the three towns can bring to bear on the problem. They can either secure or endanger the future of the island. It is for

DOES NOT  
CIRCULATE

M  
774.195 DEC 5 1966

m86e 14 DEVELOPMENT OF MOUNT DESERT

them to consider carefully what the sources of the island's prosperity are and will be. It is for them to take counsel with the summer residents who love the island and hold property on it; and to this end it might be expedient that a copy of every town-meeting warrant should be sent in good season to all non-resident taxpayers who express a desire to receive it.

CHARLES W. ELIOT.

25 December, 1903.