



University of Southern Maine
USM Digital Commons

Exhibition Catalogue

Maine Bird's Eye Views, 1870-1905

3-2021

Maine Bird's Eye Views--An Introduction

Earle G. Shettleworth Jr.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/oml-maine-birds-eye-view-catalogue>

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Maine Bird's Eye Views, 1870-1905 at USM Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Exhibition Catalogue by an authorized administrator of USM Digital Commons. For more information, please contact jessica.c.hovey@maine.edu.

Maine Bird's Eye Views--An Introduction

Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr.

The first published view of a Maine community dates to 1782, when John Norman included an engraving of the burning of Falmouth, now Portland, by the British in 1775 to illustrate his *Impartial History of the War in America*. The town quickly rebuilt after the Revolution and appears as a thriving seaport on a circa 1807 Portland Marine Society membership certificate engraved by James Akin.

With the arrival in America in 1819 of the German invention of lithography, pictures of Maine towns and cities could be reproduced inexpensively in large numbers for a wide audience. This major innovation in printmaking came to New England in 1825 when John Pendleton opened his lithography shop in Boston. And thus, made in Boston and New York between the 1830s and the 1860s, lithographs of Maine communities helped form the young state's identity. Based on drawings and paintings by nationally known as well as local artists, these prints showed Maine's capital city, Augusta; the lumbering and shipbuilding communities of Bangor and Bath; and the textile manufacturing centers of Saco-Biddeford and Lewiston. Portland, the state's largest port, was depicted along with the coastal towns of Bath, Belfast, Bucksport, and Castine. These pictures enlivened homes, offices, and public spaces. They were sent to relatives, friends, and business associates to convey the image of Maine's prosperous communities.

After the Civil War, this pride of place took a new form of expression in the bird's eye view. Drawn from a perspective of two to three thousand feet in the air, these images are less picturesque than the earlier panoramic landscapes. They show an entire town or city in detail, including residences, businesses, industries, and significant topographic features. Usually printed as tinted lithographs in one or two colors, these views were sold by companies specializing in this form of printmaking. While the bird's eye view business first flourished in other parts of the country in the late-1860s and early-1870s, most of Maine's approximately ninety bird's eye views were produced between 1875 and 1900. Of those, twenty-nine were published by John J. Stoner between 1875 and 1879 and thirty-one by George E. Norris between 1888 and 1898.

Located in Madison, Wisconsin, John J. Stoner operated one of the largest view publishing firms in post-Civil War America. Stoner produced views in more than twenty-five states and Canada. He was active in the West and the Midwest during the 1860s and moved eastward in the 1870s. Stoner's twenty-nine Maine views, dating from the second half of the 1870s, cover the length and breadth of the state – from the Berwicks in the south to Houlton in the north and Calais in the east. Major commercial and industrial cities such as Biddeford-Saco, Portland, Lewiston-Auburn, Augusta, Waterville, and Bangor are represented as well as shipbuilding centers such as Bath and Thomaston.

More than half of Stoner's Maine views bear the signature "A. Ruger" or the initials "A R," indicating the work of one of the most prolific view artists of the period. Born in Prussia in 1829, Albert Ruger began to travel as a view artist in 1866. By his death in 1899, Ruger had drawn views in most states in the eastern half of the country. His Maine work dates between 1877 and 1879. Other Maine prints by Stoner were based on drawings by Thaddeus M. Fowler, Augustus Koch, and Joseph Warner.

During the ten years between 1888 and 1898, George E. Norris of Brockton, Massachusetts, drew and published more than thirty bird's eye views of Maine communities. A decade before, Joseph Stoner had employed artists whose drawings served as the basis for lithographs with a linear appearance. By the late 1880s a new photogravure process enabled George Norris to directly reproduce his own drawings, resulting in prints of a more pictorial quality. Norris used the Burleigh Lithography Company of Troy, New York, to produce most of his views. With the exception of Waterville, Fairfield, and Houlton, Norris drew communities not visited by Stoner's artists. His work covered all parts of the state, including such smaller industrial towns as Hartland, Island Falls, Monson, and the island of Vinalhaven. Dating from 1898, his last Maine bird's eye view was made to promote a coastal real estate development on Littlejohn's and Cousin's Islands in Casco Bay.

George Norris was born in Wareham, Massachusetts, in 1855. His name first appears on views in conjunction with other view artists, including Albert F. Poole and Henry Wellege. By the late 1880s, he had settled in Brockton, Massachusetts, and began to travel in New England, drawing views of Maine, Massachusetts, and Vermont communities. His bird's eye view business ended in the late 1890s when he became a hotel manager in Brockton.

How bird's eye views were made is an intriguing question. In Maine, the nearly three dozen town and city wall maps published between 1850 and 1880 may have been sources for street patterns and building locations, along with the fifteen county wall maps and eleven county atlases of the period. Artists walked each street in a town, recording buildings and other prominent features. They then transferred their sketches to a map of the town streets that had been drawn to perspective, but not necessarily to scale. Modifications involving the compression of distance may have been made to fit the image to a common rectangular format that varied in size according to the community.

An original drawing for the Stoner view of Wiscasset gives some indication of Albert Ruger's working technique. Owned by the Wiscasset Public Library, the drawing is dated 1877, and the business references are not in numerical order. Before printing, the lithographer changed the date to 1878 and reordered the references. Notes that appear on the reverse of the drawing specify the changes that Ruger asked the lithographer to make as he transferred the image from paper to stone. A comparison of the drawing and the

lithograph shows that the lithographer followed Ruger's instructions. The topography in the lithograph has more contours, pine woods dot the hillsides, and the draw of the bridge has been changed. In contrast, George E. Norris's 1896 print of Blue Hill was an exact photogravure reproduction of his original India ink rendering, now at the Blue Hill Public Library.

In two instances, Kennebunk and Old Orchard Beach, the original pen and ink drawing of the town was photographed, and mounted photographs were produced instead of lithographs. While no lithographic copies of the 1877 bird's eye views of Kennebunk and Old Orchard Beach have been located, there are photographic copies of the drawings by J.H. Lamson, a Portland photographer. The Kennebunk photograph reproduces the bird's eye view format of a printed title, date, and key to principal buildings, while the Old Orchard Beach view is a smaller cabinet card with only a printed title to identify its location. In both cases, the photographer's name appears as part of the caption.

The marketing of bird's eye views was similar to the selling of pre-Civil War town and city lithographs. An artist would display a drawing in a public location and solicit a specified number of subscriptions, often with the promotional assistance of a local newspaper. Subscription numbers varied according to the size of the community. Joseph Stoner required three hundred subscribers for Portland in 1876, one hundred and twenty-five for Waterville in 1878, and eighty for Thomaston in 1878. The price of views ranged from one to three dollars per copy. Once the subscription goal was met, the drawing was transformed into prints that were distributed to the purchasers.

View companies also obtained subscriptions from businesses. Several bird's eye views published by Stoner and Norris have a listing below the image, keyed to various buildings in the print, including commercial establishments and industries. Local businessmen probably paid for such recognition. Often artists inserted vignettes depicting individual businesses and buildings of historic and civic interest. Albert F. Poole's 1880 print of Bar Harbor includes five inset views of summer hotels. The L.E. McAnn view of Calais and St. Stephen in 1889 features forty-one vignettes, many of them advertising local merchants. In the case of Red Beach in Washington County, the 1889 bird's eye view focuses on the village's industries, plaster mills, a granite quarry, and granite polishing works.

As land companies formed to develop coastal summer colonies, bird's eye views were frequently used to promote these enterprises. In 1887 the Bangor lithographer Frank K. Smith was commissioned by the Mount Desert and Penobscot Bay Real Estate Company to produce a view of a proposed resort on Islesboro. The same year Smith made a similar print to advertise the Frenchman's Bay and Mount Desert Land and Water Company's vision of Sorrento. As previously mentioned, George E. Norris made a view of Little John's and Cousin's Island for the Atlantic Improvement Company in 1898.

In 1981, the Farnsworth Art Museum in Rockland, Maine, organized the exhibition “Through a Bird’s Eye: Nineteenth Century Views of Maine” to call attention to these fascinating prints. For the catalogue essay, curator Christine B. Podmaniczky described the contributions of artists such as George Norris and Albert Ruger and provided a preliminary list of known bird’s eye views of communities in Maine. Since then, many other views have been discovered. Maine’s Bicentennial year (2020) offers the perfect opportunity to locate, reexamine, and share the more than ninety bird’s eye views of Maine towns and cities produced in the post-Civil War period. Originally made to celebrate economic growth stemming from the Industrial Revolution, these lithographs are invaluable snapshots in time of built environments across the state. The level of detail they contain about street patterns, buildings, and natural features is a rich source of information for those interested in local history, architectural history, and urban development. Moreover, these views are marvels of Victorian artistry and printmaking that provide a significant contribution to our understanding of Maine’s past.