

Maine History

Volume 43
Number 4 *Traditional Landscapes, Modern Maine*

Article 7

6-1-2008

Book Reviews

Polly Welts Kaufman
University of Southern Maine

Christian P. Potholm
Bowdoin College

Jean F. Hankins

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

 Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), [Indigenous Studies Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kaufman, Polly W., Christian P. Potholm, and Jean F. Hankins. "Book Reviews." *Maine History* 43, 4 (2008): 470-475.
<https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mainehistoryjournal/vol43/iss4/7>

This Book Reviews is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in Maine History by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine. For more information, please contact um.library.technical.services@maine.edu.

BOOK REVIEWS

The Penobscot Dance of Resistance: Tradition in the History of a People. By Pauleena MacDougall (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2004. Pp. vii+250. Maps, photographs, notes, index, Paper. \$24.95).

In her study of Maine's Penobscot Indians, Pauleena MacDougall, associate director of the Maine Folklife Center, has carefully undertaken the enormous task of documenting over time the various methods the tribe used to resist complete acculturation to the dominant culture. Far from becoming extinct the way many nineteenth century anthropologists predicted, the Penobscots now list more than 2,000 persons on their tribal roll; less than one quarter live on Indian Island itself.

Although the author explains existing dissatisfaction among the Penobscots with the Indian Land Claims Act of 1980, she presents the settlement as the culmination of their continuing efforts for survival. The \$81.5 million settlement provided for the purchase of 300,000 acres of land at fair market value. The Houlton Band of Maliseets received one-tenth of the overall settlement and the remaining amount was split between the Penobscot and Passamaquoddy Indians. The Department of Interior set up a \$27 million trust fund for economic development with the interest to be distributed to the tribes. Despite the issues that remain unsettled, MacDougall points out that the case established an important legal precedent for other Indian land claims cases.

In addition to improved educational opportunities and health care, the author believes that the revival of cultural consciousness, beginning in the early 1970s, led the Penobscots to a fuller understanding of the rights and entitlements that had been denied to them over the centuries. The survival of the Penobscot language and legends, and of such crafts as basket weaving and wood carving, of dance and music, including drumming and singing, contributed to a renewed activism.

In her study MacDougall delineates the circumstances and events that led to the nadir of the Maine Indian people at the turn of the twentieth century. The first blow to their survival came with the arrival of European diseases in the seventeenth century. Current archeological research suggests that the Penobscots who lived on Indian Island

represented the surviving populations of several different groups of indigenous peoples. Although they were caught up in the European wars for the possession of North America, the Penobscots were more likely to side with the French whom they knew from the fur trade. Many accepted Catholicism from the Jesuit missionaries. Despite these new influences, the Penobscots kept what MacDougall calls their “core values . . . of land, spiritual power, and reverence” (p.64). After the creation of the United States, their story is about the loss of land through a series of misunderstood treaties and mismanaged agreements.

MacDougall gives many examples of the Penobscot’s resistance to acculturation. Instead of farming, which the Penobscot men found not only unmanly and confining, but also unsustainable, they turned to building birch bark canoes, hunting, guiding sportsmen, cutting wood, and working in river drives. Instead of creating baskets for middlemen to market, Penobscot women set up summer encampments to sell their own creations. Although MacDougall doesn’t describe it, another activity for Penobscot women like Lucy Nicoliar and Molly Spotted Elk and men like Frank Loring was to produce and star in Indian entertainments both on the vaudeville and Chautauqua circuits. (See, for example, Bunny McBride, “Princess Watahwaso: Bright Star of the Penobscot” in Marli Weiner ed., *Of Place and Gender: Women in Maine History* [2005], 87-132.) A successful contemporary Indian-directed economic activity is the Penobscot “high stakes bingo” held on Indian Island in the Sockalexis Bingo Palace.

In spite of the extensive efforts of the Penobscot people to find their own routes to economic and legal survival, MacDougall points out that they still believe that the all-encompassing issue of sovereignty is not settled. Because they are a federally recognized tribe, the Penobscots believe they are a sovereign political entity with jurisdiction over their internal affairs. Residents of Maine are well aware that some of their remaining contentious issues include pollution of the Penobscot River by paper companies, jurisdiction over criminal activity within Indian territories, and the right to establish gambling casinos.

Maine people are increasingly conscious of the importance of this Native heritage. One example is the law passed by the Maine state legislature that Maine’s Native American history be included in the public school curriculum. In addition to the *Penobscot Dance of Resistance*, MacDougall also contributed to this effort by editing for publication Molly Spotted Elk’s *Katahdin: Wigwam’s Tales of the Abnaki Tribe* (2003), which had been languishing in the Northeast Archives of Folklore and

Oral History. It includes a dictionary of the Penobscot language. Mac-Dougall's report on her years of work in digging out the documentary and oral evidence of first the apparent demise and then the revival of the Penobscot people and their culture should find a receptive audience.

POLLY WELTS KAUFMAN
University of Southern Maine

Maine's Visible Black History: The First Chronicle of its People. By H. H. Price and Gerald E. Talbot (Gardiner: Tilbury House, 2006. Pp. 429. \$35. Paper).

This is an outstanding and much needed work. In fact, every library in Maine should be required to have a copy, and courses on Maine history would do well to routinely expose students to its truly vital information. The work turns out to be an invaluable resource and research tool. And yet it is more, for it comes alive with the stories and snippets about the lives of so many African Americans who came to Maine, for one reason or another, over the sweep of the last 300 years.

The authors provide nothing less than an exhaustive account of the roles of black men and women throughout the history of the state. From the first arrivals — perhaps fishermen from the Cape Verde Islands — to free blacks from Nova Scotia as well as slaves and indentured servants, and many other in-migrants, black Mainers have been an intrinsic and vital part of the state's history.

For example, from the early Wabanaki wars through the Mexican War and the Civil War and the Spanish American War to the present ones in Afghanistan and Iraq, African Americans from Maine have served with distinction. And in addition to their stereotyped occupations of domestics and laborers, they have had virtually every type of career possible in Maine.

This finding is perhaps the biggest contribution of the book. Price and Talbot carefully and minutely detail the lives of the black men and women of Maine as sea captains, land speculators, farmers, entrepreneurs, railroad workers, smugglers, chefs, inventors, ministers, lawyers, fishermen, doctors (nine of whom graduated from the Medical School of Maine at Bowdoin College), loggers, pilots, artists, writers, mariners, builders of the ships at Bath and, during World War II, South Portland,

community leaders, nurses, politicians, soldiers, philosophers, pilots, public servants, lobstermen, and photographers.

They are all here in this volume, which is replete with hundreds of photographs which help tremendously to make the ubiquitousness of the black experience in Maine history come more alive and make of it the glory of the ordinary. Price and Talbot succeed in highlighting the black Mainers' stories in the context of the American experience of ethnic triumph against odds. The proud photographs in this work thus speak to both those struggles and the transcendent successes of the black Mainers through the ages but also attest to their bonds of commonality, for their story, however brutally etched, does reflect the struggles and successes of other ethnic groups. There is extra tragedy here, of course: the ethnic cleansing of Malaga; slavery itself; discrimination and ostracism; prejudice and meanness; the barriers and obstacles. But the struggles and successes of black Mainers seem to thematically transcend these blights.

It should also be noted that while we are always grateful to Tilbury House for its many contributions to our understanding of Maine's history, books with that imprint are often overly long, unnecessarily discursive, and usually need a much stronger editorial hand. Happily, *Maine's Visible Black History* is long but not repetitive or unnecessarily meandering.

I had but two minor quibbles. First, why must we be told that one author is "white" and the other "black"? Or that one or more contributor is "a white professor"? The black experience is the black experience surely, but chroniclers of it can, and should be, judged on their insights, not their skin pigmentation. Second, the book desperately needs an overarching conclusion, summing up the major themes of the book. Those themes are inherent in the various chapters, of course, but seemingly lost in the vast sweep of the very detail that is the book's strength.

On balance, however, this is a superbly documented and very important work for anyone interested in Maine's history, not simply its "black" history. *Maine's Visible Black History* not only heightens our appreciation of the "black experience," it also makes us want to know more about that heritage. For example, reading this volume made me want to visit the Talbot-donated African American Collection of Maine at the University of Southern Maine's Glickman Family Library to learn more about the various dimensions the authors share in the work.

This is a stimulating and enjoyable book which really ends up transcending the sheer volume of its material and the cascade of its detail to

leave the reader wanting to know more and feel more and appreciate more: a significant accomplishment indeed.

CHRISTIAN P. POTHOLM
Bowdoin College

Smith, Joshua M. *Borderland Smuggling: Patriots, Loyalists, and Illicit Trade in the Northeast, 1783-1820*. (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 2006. Pp. 160. Cloth. \$55).

In writing *Borderland Smuggling*, Joshua M. Smith began with an advantage not given to every historian: an immediately engaging subject. The true stories of smugglers, highwaymen, prison escapees, and bank robbers that captured our imaginations as young readers continue to fascinate us as adults because of their fast-paced action, colorful heroes and villains, and the protagonists' extraordinary skill, intelligence, and physical strength in the face of difficult odds. The main disadvantage the author had was that, because smuggling is illegal, finding historical records was difficult.

Smith's subject is the illicit trade that flourished especially from 1783 to 1820 in the Passamaquoddy region lying between Maine and Canada, where American and British subjects were united in their support for smuggling. Although this slim book is full of colorful characters, Smith quickly disabuses the reader of the notion that he is writing about heroes or patriots on either side of the border. There was, for example, Lewis Frederick Delesdernier, a native of Nova Scotia who was customs collector for the United States from 1783 to 1810. Believing that his role was to facilitate international trade, Delesdernier "tolerated and even promoted illegal trade." The smugglers almost always won, as shown by the case of the American military commander Colonel George Ulmer, who, stationed at Eastport, had the impossible task of trying to stop smuggling operations staged by Americans with the connivance of crooked customs officials. The incorruptible Ulmer, lacking any local support (he estimated that there were 200 smugglers in Eastport), was finally forced out after a 1813 Independence Day melee in which Ulmer's troops and the locals fired stones and bullets at each other.

Smith's book is based on his dissertation at the University of Maine. Although a good deal of his research came from sources in Augusta,

Portland, and Washington County, for much of his information he had to range far and wide: admiralty records in Great Britain; national archives in Washington, D.C., Canada, and Great Britain; court records in Maine, Massachusetts, and New York. He deserves great credit not only for tackling all these documents but also for his ability to pull the important facts out of such material.

Throughout the book, Smith does a good job of explaining why smuggling existed and what it represented. Put simply, smugglers were simply ordinary people, of all classes, seeking to augment their incomes or support their families. Because of their close cross-border ties, the Passamaquoddy smugglers considered themselves more as neutrals than as traitors. The author argues that although they sometimes committed violent acts, they were neither social nor political revolutionaries. In an interesting final chapter, Smith demonstrates how both Canadian and American historians of the Passamaquoddy, trying to attain a respectable past, have discounted the illicit trade and other crimes in which their forebears so successfully engaged.

The author is better at research than writing. Smith's awkward style has produced a book that is hard going for the reader. Participles dangle; pronouns lack clear references; paragraphs develop illogically. A good, tough editor should have found and corrected many such stylistic problems, including several obvious typographical errors, the most glaring of which is the repetition on page 93 of the same exact sentence, word for word, which appeared on page 92.

Still, the Passamaquoddy smugglers emerge as colorful and multi-dimensional characters, and students of Maine history should welcome this book. *Borderland Smuggling* adds considerable new information about a subject, a geographic area, and a period of American-Canadian history that have been overlooked too often.

JEAN F. HANKINS
Otisfield, Maine