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The Machiasport Petroglyphs

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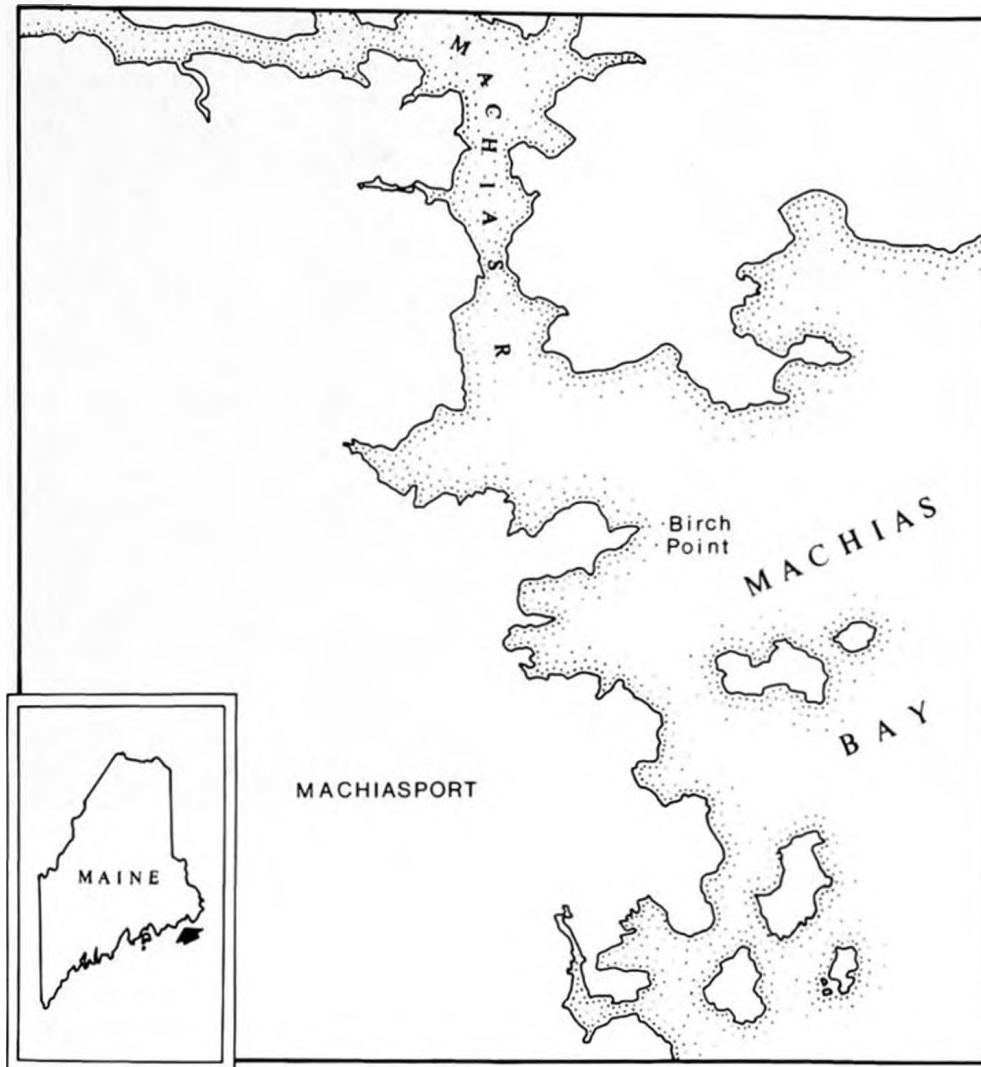
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THE MACHIASPORT PETROGLYPHS

On a low-lying inshore ledge at Birch Point (once known as Clark's Point) on the westerly side of Machias Bay at Machiasport, thirty-three petroglyphs are faintly visible.¹ Nearby on a higher ledge other petroglyphs may be found. The latter, even more eroded, are barely visible, except for one distinct representation of a Shaman.² Birch Point rises to forty feet above mean low water, and the inshore ledge on which the main group of petroglyphs were carved lies a few feet below the point's southern twenty-foot level. Along both shores of Machias Bay, the land has down-warped at irregular intervals. The ever-rising sea level has drowned whatever habitation and gathering sites there might have been in the area. Not only has this process destroyed any supporting evidence about the creators of the petroglyphs, it has brought the carvings themselves in contact with the Machias Bay tides. Over the centuries, the inflowing water eroded the shoreline near the petroglyphs and created a half-mile of mud flats, which in turn forced the main flow of water from the Machias rivers toward the easterly shore and away from Birch Point. Although the petroglyphs are sheltered somewhat from the force of the Machias Bay currents, the down-warping continues, and Maine Geological Survey reports indicate that the sea-level rise in the Machiasport area increased further not only from river silt but from sawdust and boards from the nineteenth-century Machias sawmills.³ In a few years the Machiasport petroglyphs will be scrubbed away by storm tides and pebble wash, and Maine will have lost an invaluable clue to its prehistoric past.



Birch Point (Clark Point) in Machias Bay is the site of a striking collection of prehistoric rock etchings. Although an eroding shoreline and exposure to tidal currents threaten the petroglyphs, a photographic record made by Frank A. Brown in the early 1920s has preserved this valuable clue to Maine's past.

Reporting on occurrences of rock art elsewhere in America, two anthropologists wrote in 1967 that interest in such Indian representations was more than a "matter of aesthetics." This interest, they pointed out, was

part of a world-wide urge to examine our human origins. For here lie substantial clues to what man was and therefore is. Here are found the first pre-literate gropings toward the written word. Here, too, we may look for light on the time-shadowed origins of man's ancient need to express through visual



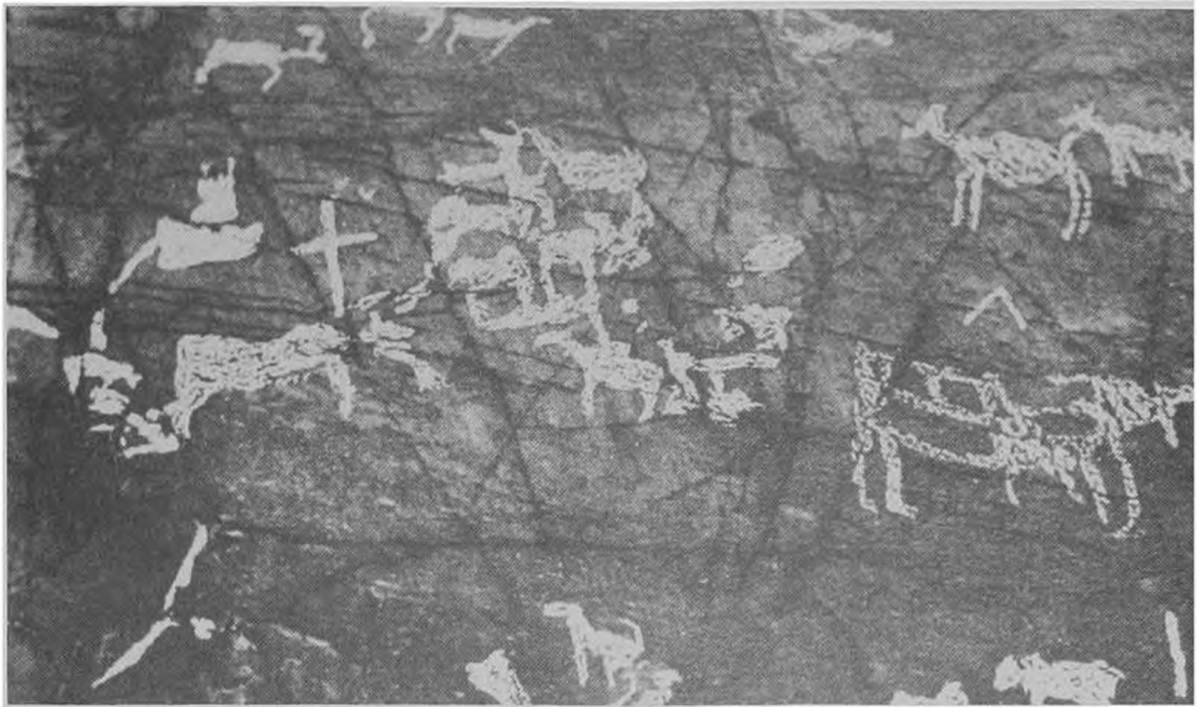
The Birch Point petroglyph site. Photo by Roger B. Ray.

imagery the yearnings that lie beyond — or beneath
— the reach of words.⁴

The Machiasport petroglyphs provide an opportunity to speculate about similar “human origins” — about early Maine inhabitants. Who were the creators of these striking figures? When were they carved? And what do they tell us about the beliefs and culture of Maine’s prehistoric coastal visitors?

Fortunately, we do not have to rely entirely on the now-fading markings themselves for answers to these questions. In 1888 Garrick Mallery of the Smithsonian Institution visited the tide-washed ledge and photographed the figures. Fifty-seven of Mallery’s images accompanied his subsequent report. Again in the early 1920s Frank A. Brown of Machiasport photographed seventy-four of the figures on the same ledge. These two collections, taken together, offer a reasonably permanent record of the Machiasport legacy.

The figures in the Mallery and Brown photographs are striking; most are representations of deer and moose, but some

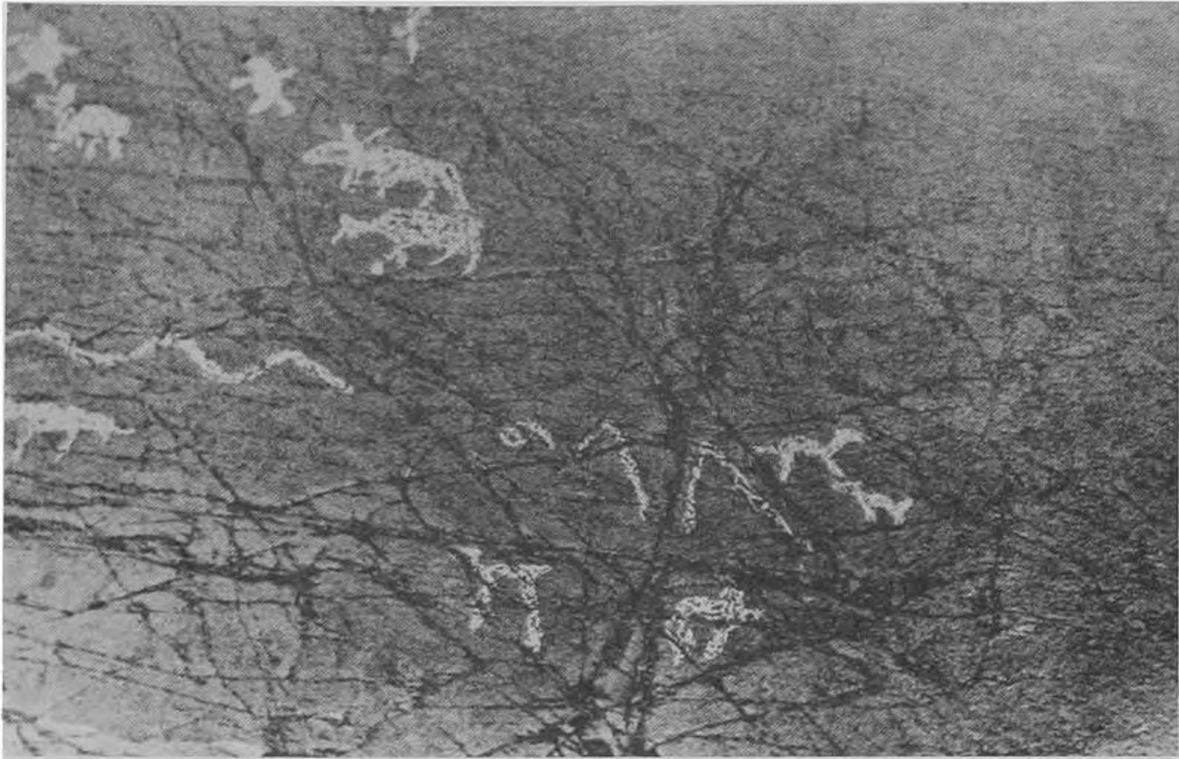


Prominent among the Machiasport representations are animal figures and hunting scenes. The absence of caribou among the figures helps date the carvings. Photo by Frank A. Brown.

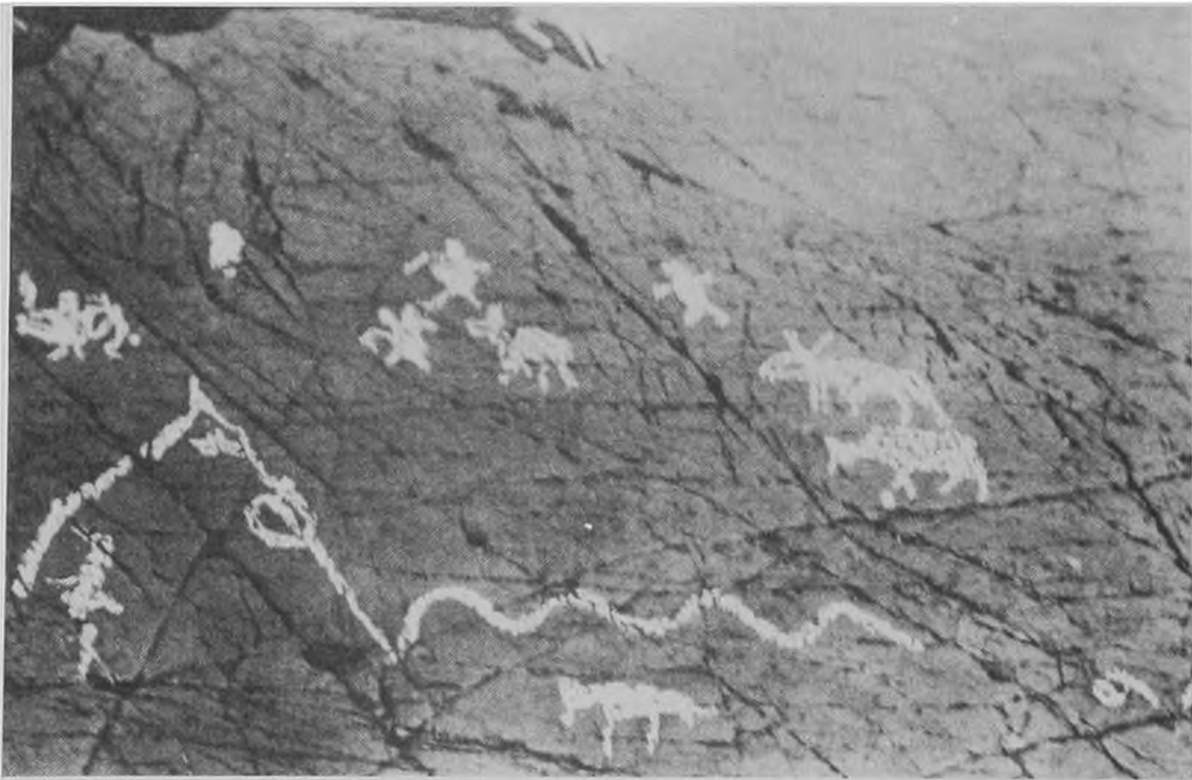
show human activity as well. One depicts a man with outstretched arm, as though about to throw a spear; another shows a camouflaged hunter stalking a small deer. Also visible is a representation of a woman, as well as figures of turtles and sea-mammals, a depiction of the mythical Black Cat and Snake from the Glooscap legend, a shaman with his animal helper, and two representations which are not positively identifiable.

Along with his collection of photographs Mallery offered speculations about the techniques used to inscribe the rock figures. Since his firsthand observations were made at a time when the figures were probably more distinct, his report bears considerable weight today. The "intaglio carving of all the figures," he wrote,

was apparently made by repeated blows of a pointed instrument, doubtless of hard stone; not held as a chisel, but working by repetition of hammerings or peckings. The deepest now seen [that is, in 1888] is about three-eighths of an inch. The amount of patient labor bestowed upon these figures must have been



A variety of animal forms offers a glimpse at the natural world of Maine's first inhabitants. The rock incisions also suggest a spiritual significance attached to living things. Photo by Frank A. Brown.



great, considering the hardness of the rock and the rude implement with which they were wrought.⁵

Mallery described the rock as schistose slate; the more precise Maine Geological Survey maps describe the stone at Birch Point as Leighton formation Silurian-age sedimentary rock.⁶

The matter of who created the petroglyphs and when the carvings were executed are closely interconnected. Dating artifacts such as these is somewhat simplified by the fact that the Maine coast, through geological history, has been in a considerable state of flux. The last of the glaciers over New England and the Maritimes, except for the area in and influenced by the Laurentide ice sheet, retreated about 10,500 B.C. Following the retreating glacier, the sea came over Maine as far as East Millinocket in the Penobscot Valley and as far as Bingham in the Kennebec Valley. The land, depressed by the weight of the mile-high glacier, eventually rebounded — but unevenly. Washington County, for instance, was plagued by numerous swamps, and islands appeared which were once part of the mainland. Obviously, the petroglyphs date from a time in which the Machiasport area was above sea level.

Today the coastline is again retreating. A recent study of the cultural ecology of nearby Passamaquoddy Bay published by David Sanger provides evidence that the rate of sea-level rise presently is “much faster ... than it was in the past.” Relying on archeological evidence in the area, Sanger suggests a rapid rise up to 3,000 or 2,500 years ago — followed by a period of limited rise, then again a recent rapid rate. The carving, this suggests, took place earlier than 3,000 or 2,500 years ago — that is, before the sea-level rise that has caused some of them to sink below low tide level. Mallery, in fact, in his 1888 report, mentioned several figures even then below low tide. He had found other petroglyph sites nearby in Holmes Bay, a part of Machias Bay, which were too far below the low tide mark to identify. Similar conditions existed at Hog Island in the bay. The Machiasport petroglyphs were well situated above the high tide mark probably 3,000 years or more ago.

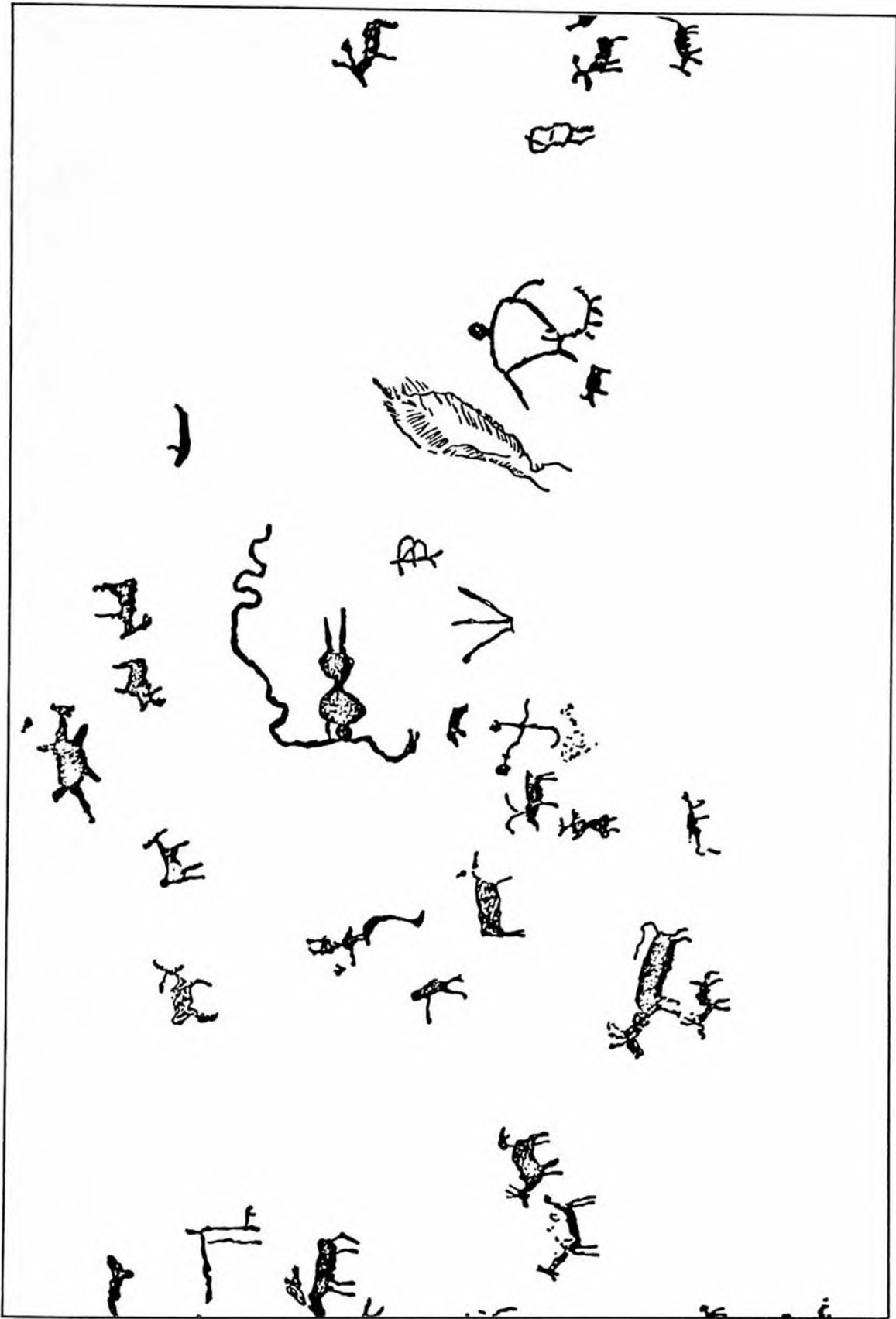
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Other evidence points to a date of origin earlier than 3,000 years ago. Sanger, for instance found that sites later than 1000 A.D. had more caribou and moose than deer, "whereas earlier sites show more deer [bones]." The Machiasport animal representations show many deer but no caribou, pointing to an earlier rather than a later date for the Machiasport petroglyphs.⁸

Dating the petroglyphs, however, does not completely resolve the mystery of who created them. Two groups of Indians — of different cultures — lived along the eastern Maine coast about this time. One, the Maritime Archaic Indians, had migrated from Labrador. In earlier times these people had, by one archeologist's account, "occupied Labrador unhindered by the presence of other culture groups." However, by 2000 B.C. (4,000 years ago) the Archaic Indians were experiencing pressure from the Pre-Dorset Eskimo people who had moved into Labrador from the north. "Moving down the Labrador coast, they encountered the Maritime Archaic Indians." By 1500 B.C., Maritime Archaic culture in Labrador had disappeared.⁹ James A. Tuck of Memorial University, who traced the migration of the Archaic peoples into the Atlantic Maritimes and to the Maine coast, felt that the high point of their influence from Newfoundland to Maine was in the period 2000 to 1000 B.C., after which this cultural entity disappeared. Their relationship to succeeding cultures is not yet clear.¹⁰

While here in Maine, the Archaic people exhibited a "basic core of religiosity," as Tuck puts it, that was best exemplified by their lavish use of red ocher in their burials. Excavation of several such sites caused them to be later termed the Red Paint people. Red Paint sites excavated by Charles C. Willoughby before the turn of the century at Bucksport, Damariscotta, Ellsworth, and Orland, and by Warren K. Moorehead in the 1920s at several coastal locations add evidence to the religious orientation of the Maritime Archaic people in Maine.¹¹

The so-called Moorehead Complex shows this culture fading out about 1800 B.C. to 1000 B.C. What ultimately became of the Maritime Archaic people is still uncertain. Students of this

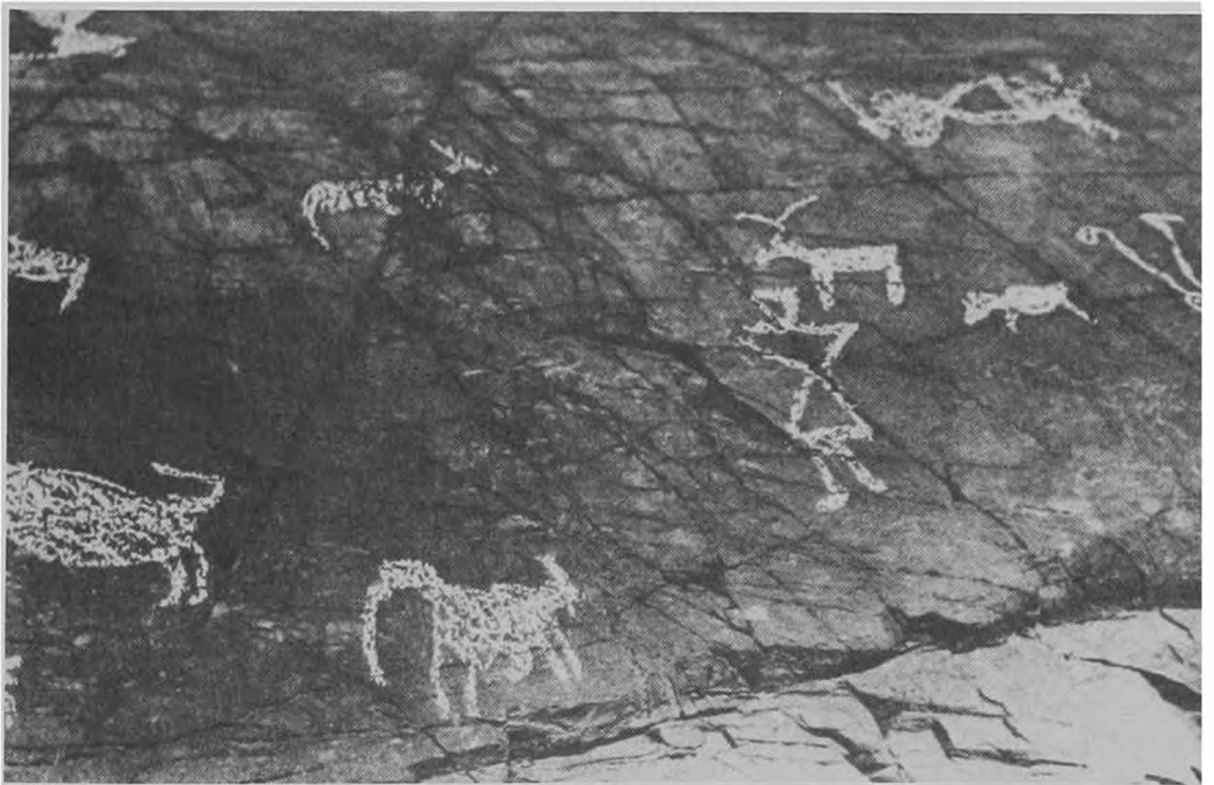
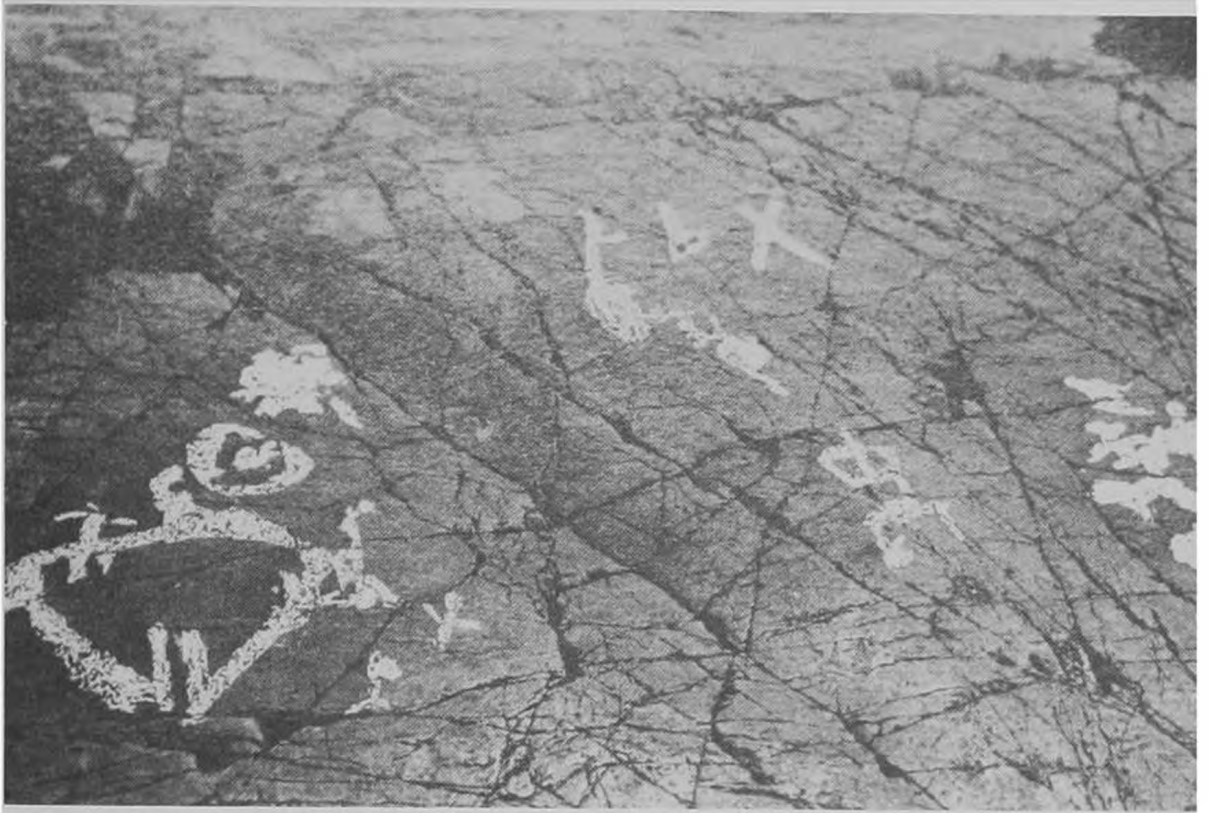




The animal figures (above and right) and the human figure (bottom right) are spiritually connected. The distinctive hour-glass shape given the human representation indicates a shaman — a spiritual leader who communicated the needs of the people to the animals whose spirits were incised on the rocks. Photo by Frank A. Brown.

period of prehistory surmise that the culture was altered by changes in "subsistence conditions."¹² Climactic shifts altered the Maine coastal environment and this in turn brought changes in sources of food supply. Seawater temperature, for instance, warmed sufficiently for a time to allow oysters to grow as far to the northeast as the Sheepscot River; then the water cooled, bringing the cold-water deepsea fish. This cooling trend was the change that first attracted the coastal Labrador Indians — the Red Paint people — to the eastern Maine region.

But changes in the food supply accounted for only part of the changing culture. The infusion of new ideas from new families migrating to Maine accounted for new tools and changes in the social order. The extent of migration and communication among North American Indians is illustrated by



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the widespread adoption of maize throughout the hemisphere. Maize (so-called Indian corn), first cultivated in Central America, eventually found its way to Maine and New Brunswick. Although the effects of changes in climate and environment were considerable, quite likely the disappearance of the Archaic people was in part a result of cultural intermixing. In fact, probably the most important impact on the Maritime Archaic culture was the migration of interior hunters from the Great Lakes about 1000 B.C.

These people, Algonkians, are the ancestors of today's Penobscots, Passamaquoddies, and Malicetes.¹³ Interestingly, the Lake Forest culture, and particularly the Ojibwa tribe, produced many rock paintings in Ontario and Minnesota, and apparently the Algonkians, like the Red Paint people, expressed a distinctive religious orientation. Selwyn Dewdney and Kenneth E. Kidd, who have studied the Great Lakes Indian rock paintings extensively, wrote that "to all appearances the aboriginal artist was groping toward the expression of the magical aspect of his life, rather than [simply] taking pleasure in the world of form around him."¹⁴

There is a striking similarity between some of the Great Lakes rock painting subjects recorded by Dewdney and Kidd and the subjects represented at Machiasport. This similarity is also apparent at Embden (Solon), Maine, where approximately ninety distinct figures comprise a band of petroglyphs about eight meters long and about two wide, located in a ledge of metamorphosed shale which juts into the Kennebec River.¹⁵ These had been carved by the same hammering or pecking method described by Mallery at Machiasport. Dean Snow, who believes these carvings were executed by the Lake Forest people and that many of the carvings were done by shaman, notes the emphasis on the sexual power of the shaman and the number of representations of female genitalia. At Machiasport there are several similar designs.

Although it seems clear that the Machiasport petroglyphs were executed by the Algonkian people, there could be earlier Maritime Archaic influences as well. If indeed the Lake Forest

culture eclipsed that of the Archaic people, the petroglyphs suggest that the cultural exchange was not entirely one way. The concept that a representation of an animal, bird, object, or human attracted the spirit of the owner was held by the Archaic Indians. They may have been the people who passed this belief to the Lake Forest people. Indeed, the connection between pictorial representation and animal spirit was an idea that the Archaic Indians passed on to other cultures in the region, and anthropological and ethnological studies of these later cultures provides a closer understanding of the earlier Archaic concept. William Fitzhugh, who reported on Maritime Archaic habitation sites at Nulliak Cove, Labrador, dating from 1700 B.C., wrote that he found a number of pendants incised with leaf, skeletal, and geometric designs and noted that some of them resembled Beothuck bone pendants.¹⁶ The Beothucks, a Newfoundland people thought to be descendants of coastal Labrador Boreal Archaic Indians, believed that a representation of an animal such as a sea mammal attracted the spirit of the owner. Their concept of a spirit world included a belief that all beings — humans, animals, and birds — possessed each its own spirit. Further, the Beothucks believed that spirits communicated with other spirits. The hunter for a hungry family could entrust his spirit to tell of his need for food to the spirit of the animal he hunted — an incised representation of which he carried with him. The animal was expected to acquiesce.¹⁷

Belief in the efficacy of representations, in fact, survived in Labrador and was adapted by the Montagnais Indians, an Algonkian people who arrived later in the region. The ethnologist Frank Speck visited the Montagnais in about 1915, and his description of their belief system offers another approach to understanding the Archaic culture. "The pictorial or symbolic representation of the plant or animal whose aid is to be secured," he wrote about the Montagnais Indians, was actually "equivalent to the creature or object itself." Further, Speck's study reveals that these Archaic Montagnais beliefs and those held by northern Algonkians were closely compatible. "To put it roughly," Speck observed, "there is an analogy in northern Algonkian philosophy between symbol or picture and control



power, bringing the objects portrayed under the dominance of the individual human spirit for the accomplishment of its needs.”¹⁸ Speck recognized that the belief in the value of representations was dependent on a belief in Manitou, a concept general to Algonkian culture. The Montagnais’ Manitou was difficult to describe, but Speck settled on the phrase “spirit power thinking.” Manitou was conceived as omnipresent yet without form or feature. It was thought of as entering into every thing or person in the natural world. Through Manitou, humans could communicate with other beings via the spirits of each. Through the agency of Manitou, humans could make their needs known to animals, birds, trees, and humans for which representations were kept at hand.

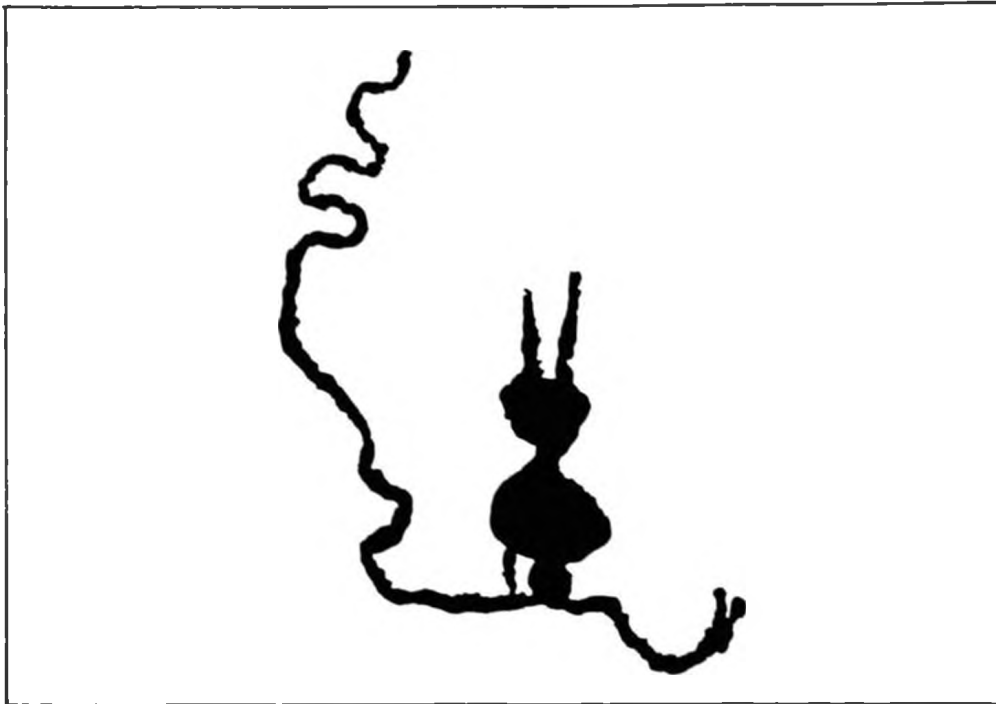
Again, the Montagnais whom Speck interviewed were Algonkians. Their ancestors had migrated east from the Canadian Shield territory to Labrador. From the Great Lakes-Lake Forest people of the southern Shield, the Labrador Indians

probably brought the concept of Manitou with them. Once in Labrador, they had ample opportunity to learn from the Maritime Archaic Indians the application of hunting magic to the Manitou concept.

Thus we are able to make fairly detailed judgments about the meaning of the Machiasport petroglyphs. The carvers of the petroglyphs, like the Ojibwa, had a tradition of expressing their belief in the magical nature of their world in large representations in their rock paintings. They believed shaman communicated with the spirit world. Shaman, supposedly, traveled out of body to the spirit world, there to learn why the spirits were angry with a tribe or individual and to learn what corrective action must be taken by the offenders. The Maritime Archaic Indians apparently told the rock carvers that they could count on the usefulness of representations to secure game. The Machiasport representations of animals, turtles, and sea-mammals were probably executed for the practical purpose of securing food. Some deep-water fish retreat south from the Maine coast when the water temperature plunges, so in off seasons the coastal Indians looked for land-based game.

One other Machiasport carving, the depiction of Black Cat and Snake, reveals another side of the religious beliefs of the Machiasport Indians. The legend of Black Cat and Snake is one of the many stories of the god-hero Glooscap (Kuloskap, or Glusabe) known to northeastern Algonkians. It is the story of Glooscap's triumph over Evil.

The background of the Black Cat and Snake carving is the legend of God making a rare visit to earth. Dissatisfied with conditions here, in which manlike beings struggled to cope with intolerable heat, cold, and drought, he created a new race of men. He endowed Glooscap with magical powers and instructed him to teach men how to live with one another and with the natural world. Glooscap accordingly subdued the elements, reduced the size of animals, and relentlessly pursued Evil. When he completed his mission, Glooscap departed to a land of peace and plenty. His followers expected to join him



The Machiasport petroglyphs also include a representation of the Algonkian Black Cat and Snake legend. The petroglyphs not only helped ensure a continuing food supply through spiritual representations of game, but hinted at yearnings for an afterlife as well.

there at their deaths, but in the meantime the living were to cope as best they could with angry spirits and Evil — for Evil never dies. The living, who longed for Glooscap's return, acknowledged in the representations of Black Cat and Snake aspects of the story of Glooscap subduing Evil. The two figures signify how difficult it is to live in a world influenced by Evil; Glooscap taught humans to eschew greed and envy.¹⁹

The petroglyphs, then, depict the Algonkian attempt to ensure a continuing food supply through mechanisms in part, perhaps, borrowed from the earlier Archaic Indians. They also hint at less distinct yearnings for an afterlife. What remains is to explain why the Indians chose the Machiasport location to carve the petroglyphs. Today it would appear a most unsuitable location, but at one time it was a convenient stopping place in travel from coastal eastern Maine into the interior. Just above the spot is the confluence of the three Machias rivers. The middle river runs many miles into present-day Penobscot

County, and short carries would have brought the Algonkians to the expansive Penobscot River system. Before the land in back of the petroglyphs at Birch Point down-warped from forty feet above sea level to twenty feet, and before the petroglyph ledge sunk still lower, this area was readily accessible from the bay. The Machiasport location was an inviting place to stop and wait for the incoming tide that would carry the Indians into the interior.

Apparently, in fact, this stopover spot became a conference center. George W. Drisko, who published his *Narrative of the Town of Machias* in 1904, wrote that as late as the nineteenth century Machias Bay was the scene of an annual September get-together for Indians as far east as St. John, New Brunswick, and as far south as Penobscot Bay.²⁰ According to Drisko's account, however, these gatherings had moved to the more accessible east side of Machias Bay.

Soon the vestiges of the petroglyphs will be scrubbed away by storm tides and pebble wash and the ever-rising sea level. Fortunately, the photographs of Mallery and Brown will survive. In addition, the overlays and photographs of the Embden/Solon and Machiasport petroglyphs prepared by the Maine State Museum are to be included in a fall 1985 exhibit at the museum. The mystery of the petroglyphs, if not the actual petroglyphs themselves, will be accessible to historians, ethnologists, and archeologists for years to come.

NOTES

¹Mr. M. A. Thompson, who lives in a *circa* 1830 house on high ground at Birch Point, explained the confusion over the point's name. A 1775 chart terms the entire peninsula Birch Point, as does the current U. S. Coast and Geodetic Survey map. Mr. Thompson supplied the information that Benjamin Clark bought the entire 100-acre point in the early 1800s. Clark sold home lots to his relatives, all named Clark. Locally the point came to be called Clark's Point.

²Mark H. Hedden, "The Form of the Cosmos in the Body of the Shaman," *Maine Archaeological Society Bulletin* 24 (no. 1, 1984). See also cover

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illustration, same issue. Hedden has reproduced a number of impressions made in 1981 of Machiasport petroglyphs for the covers and supplied comments for volume 23, nos. 1 and 2 (1983), and volume 24, no. 2 (1984), of the *Bulletin*.

³Maine Geological Survey, Augusta, Open File no. 80-8, 1983.

⁴Selwyn Dewdney and Kenneth E. Kidd, *Indian Rock Paintings of the Great Lakes*, 2d ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press for the Quetico Foundation, 1967), preface.

⁵Garrick Mallery, "Picture Writing of the American Indians," *Tenth Annual Report of the U. S. Bureau of Ethnology* (1888-1889).

⁶Maine Geological Survey, Open File no. 84-2, sheets 1, 2.

⁷David Sanger, "Cultural Ecology in Passamaquoddy Bay, New Brunswick," *Maine Archaeological Society Bulletin* 25 (no. 1, 1985): 10-16.

⁸David Sanger, *Sea-Level Rise in Passamaquoddy Bay: Archaeology and Sediment Cores*, Maine Geological Survey, Open File no. 85-73, 1985. The Indians who carved the petroglyphs at Machiasport were not the first to see eastern coastal Maine. Further east at Debert, Nova Scotia, a habitation site has been dated at 8700 B.C. It was apparently abandoned because of the rising sea level. North American Indians from the mid-Atlantic area (Delaware and New Jersey, for example) and from the West came to Maine soon after the land became habitable, which was about 8700 B.C. See G. F. MacDonald, "Debert: A Paleo-Indian Site in Central Nova Scotia," *National Museum of Man of Canada, Anthropology Papers* (no. 16, 1968); Harold W. Borns, Jr., "Possible Paleo-Indian Migration Routes in Northeastern North America," *Maine Archaeological Society Bulletin* 11 (no. 1, 1971).

⁹William Fitzhugh, "Residence Pattern Development in the Labrador Maritime Archaic: Longhouse Models and 1983 Surveys," in *Archaeology in Newfoundland and Labrador*, edited by Jane Sproul Thomson and Callum Thomson, Governments of Newfoundland and Labrador, annual report no. 4 (1984).

¹⁰James A. Tuck, "Regional Cultural Development, 3000 to 300 B.C.," in *Handbook of North American Indians*, vol. 15, *Northeast* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian, 1978), p. 34.

¹¹Charles C. Willoughby, "Prehistoric Burial Places in Maine," *Peabody Museum of Harvard University Archaeological and Ethnological Papers* 1 (July 1891); Warren K. Moorehead, *A Report on the Archaeology of Maine* (Andover, Mass., 1922), pp. 143-45, 149-50. Lower level excavations give evidence of Maritime Archaic culture and upper levels, the later Algonkians. Moorehead found no relationships between the two cultures.

¹²Dean R. Snow, *The Archaeology of New England* (New York: Academic Press, 1980), p. 208.

¹³Tuck, "Regional Cultural Development," p. 34.

¹⁴Dewdney and Kidd, *Indian Rock Paintings*.

¹⁵Dean R. Snow, "The Solon Petroglyphs and Eastern Abnaki Shamanism," in *Papers of the Seventh Algonkian Conference*, edited by William Cowan (Ottawa: Carleton University, 1975).

¹⁶Fitzhugh, "Residence Pattern Development," p. 17.

¹⁷Roger B. Ray, "Beothuck Pendants," *Newfoundland Quarterly* 79 (Fall 1983): 36-38.

¹⁸Frank G. Speck, *Naskapi, The Savage Hunters of the Labrador Peninsula*, reprint edition (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977), p. 197.

¹⁹The legend of Black Cat and Snake comes from one of the versions of Black Cat and Sable. J. Walter Fewkes had collected this and other Glooscap legends. Mallery modified Fewkes's version and printed it in his 1888 report, p. 473. Fewkes illustrated his version with a reproduction of a drawing incised on a Passamaquoddy birch-bark box. The Machiasport petroglyph is, of course, much older. The drawing Fewkes reproduced is in his "A Contribution to Passamaquoddy Folklore," *Journal of American Folk-Lore* 3 (no. 11, 1890): 266-73, together with his version of the legend. (The Indians, incidentally, did not have domestic cats. In this story, "Cat" means a member of the weasel family.)

²⁰George W. Drisko, *Narrative of the Town of Machias: The Old and the New, the Early and the Late* (Machias, Me.: Press of the Republican, 1904). Drisko also wrote: "De Monts left the first tangible proof of the discovery of Machias River." According to Drisko, de Monts set up a trading post at Clark's Point (Birch Point) as early as 1605-1606. I fear Drisko relied on apocryphal folklore. I could find no mention of Machias or of de Monts going there in the *Jesuit Relations*. See *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*, edited by Reuben Gold Thwaites, vol. 1, *Acadia, 1610-13* (New York: Pageant Book Company, 1959); Rev. P.F.X. DeCharlevoix, S.J., *History and General Description of New France* (New York: J. G. Shea, 1866-1872).

Roger B. Ray, former president of the Maine Historical Society, compiled three editions of the Society's BIBLIOGRAPHICAL GUIDE TO THE HISTORY OF THE INDIANS OF MAINE AND THE ATLANTIC MARITIME PROVINCES. He has also contributed articles to the Society's QUARTERLY, as well as to ARCHAEO-ASTRONOMY, and the NEWFOUNDLAND QUARTERLY.