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Early Architecture and Campus Planning at The Bangor Theological Seminary

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EARLY ARCHITECTURE AND CAMPUS PLANNING AT THE BANGOR THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Incorporated in 1816 as the "Maine Charity School," the Bangor Theological Seminary is an interesting example of pre-Civil War New England higher educational architecture and campus planning. With all but one of its early structures intact and in use, the seminary informs us today about nineteenth-century building design and planning concepts at higher educational institutions throughout the region. Though geographically removed from other theological seminaries and colleges in New England, Bangor still felt their impact, and the physical evidence which one may view at Bangor Theological effectively illustrates widely accepted architectural patterns and preferences of the day, as well as the indigenous, vernacular traditions of the immediate locale. It cannot be concretely documented but it may be fairly safely presumed that the most direct influences were transmitted from Andover (Massachusetts) Theological Seminary, Bowdoin College in Brunswick, and Waterville (later Colby) College in Waterville. We know, however, that the basic planning tradition emanated from Yale.¹

Some architectural historians have conjectured that the campuses of early New England higher educational institutions developed in a haphazard, informal manner, with little or no attention paid to site planning and building placement. Only in a few instances was this true; in the great majority, it was not the case, as surviving records and the campuses themselves demonstrate. At Bangor the principal pre-Civil War buildings (Fig. 1) are arranged in an orderly fashion in a straight row facing east, with the chapel occupying the dominant center position, suggesting the prime importance attached to religious education. This scheme originated with the Jonathan Trumbull plan at Yale in the late 1700s and became popular throughout New England and the rest of the country before 1860. It was this design concept, open and extroverted,



Figure 1: Chapel Row, Bangor Theological Seminary, from a circa 1920 photograph. Commons House stands at the left; David Nelson Beach Chapel, center; and Maine Hall, right. The evolution of "Chapel Row" and other Bangor Theological Seminary buildings forms an instructive chapter in New England architectural history. Photo from Moulton Library, BTS, courtesy of the author.

which served as the earliest inspiration for the Bangor campus, as well as those at Andover, Bowdoin, and Waterville. To the present day, "Chapel Row" has remained the architectural core of the seminary, and all the post-Civil War development of the physical plant has been carried out in relation to it (Fig. 2). In its lack of perfect symmetry, the Bangor row does depart somewhat from the prevailing New England tradition, but it still conveys an appealing informality and individuality that is so often associated with Maine's building heritage. Thus, the story of the evolution of "Chapel Row" and other early seminary buildings at Bangor forms a useful and instructive chapter not only in Maine but in general New England architectural history.²

A donation of land from Isaac Davenport of Milton, Massachusetts, attracted the Seminary in 1819 to Bangor from its first home in Hampden, Maine. The seminary initially possessed "seven and a half acres of glorious scenery and no buildings" on a commanding hillside site above the city of Bangor.³ According to the terms of the Davenport gift, the school was obligated to fence the tract on three sides, to occupy and improve it within one year from the date of the deed, and to

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build upon it within five years. But the trustees proceeded slowly and for a time classes were held in several locations about Bangor, while students boarded with local families. Finally, on December 25, 1821, the trustees took the initiative and voted:

That ... [the] committee for agricultural improvements, be hereby requested and authorized to erect a building two stories high not exceeding thirty feet by forty feet in area, with a cellar, on the land granted by Mr. Davenport.⁴

Two more years elapsed, and in 1823-1824 "the Chapel," as this first structure was called, was erected opposite the Davenport tract on the south side of Hammond Street on a piece of land today occupied by the Hannibal Hamlin house, the residence of recent seminary presidents.

Little is known about the building, and its period of use was brief, for it burned in 1829. Replaced in 1832-1833, it burned a second time in 1833, and was not rebuilt.⁵ Cook's history of the seminary tells us that the chapel was not erected by a contractor, but rather by those associated with the institution "who did the carpentry and all the finishing, except the plastering."⁶ Building materials were solicited from patrons of the seminary and included a bell lost in the 1829 fire. The interior contained a room for religious worship and six recitation rooms. The appearance of the exterior is unknown, though one could reasonably assume that the structure was extremely plain and unadorned, and therefore of limited architectural importance. Curiously it is the only building to have burned in the seminary's entire history.⁷

As early as 1825 the Board of Trustees appointed a three-man committee "to superintend the erection of a dwelling house on the lot of land belonging to the Seminary, as soon as the state of funds [justified] the measure."⁸ The seminary campus that one may view today began to take shape in 1827-1828 with the construction of the Commons House, more recently known as "Old Commons" or "Old Commons House" (Fig. 3). The second of the seminary's facilities, it is the oldest surviving

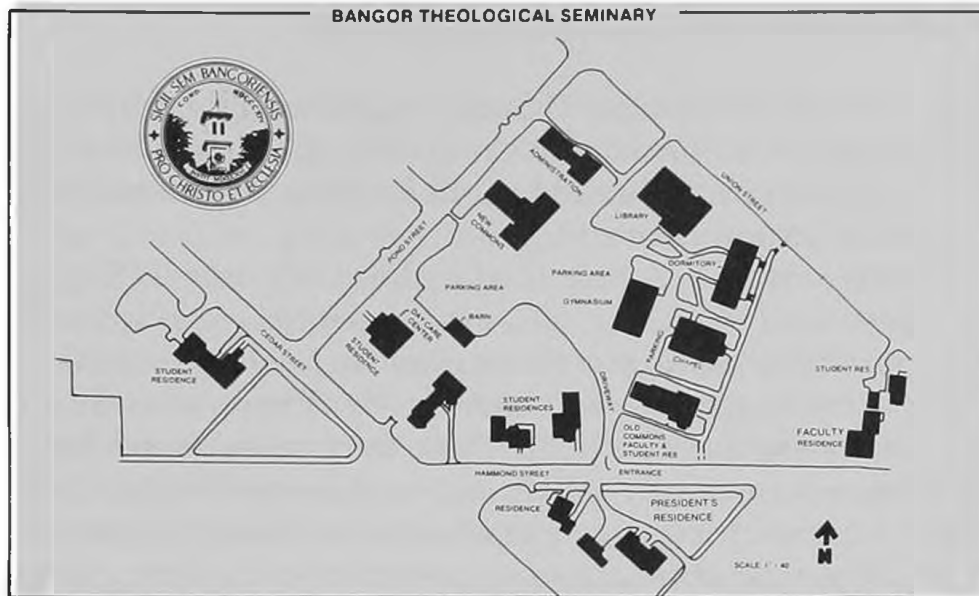


Figure 2 (top): map from *Catalogue of the Bangor Theological Seminary, 1984-86*, courtesy Bangor Theological Seminary. Figure 3 (bottom): Old Commons House (1827-1828). Photo by the author.

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part of the physical plant. Though the planning for this multi-purpose structure predates the formation of “Chapel Row,” it was ultimately incorporated into the impressive three-building scheme on its southern end.

This structure, commenced by local labor in 1827 at an estimated cost of \$4,000, was soon thereafter supplied with appropriate furnishings and completed in full by the middle of 1828.⁹ The designer/builder was Nathan Pierce, a local contractor. As originally built, this three-story, white, wood-frame building was intended to afford accommodations for the boarding of students, some twenty of whom resided on its upper two floors. Upon occasion classes were conducted in these rooms, but the major function of the Commons House, as the name implies, was boarding, and therefore the dining room and kitchen were located in prime space on the first floor.¹⁰ Used entirely for student purposes until 1839 when it was superseded by two other buildings, it was remodeled as a double house under the direction of Bangor housewright Leonard L. Morse.¹¹ Today it accommodates two faculty units in the front portion and four student apartments in the rear.¹²

Alterations to the exterior of the Commons House made after 1839 added to the mass of the building and gave it a somewhat awkward, undomestic appearance. In 1843 an old barn was moved from another site and attached to the rear of the twenty by forty-five foot structure, only to be taken away several decades later. In 1872-1873, due to the widening of Hammond Street, \$8,000 was expended to move the building slightly north toward the Beach Chapel, to place it on new stone foundations, and to renovate the rear portion. A double south side porch, added in 1914, is simple in form and blends well with the rest of the quite vernacular exterior.¹³ Sometime after 1928 a grand, seven-columned Greek Revival porch (documented by old photographs) was stripped off the front facade, and a less appropriate pitched-roof entranceway substituted. Though deprived of some of its original architectural features, the Commons House remains an important artifact of early seminary history, and has been little changed in recent decades.

With the placement and construction of the seminary's next building, Maine Hall, in 1833-1834, the trustees committed the institution to the development of the three-building row as the dominant planning concept for the campus. Though Bangor's leaders likely looked to Bowdoin and Waterville for guidance, the primary source may well have been Andover Theological Seminary, with which the Bangor Theological Seminary enjoyed a close relationship over many years. A major influence in planning the campus was Professor Enoch Pond, himself an Andover graduate, whose recollections of Andover's physical plant no doubt shaped his thinking toward Bangor, and whose leadership guided the seminary through its formative years.

In confirmation of the trustees' commitment to the row, Maine Hall was positioned atop the hill near Union Street on the north side of the Davenport tract. It aligned with the Commons House, leaving a gap later to be filled by the Beach Chapel.

Maine Hall features many of the stylistic qualities possessed by other dormitory structures of its time in New England; with little question its planners were influenced by what they had seen of or heard about other educational and public buildings in Maine as well as elsewhere in the region. This was evident in the first-stage preparations of the Board of Trustees when it authorized in March 1829 that:

... the Superintending building committee ... provide funds from any person or persons for the purpose of erecting a brick building to be used for public rooms and for the accommodation of students — Said building to be three stories high and not less than thirty-eight nor more than forty feet wide — nor less than fifty nor more than eighty feet long ...¹⁴

It has long been believed that the specific source for this rectangular, box-like structure was Andover's Bartlett Hall (1820), a building often used as a model for others, but one which Maine Hall only slightly approximated in its final form. In fact, more likely models existed not only in state, but at

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Harvard, Brown, Williams, and other New England institutions. In terms of front elevation, it most closely resembles the pre-1822 form of Maine Hall (1807-1808) at Bowdoin, which itself may have been inspired by Harvard's Hollis Hall (1762-1769), still standing in the Yard at Cambridge.

With the germ of the plan established and financing efforts underway, it still took four more years before the trustees made the decision to officially announce the commencement of the project to the public.¹⁵ By July 1833, the cornerstone had been ceremoniously laid, and at the Congregational State Conference in Portland the next year the following encouraging statement was issued:

A new and elegant building, 106 feet long, 38 feet wide, and four stories high, has been erected, and furnished externally. One half is finished inside. The other half is in progress, and will be finished as soon as practicable. The building is designed chiefly for the accommodation of students and when all finished will accommodate sixty-four. The cost, when completed is thirteen thousand dollars.¹⁶

Financial obligations were momentarily satisfied by subscription receipts received through the General Conference of Maine, but it was several years before the project could be considered complete. Recently, documents have surfaced at the seminary's Moulton Library indicating that Charles H. Pond of Bangor drew the plans while Leonard L. Morse, responsible for the 1839 renovations of the Commons House, did the carpentry and other finishing, and Jeremiah Berry of Thomaston did the stone and brick masonry work.¹⁷

A tour through Maine Hall today reveals much about the building as it was first built. Such an on-site investigation is a satisfactory substitute for consultation of floor diagrams and detail drawings which no longer appear to exist. Except for minor alterations in decor and utilities and some slight changes in function, Maine Hall looks much the same now as it must have when theological students of a century ago resided within its walls. A 1903-1904 seminary catalogue describes the

original inside plan, pointing out that each of the thirty-two student suites

... consists of study and bedroom; the corner rooms have two bedrooms attached and may be shared by two students. Rooms are provided with hard-wood floors and carpets and are furnished with beds, bedding, chairs, tables & book-shelves. Each occupant supplies his own stove, fuel, lights & toilet furniture.¹⁸

Four suites were located on each floor with a fireplace in each one, a style consistent with the English entryway system widely adopted at early New England schools and colleges. At times, Maine served functions other than residential. During the thirties and forties, the classical or preparatory department, recitation rooms, a chapel and meeting room, and a 4,000 volume library could have been found there.¹⁹ Though Maine Hall is no longer the total educational facility that it once was, it still receives praise for the comfortable and flexible utility of its lounges and residential quarters.

As a work of architecture, Maine Hall has not attracted such enthusiastic notice. Most local onlookers consider it more important historically than aesthetically. A rather plain and conventional structure, the building is a bit overwhelmed by the more ornate design of its close neighbor, Beach Chapel, the primary structure in the row. Only a few basic style elements are noticeable. In an 1853 view from *Gleason's Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion* (see cover), and in a recent photograph (Fig. 5), the pitched-roof front pavilion may be seen, its most pronounced detail being the decorative round-arched ventilator with fanlight. Thin moldings extend under the gables and eaves of the roof. In its present form the building features an Italianate bracketed veranda, which replaced the original, less flamboyant Greek Revival porch. As in other institutional dormitories of the period, brick chimneys penetrate and rise above the roof planes, and white stone window sills and lintels mark the walls in pleasant, repetitious fashion. Maine Hall lacks the well-proportioned scale of Beach Chapel,



Figure 5 (top): Maine Hall (1833-1834). Figure 6 (bottom): New Commons Hall (1836). Photos by the author.

though it is perhaps more successful in the relationship of its exterior to its interior. The building form suggests that its designer's principal concern was with economy, practicality, and function, rather than artistic considerations. The end design result was very little different than that in evidence at comparable educational institutions of the era.²⁰

Bangor Theological Seminary's fourth pre-Civil War building was New Commons Hall (Fig. 6), erected in 1836 at a cost of \$6,000, with framing and carpentry finish by Charles W. Howland of Orono.²¹ Designated by the trustees as a replacement for the Old Commons House, the new structure was envisioned to serve students not only as a boarding house, but also as an infirmary. Living space for kitchen workers and space for storage were also included in the plans.²² During its first years of operation, New Commons was administered by a student club, which offered meals at a rate of \$1.75 per week (Fig. 7), cultivated a vegetable garden nearby, prepared menus, issued bills, supervised the hired steward and his helpers, and cared for the building. From 1847 to 1860, the southerly wing housed a 7,500 volume library. Like so many other educational facilities of its era, though it was built with a single function in mind it actually served several.²³

Domestic in its proportions and massing, New Commons Hall is not a particularly distinguished or ornate work of architecture. However, in its simplicity and refinement it makes an interesting statement not unlike that of the first commons buildings at Bowdoin and Waterville. The elongated three-part symmetry produced by its two-storied center section and single-storied wings creates an effective echoing response to the three principal seminary buildings arranged in a row in front of it. Tall brick chimneys contrast with the essential horizontality of the building, creating a forceful interplay of visual forms. Of the few obvious exterior details present, the Greek Revival central doorway is by far the most eye-catching. But in other respects, New Commons, like so many other educational facilities of its period, sacrifices aesthetic appeal to ever-changing function, and reflects the conservative standards



Figure 7: Interior of New Commons Hall (1836). Photo (c. 1890) from Moulton Library. BTS, courtesy of the author.

and habits of New England higher education. The message that it offers centers upon Puritan practicality and directness.²⁴

For over twenty years the space between Maine Hall and the Commons House remained vacant, and the row idea, apparently conceived at the time that Maine Hall was erected, was left unrealized. Desires for a substantial building to answer the general needs of the seminary had been expressed by the faculty, trustees, and students since the 1830s, but the fragile state of the national economy and the lack of available construction funds prevented execution of the project. By 1848 conditions had improved to the point that the Visitors of the General Conference of Maine renewed the suggestion for a building project and commenced seeking contributions from the Congregational churches of the state. In addition assistance was forthcoming from interested women in Bangor and nearby, who, as the "Corban Society," sought monetary support from the "Ladies of Maine" and other private sources.²⁵ It was estimated in 1854 that approximately \$12,000 would be required to

carry out construction, and this was borne out by subsequent events.²⁶ Still, for lack of resources, time dragged on. In 1855 the visitors wrote in their minutes:

The demand for the long-contemplated building to be occupied as a library and chapel, has become most pressing ... the library is annually growing larger, and we cannot believe that recent revivals in the colleges and churches of New England will not soon bring to our Seminary, candidates for the ministry in larger numbers.²⁷

In 1857 it was announced that “the Ladies of Bangor have taken it in hand to provide funds,” and in June, a year later, the cornerstone was laid with appropriate exercises.²⁸ Finally in their 1859 report the visitors were able to proudly proclaim:

The great event of the current year has been the building of the Chapel You will be gratified to learn ... that the building is nearly finished, and will soon, with the leave of Providence, be consecrated and occupied.²⁹

On July 27, with many religious dignitaries present, the new chapel was dedicated in elaborate services and began a period of use “of inestimable value to the institution.”³⁰

The David Nelson Beach Chapel (Fig. 8) was designed in the popular Italianate style by an architect recently identified as William Morse, a resident of Bangor and planner of other public buildings in the city.³¹ A two-story rectangular brick structure with dimensions of fifty by seventy-four feet, the chapel possesses a pitched slate roof and a front projecting tower sixteen feet square. Eighty feet in height, the tower very closely resembles stairtowers of the same era that were attached to mill buildings in New England towns and cities, providing strong decorative accents. The seminary bell, which had previously been suspended quite ingloriously from a simple wood frame nearby, was raised to a proper place in the new belfry.

Upon its completion, the front one-third of the structure contained two lecture rooms on each floor, all reached from a central corridor.³² The library, as shown in an old photograph



Figure 8 (top): David Nelson Beach Chapel (1858-1859). Photo by the author. *Figure 9* (bottom): Beach Chapel, interior of the library. Photo from Moulton Library, courtesy of the author.

(Fig. 9), was fitted out on the first floor rear to receive 12,000 volumes, many of which were previously stored in the south wing of New Commons Hall.³³ Spacious and well arranged, it served the seminary well until it was supplanted by a modern library facility in the early 1960s. Unfortunately for architectural historians, the entire interior was remodeled in this century, and one can no longer see, in either the library or the chapel sanctuary above, the classic round arches, ceiling dentil moldings, ornate supporting columns, window and door moldings, and other design elements that constituted the original embellishment.

The exterior, on the other hand, has retained its original hooded round and segmental window arches, white bracketed window sills, horizontal belt courses, and striking plain white frieze with paired wooden brackets under the roof eaves. The wooden tower rests atop a brick entranceway which is rich in the kind of detail that is the unique trademark of the Italianate (Fig. 10). Topped by a distinctive square belfry, the tower displays a proliferation of brackets and round-arched apertures and features a lovely rose window composed of interlaced triangular elements. The total aesthetic effect is noteworthy and communicates the expectation that the building's function, as expressed emphatically on the interior, must somehow adjust itself to exterior decorative concerns. Though somewhat out of character with the rest of the seminary's pre-Civil War architecture, the Beach Chapel conveys the essence of an American generation that sought to identify with other cultures and periods, rather than with its own nation's rather abbreviated past. But as the central ordering point on the small hilltop campus, this building successfully completes "Chapel Row," and in doing so helps to forcefully project the seminary's mission as an influential regional institution of theological education.



Figure 10: Beach Chapel (1858-1859); front entranceway detail. Photo by the author.

NOTES

¹This article has as its basis research conducted for my Ph.D. dissertation ("College Architecture in Northern New England Before 1860: A Social and Cultural History," Boston University, 1970), as well as additional research conducted in 1985-1986.

²See Bryant F. Tolles, Jr., "College Architecture in New England before 1860 in Printed and Sketched Views," *The Magazine Antiques* 103 (March 1973): 502-509.

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³Walter S. Cook, *Bangor Theological Seminary: A Sesquicentennial History* (Orono: University of Maine Press for the Bangor Theological Seminary, 1971), pp. 9-10.

⁴Records of the Trustees of the Maine Charity School (1814-32), Meeting of December 24, 1821. Moulton Library, Bangor Theological Seminary, Bangor, Maine.

⁵Calvin M. Clark, *History of the Bangor Theological Seminary* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1916), p. 396.

⁶Cook, *Bangor Theological Seminary*, p. 10. The cost of the building was \$1,200.

⁷Cook, *Bangor Theological Seminary*, pp. 10-11.

⁸Records of the Trustees of the Maine Charity School, Meeting of August 8, 1828.

⁹Clark, *History of the Bangor Theological Seminary*, p. 66.

¹⁰"The Old Commons House: 1828-1928," *The Alumni Bulletin of Bangor Theological Seminary* 2 (July 1928): 1-2; Enoch Pond, *Autobiography* (Boston: Congregational Sunday-School, 1883), pp. 64, 68.

¹¹Memorandum of Agreement Between Leonard L. Morse and the Trustees of the Maine Charity School, June 6, 1839. Moulton Library, Bangor Theological Seminary.

¹²"The Old Commons House: 1828-1928," p. 1; Cook, *Bangor Theological Seminary*, p. 11.

¹³Cook, *Bangor Theological Seminary*, p. 11; Clark, *History of the Bangor Theological Seminary*, p. 249.

¹⁴Records of the Board of Trustees of the Maine Charity School, March 25, 1829.

¹⁵Clark, *History of the Bangor Theological Seminary*, p. 134; *The Christian Mirror*, May 16, 1833; Cook, *Bangor Theological Seminary*, p. 20.

¹⁶*Minutes of the General Conference of Maine for 1834*, p. 5. The General Conference was the central organizational body for the Congregational churches of Maine. Its purpose was to be a loose organ for communication rather than for administrative control.

¹⁷Memorandum of Agreement Between Leonard L. Morse and the Trustees of the Maine Charity School, June 1, 1833; Memorandum of Agreement Between Jeremiah Berry and the Trustees of the Maine Charity School, June 1, 1833; Proposal by Jeremiah Berry to the Trustees of the Maine Charity School for the Erecting of a Four-Story Building, 1833. Moulton Library, Bangor Theological Seminary.

¹⁸*Catalogue of the Bangor Theological Seminary for 1903-1904* (Bangor, Maine: Bangor Theological Seminary, 1903).

¹⁹Pond, *Autobiography*, p. 71; Calvin M. Clark, "Maine Hall — Reminiscences of a Centenarian," *The Alumni Bulletin of Bangor Theological Seminary* 9 (1934): 1.

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²⁰Today Maine Hall is known as "Whittaker Hall" after Frederick William Whittaker, student, alumnus, and president of the seminary from 1952 to 1978. It contains a social room, suites of student rooms, faculty and administrative offices, a refectory, and a mailroom.

²¹*Minutes of the General Conference of Maine for 1836*, p. 6; Estimate for the Commons House, Bangor Seminary, Charles Howland, April 28, 1836. Moulton Library, Bangor Theological Seminary.

²²Records of the Board of Trustees of the Maine Charity School, Meeting of March 24, 1829.

²³Clark, *History of the Bangor Theological Seminary*, p. 66.

²⁴At present, New Commons accommodates a dining hall, three student apartments, three student rooms, a staff lounge, a kitchen, and a shop.

²⁵Clark, *History of the Bangor Theological Seminary*, pp. 176-77; Cook, *Bangor Theological Seminary*, pp. 30-31; "Seminary Chapel" (Broadside addressed to the Ladies of Maine by the Committee of the Corban Society, Bangor, November 1855).

²⁶*Minutes of the General Conference of Maine for 1854*, Visitors Report.

²⁷*Minutes of the General Conference of Maine for 1855*, Visitors Report, p. 44.

²⁸*Minutes of the General Conference of Maine for 1857*, Visitors Report, p. 53; *Minutes of the General Conference of Maine for 1858*, Visitors Report, p. 56.

²⁹*Minutes of the General Conference of Maine for 1859*, Visitors Report, p. 56.

³⁰Pond, *Autobiography*, p. 84.

³¹Telephone conversation with Deborah Thompson, Bangor Historical Commission, August 14, 1987. Unfortunately, no known architectural drawings for the chapel have been discovered.

³²Clark, *History of the Bangor Theological Seminary*, p. 178; Cook, *Bangor Theological Seminary*, p. 31.

³³*Minutes of the General Conference of Maine for 1859*, Visitors Report, p. 56.

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ROGER HOWELL MEMORIAL RESOLUTION

Roger Howell, Jr.
1936-1989

The Trustees of the Maine Historical Society note with profound sorrow the death on September 27, 1989 of Roger Howell, Jr., President of the Society since 1987. Roger Howell brought to the Maine Historical Society a remarkable combination of talents and experience. He was a scholar of international eminence, a gifted and inspiring teacher, and for nine years (1969-1978) the President of Bowdoin College. He had graduated from Bowdoin in 1958, and went on to Oxford the next year as a Rhodes Scholar. English History in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries engaged his research and writing interests, and he became while still a very young man a leading authority on the history of the English Civil War. But, as Thomas Fuller wrote of an English "worthy" of that same seventeenth century Roger knew so well, "his learning did not live in a lane," and Roger Howell's enthusiasm for history extended to other times and other lands. It reached, too, into the smaller worlds of state and local history, and the Maine Historical Society has been the richer for his concern in those areas.

Roger Howell became a member of the Society in 1968, and was elected to the Board of Trustees in 1982. As a member and later Chairman of the Publications Committee, he helped to guide the publishing endeavors of the Society. There, as also in other aspects of the Society's role, his vision embraced a commitment to bringing Maine history to all age levels, and to the general public. He believed deeply that the Maine Historical Society should be a leader in achieving those goals.

Roger Howell was elected President of the Society in 1987, and re-elected in 1989. As President he demonstrated strong leadership. He worked with firmness and tact to effect the adoption of the Society's Master Plan. He guided the Board in policy decisions, and strengthened the role of Trustees in fundraising and development projects; and he sought always to bring about improved communication and accountability within the Board, and between the Trustees and members of the

professional staff. He blended administrative skill with a vision of growth, and in the mist of his busy life he made an important contribution to Maine history. As President of Bowdoin, Roger had written a perceptive biography of Oliver Cromwell; as President of the Maine Historical Society, he brought his unsurpassed knowledge of seventeenth century England to the project *Maine in the Age of Discovery*. As an important part of that project, he prepared an accurate critical transcription on Christopher Levett's *A Voyage into New England 1623-24* and as an introduction to the text he wrote an essay that provides a fresh assessment of Levett's life and career. It was one of the last published works from Roger Howell's pen.

We who served with Roger Howell as Trustees of the Maine Historical Society hereby record our deep sense of loss at his early death; but in doing so we express gratitude for his leadership, and pledge our commitment to the purposes of the Maine Historical Society that he worked for and embodied.