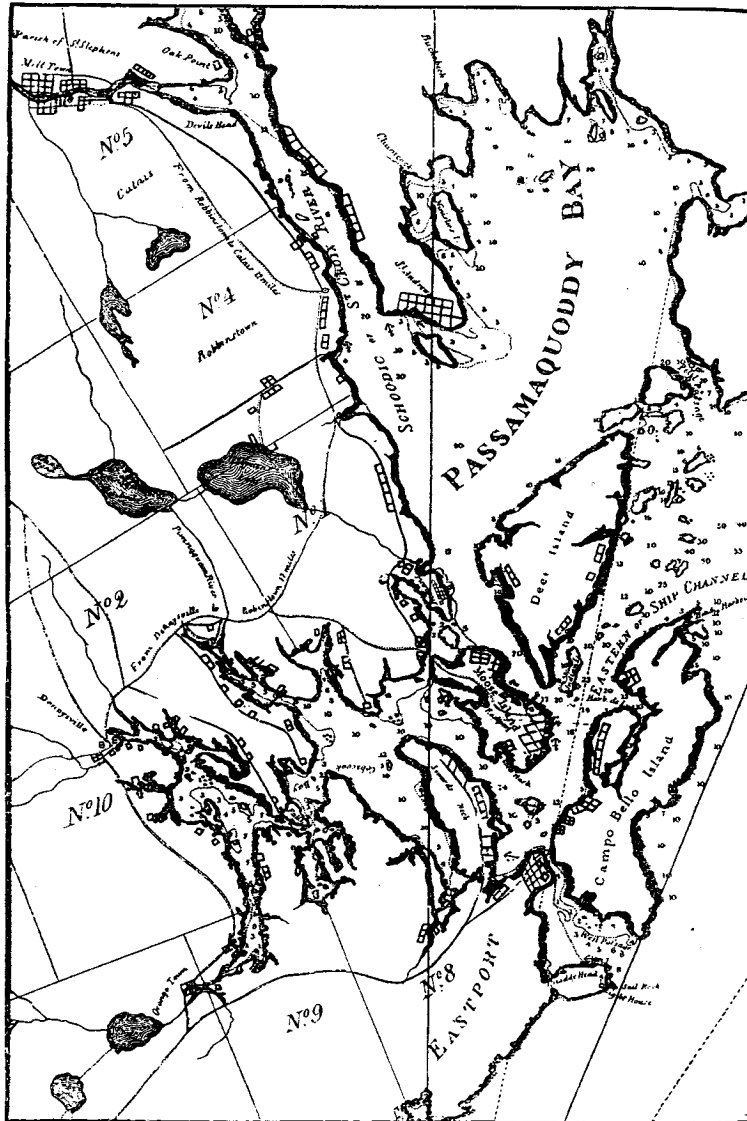


CENTER AND PERIPHERIES: LOCATING MAINE'S HISTORY

By ALAN TAYLOR

*What is the place of Maine history? Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Alan Taylor uses the misfortunes of George Ulmer, commander of militia volunteers in Eastport during the War of 1812, to argue that historians should refocus their view of the past by paying attention to places traditionally deemed "marginal" or "peripheral" to the larger story of American history. Professor Taylor points out that, as a borderland, Maine has long been an international crossroads—an area of dense cultural and economic interaction—and, therefore, should be at the center of our quest for understanding past experience. A professor of history at the University of California, Davis, Alan Taylor is the author of *Liberty Men and Great Proprietors: The Revolutionary Settlement on the Maine Frontier, 1760–1820* and *William Cooper's Town: Power and Persuasion on the Frontier of the Early American Republic*.*



This 1810 map shows the location of Eastport, on Moose Island, a center for illicit cross-border trade during the early nineteenth century. "A Map and Chart of the Bays . . . in Passamaquoddy" by Benjamin R. Jones, 1810. From William Henry Kilby, *Eastport and Passamaquoddy* (Eastport, Me.: Edward E. Shead and Co., 1888).
Courtesy Maine Historical Society.

DURING the War of 1812, George Ulmer commanded the American forces on Passamaquoddy Bay, where he utterly failed to stem the swelling flow of commerce across the border to Canada. His tragicomic experiences help to address the question: how do we locate Maine's history? Should we persist in telling Maine's history as a part of the national narrative of the United States or should we shift to an international context, that places Maine in the middle of a nexus of cultural and economic exchanges, equally Canadian as well as American? It was George Ulmer's tragedy that he believed that he could enforce a hard and fixed boundary, isolating Maine from Canada and, thereby, placing Maine at the end of the line, defined by the United States. I will argue that, as historians of Maine, we should not repeat his mistake.

Late in 1812 Ulmer took command of the most godforsaken post on the American border with British-held Canada: Eastport, which lay at the eastern edge of the District of Maine, then part of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts (and the United States of America). In June of 1812 the American Congress and President had declared war on Great Britain. Their strategy was to invade Canada via the Great Lakes and Lake Champlain. The American command planned no offensive opera-

tions on the northeastern frontier because of British naval supremacy in the Bay of Fundy. That supremacy put it in the power of British forces to seize Eastport, a lightly fortified island town, virtually at will. As a result, the American command was willing to invest in Eastport's defense only those men and resources which it was prepared ultimately to sacrifice. They included George Ulmer.¹

He had formerly prospered as a land agent and speculator, as a sawmill owner, merchant, toll bridge operator, and shipbuilder at Ducktrap River in Lincolnville. By 1798 he became that town's richest man. During the next decade, his wealth, ambition, and ability purchased political power as a state senator, county sheriff, and general in command of the Hancock County militia. But both his wealth and his power crumbled, beginning in 1807 when spring and December floods ravaged his mills, toll bridge, and shipyard. Worse still, in December of 1807, Thomas Jefferson's administration announced an embargo, freezing American shipping in port, in a bid to bring economic pressure on Great Britain. Instead, the embargo brought economic ruin to New England's merchants and shipbuilders—including George Ulmer. The unpopular embargo also revived the opposition Federalist party to the political detriment of Ulmer, who had cast his lot with the Jeffersonians. In April 1812 Massachusetts's voters returned the Federalists to state power. Anticipating the imminent embarrassment of discharge from his appointive positions and an investigation into his abuse of the sheriff's office, Ulmer resigned as county sheriff and militia major general. By July of 1812 he was financially desperate, and he plaintively wrote to his political mentor, William King of Bath: "I am now really under the necessity of going into the army or navy to keep out of prison [for debt] or some thing worse." Ulmer sought to recoup his fortunes by securing a field officer's commission from the national government, in reward for his past political services. King lobbied President James Madison, who in the fall bestowed a mixed blessing upon Ulmer: a commission as Colonel of volunteers entrusted with the command at Eastport, the least desirable post on the entire border.²

Although Eastport was ultimately a forlorn hope, the United States needed some military presence there to try to stem the swelling flow of illegal commerce back-and-forth across the border: a commerce of great benefit to the provision-short inhabitants and British soldiers of the Maritime Province. Unable to trade legally and directly with Great Britain and her colonies, many American merchants shipped thousands of barrels of flour and pork from the middle Atlantic states to Eastport.

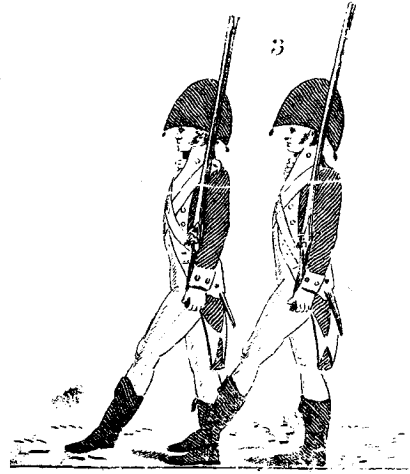
Meanwhile, their British counterparts forwarded their textiles and hardware across the Atlantic to St. Andrews, New Brunswick, which adjoined Eastport to the northeast. Almost every night a local flotilla of open boats rowed both ways across the passage to exchange their small cargos. The trade benefited the British far beyond the Maritime Provinces. From New Brunswick those barrels of smuggled pork and flour were reexported in British vessels to feed British sailors and soldiers in Canada, the West Indies, and the Iberian Peninsula. And continued access to the American market through Eastport kept up the profits and employment in Great Britain's factories. Consequently, Eastport's illicit commerce helped sustain the British economy and the British war effort against both Napoleon's France and Madison's America.³

While the war threatened mercantile depression elsewhere in coastal America, it brought a wildcat boom to Eastport. Under the artificial constraints of war, the border town became the forced conduit for a trade that had previously flowed through many more direct routes. Instead of sailing from Boston, New York, or Philadelphia directly to Jamaica, Liverpool, or London, American merchant ships had to proceed down the Atlantic seaboard to Eastport, where they turned to the local boatmen to complete their exchanges with their British counterparts. The war rewarded Eastport's smugglers with artificial opportunities and inflated profits.

Eastport's customs officers winked at the trade. Obligated to live in a community that thrived from smuggling, they had learned to protect themselves from abuse and to pad their incomes with payoffs by colluding in the smuggling trade. The indulgent customs collector, Lemuel Trescott lived to a ripe old age revered as a local pillar of the community, with Eastport's municipal hall and an adjacent town both named for him. In sum, Eastport became the most notorious smuggling port in a nation notorious for smuggling. Despite the war, indeed because of it, Eastporters meant to preserve their friendly and profitable relations with their New Brunswick neighbors. In June of 1812 the inhabitants held a public meeting that unanimously voted to refrain from waging war on their neighbors. Unstated but understood was that they would persist in their amicable, albeit illegal commerce. The locals were not likely to suffer lightly a restraining military force led by an inexperienced commander.⁴

When Ulmer arrived in December of 1812 he found a military nightmare because the Federal government regarded Eastport as a lost cause and because the local people worked to undermine Ulmer's command.

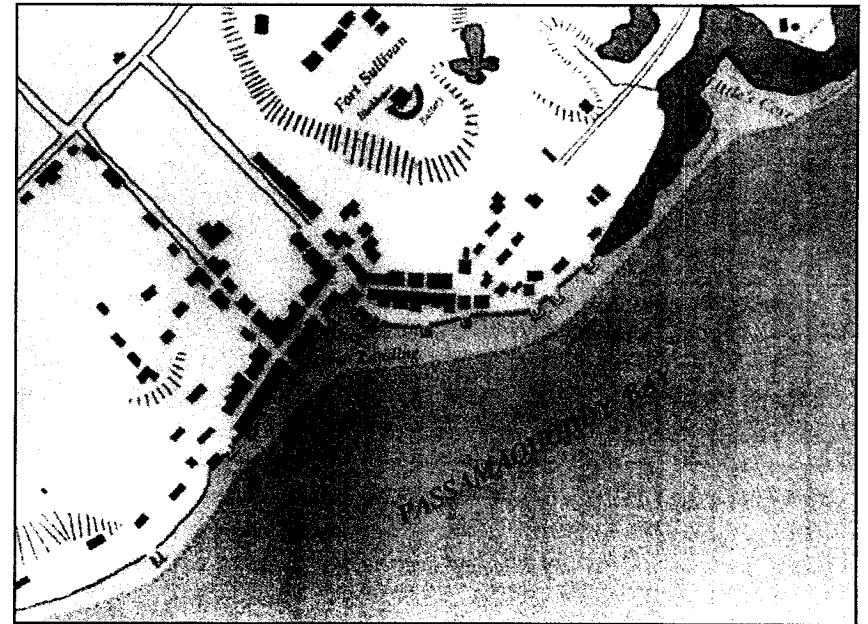
The barracks were two tenements that he deemed “scarcely fit to shelter cattle.” They had been rented from a local landlord, who charged an exorbitant price because he otherwise could have employed the structures in the lucrative business of warehousing smuggled goods. Unsure of how long American troops would be staying in Eastport, the American high command declined building its own barracks there. Ulmer’s volunteers were a sad mix of callow teenagers and old men. He described many as “children that ought to have nurses come with them to take care of them and cannot with prudence be suffered to be out in the night.” An Eastporter characterized the troops as men and young boys who “can do government but little service for one year except eat the government provisions and stay by the fire.” But there were few and only miserable provisions to eat. The local commissary was the leading local smuggler, a merchant named Benjamin Bartlett, who led the thinly-veiled local campaign to drive Ulmer mad. Bartlett provoked the troops to near mutiny by assuring them “that government don’t allow them good provisions—and will not pay for any but bad.” Sometimes no provisions reached the troops because the shippers recognized that there was more money to be made by smuggling the barrels of food across the border to the British. Ulmer fumed, “Thus the troops must suffer, while the enemy are furnished with their provisions by traitors!” There is more than a little tragic irony in a situation where malnourished American soldiers tried to garrison a smuggling port overflowing with provisions bound from their profit-minded countrymen across the lines to the British enemy. Bitter over the neglect from the military commissary and the high command, Ulmer recognized that his superiors regarded his command as a makeshift guard that sooner or later would fall into British hands. In March of 1813 he ruefully assured his commanders not to worry about



The idealized militiamen illustrating Isaac Maltby's *Elements of War* (Boston: T. B. Wait, 1813) bore almost no resemblance to the ragtag group under George Ulmer's command at Eastport. Courtesy Maine Historical Society.

providing for his regiment: “If we don’t have them, we shall not lose them.”²⁵

The locals proved adept at frustrating Ulmer’s every attempt to suppress their smuggling. In early March of 1813 Ulmer’s men seized a schooner belonging to Benjamin Bartlett and laden with a cargo worth \$40,000. But collector Trescott came to the rescue of his friend Bartlett by interceding to claim the vessel for the custom house. Thereby Trescott prevented Ulmer and the volunteers from receiving any prize money. The intervention also enabled Bartlett to cut his losses by repurchasing the schooner at public auction for a reduced price, while receiving from Trescott the informers’ share of the prize money. In April 1813 the local smugglers fabricated debt suits against Ulmer and the local sheriff promptly arrested the Colonel for debt, packing him off to the Washington County jail in distant Machias. From behind bars he wrote, “I hate to fight Americans, [but] we have no other real enemies on this frontier.” In his absence, discipline dissolved among the leaderless volunteers, while the smugglers had a free hand in their trade. Released a month later, Ulmer returned to find that Eastport remained “filled with speculators,



Map of Eastport showing the location of the garrison (later named Fort Sullivan) overlooking the town. Map by Joshua M. Smith.

spies, and smugglers.” Unlike the more adept and flexible Lemuel Trescott, the Colonel did not recognize that he had been cast in a farce that required collusion rather than patriotism.⁶

The accumulated humiliations and frustrations drove the Colonel to distraction. He began to drink heavily and to act erratically. He lost control of his men. Disregarding Ulmer’s direct orders, the men began wildly to fire their muskets into the air to celebrate the Fourth of July. Enraged, the Colonel stormed onto the parade ground and ordered his shocked officers to point a loaded cannon at the celebrants. As all fell momentarily silent, Ulmer renewed his orders and threatened to fire the cannon if another shot was fired. Calling the Colonel’s bluff, the men resumed their firing into the air. Furious at his impotence, Ulmer stormed off the parade ground.⁷

Led by Captain Sherman Leland, his subordinate officers secretly wrote to the district commander, seeking Ulmer’s removal. They asserted, “He drinks so hard and there is such wildness and inconsistency in his orders and conduct that he has become perfectly contemptible in the sight of his troops, and the consequence is insubordination and all the train of evils which naturally follow.” In August of 1813 the district commander dispatched an aide to Eastport. After a hasty investigation, the aide exercised his authority to relieve Ulmer of command and to place him under house arrest. He remained in Eastport under arrest until December 17, 1813, when he was summarily discharged from the service. He demanded and belatedly got a military court of inquiry, held at Portland on May 30, 1814, which cleared him of any criminality but declined to restore his commission.⁸

It was Ulmer’s tragedy that he mistook for fact the fiction of a rigid national boundary between the United States and British Canada. He tried to make hard and fast a demarcation between neighboring and similar peoples who preferred to persist in traveling and trading in utter disregard to the supposed boundary. Far from separating the inhabitants along that border line, the war accelerated the exchange of commerce, drawing St. Andrews and Eastport—Maine and New Brunswick—more intimately together.⁹

In theory, borders distinguish and separate adjoining nations, rendering borderland neighbors into strangers. They are told by laws, signs, border guards, and customs offices that despite their physical proximity and their common interests, they should be economically and politically different. But nations are, in the phrase of Benedict Anderson, fundamentally “invented communities.” Those constructions are most forced

and artificial along the margins where the supposed borders invite, rather than deter, the exchange of peoples, goods, and identities. This was especially so in the early nineteenth century in North America, when and where the federal union was so weak and the British empire’s presence was so dispersed.¹⁰

In 1812 the Canadian-American border was a relatively new and jury-rigged affair. After 1763 and until the American Revolution, Canada and the thirteen Atlantic seaboard colonies had belonged within a common British empire. At the end of the American Revolutionary War, the peace treaty of 1783 divided the empire by establishing an artificial border between the new American republic and the British province of Canada. Geography did not dictate a “natural” boundary between the United States and Canada. The border’s principal geographical features—the Great Lakes—functioned as ready avenues of trade and migration rather than as barriers. During an era when goods and bodies moved mostly by water, the peoples living on the different shores of the Great Lakes and along the Bay of Fundy interacted more easily and frequently with one another than with their own hinterland countrymen. The people of American Eastport had more frequent contact and closer ties with their neighbors in British St. Andrews than they did with their fellow Americans in Bangor or Augusta (to say nothing of Pittsburgh or Cincinnati).¹¹

The eastern boundary had proved especially elusive because there was no certain identity to the St. Croix river that the negotiators of 1783 had declared to demarcate the United States from Canada. The state of Massachusetts and the United States meant to push that border eastward by declaring the Magaguadavic River to be the true River St. Croix. More plausibly, the British argued that the more western and substantial Schoodic river was the St. Croix as named by the French explorers Champlain and de Monts in 1604, when they had wintered on an island near its mouth. In 1797 a border commission jointly established by the Americans and the British ruled in favor of the latter, after the St. Andrews merchant Robert Pagan practiced historical archaeology to find the ruins of Champlain’s encampment at the mouth of the Schoodic. This ruling retained St. Andrews and the larger Passamaquoddy Islands—Deer, Campobello, and Grand Manan—for the British empire but it left Eastport on Moose Island in continued limbo, occupied by the United States but claimed by the British.¹²

Nor did the border have much cultural meaning. With the conspicuous exception of the French habitants in Quebec, the settlers on both

sides of the long Canadian-U.S. border shared a common British culture and similar experiences creating a landscape of recent, raw settlement in a heavy forest. Except when in the French towns and villages, the visitor to either side of the borderland was very hard pressed to distinguish a Canadian from an American settlement, or a Canadian from an American settler. Indeed, most of the new settlers in the Maritime Provinces and in Upper Canada (the region around the northern and western shores of Lake Ontario) were recent emigrants from the United States, forced out by their wartime Loyalism. During the 1780s and 1790s language did not yet afford the United States a monopoly on the adjective "American." Because the Atlantic remained a far more significant conceptual and geographical divide than did the new border, to English-speakers "America" still meant all of North America above Mexico. In newspaper and travelers accounts, Halifax, Saint John, and Montreal were just as "American" as New York, Boston, or Portland. Geographically, economically, and culturally the inhabitants of Eastport and St. Andrews were remarkably alike despite the intervening official border.¹³

The political independence of the United States and the consequent diplomatic partition of North America also contradicted the economic interdependence that had developed between Britain, North America, and the empire's West Indian colonies. Although politically independent, the United States remained economically dependent upon Britain for almost all manufactured goods and upon the plantations in the British West Indies for sugar, molasses, and rum. On the other hand, British Canada imported American foodstuffs, while the West Indies needed the lumber and provisions that the former American colonies had so long and so abundantly provided.¹⁴

During the mid-1780s the British leaders tried to give significance to the northern border by prohibiting the importation of grains, flour, and livestock from the United States. The officials hoped that, in the short run, Canada would become self-sufficient in foodstuffs and that, in the longer run, Canada could replace the American republic as the primary provisioner of the British West Indies. They meant gradually to isolate the United States from the economic benefits of the British empire, by developing Canada into a substitute for the American republic. But it did not work, in part because the people along the border refused to cooperate with the intended economic isolation of the United States from the empire. The continuing smuggling of American produce through Eastport into New Brunswick and on to Nova Scotia and the West Indies prolonged the agricultural underdevelopment of the Maritimes and the dependence of the sugar islands on American suppliers. Until 1807 East-



Eastport customs collector Lemuel Trescott turned a blind eye to smuggling in Passamaquoddy Bay. From *Eastport Sentinel*, April 20, 1892.
Courtesy Maine Historical Society.

port rankled the British because its illicit commerce mostly worked to the empire's disadvantage. But when the United States adopted a system of commercial warfare in 1807 it became in Britain's interest to reverse its policy and instead to encourage the flow of goods through Eastport. The British acted in response to an American reversal in policy with the embargo leading to the first concerted effort to stop the smuggling at Eastport. However, neither the British officials before 1807 nor their American counterparts after 1807 could succeed in making the border effective.¹⁵

The elusive border that so frustrated national and imperial officials in the early nineteenth century, holds a lesson for historians of Maine. Fundamentally, that porous border reveals that Maine has long been much more than the northeastern margin of the United States. Instead of accepting a marginal status within a nation-centered story, we should recognize that Maine has long been an international crossroads. We can avoid the marginalization of Maine history (and of Maine identity) by recognizing that, as a borderland, it is a region that draws people together, rather than one that keeps people apart.

By recognizing that our border places us at an international crossroads, we will join an important, developing historical project to demystify national identities and their metanarratives. To this end, historians of Europe, North America, and Latin America have begun to highlight the artificial, fluid, and porous nature of boundaries between supposed national communities. For example, in *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees*, Peter Sahlin reveals the long, slow, tortuous, and never complete process of cultural separation along the supposedly natural boundary of the Pyrenees between France and Spain. Similarly, recent historians of the American southwest and Mexican north revel in, rather than deny, the deep and enduring intertwining of Hispanic, Anglo, and native peoples and traditions along a border that has never been effectively enforced.¹⁶

If extended to the northeastern border, this new perspective holds great promise for the rethinking of Maine's history. For I would argue that the traditional American nationalist historiography has served us poorly. It thinks of nations as having a center and a set of peripheries; the major decisions and actions occur at the center and the peripheries can only react. In traditional American history, the Boston-to-Washington corridor has been the center of "real history," with events everywhere else rendered peripheral. In this master narrative of the development and expansion of the United States, Maine fares especially poorly as the

most peripheral of the peripheries. It appears as the northeastern end-of-the-line, a quaint but unrepresentative backwater bypassed by the major events and forces of American history.

During the early 1980s as a graduate student interested in writing about Maine, I keenly felt this marginalization. I was at Brandeis University at a time when the new social history was the rage. The most influential works were detailed quantitative studies of particular communities, usually located in eastern Massachusetts. Historians treated Plymouth, Dedham, Andover, and Newburyport as if they were microcosms of the American whole. For my dissertation I wanted to practice the new social history but expand its focus to a regional scale and extend its range northward into Maine. But when I broached this ambition to my faculty advisor he sternly warned me to desist. In a dire tone, he insisted, "If you write a dissertation about Maine you'll never get a job, unless perhaps at some school in Maine." And what sort of alternative topic did he propose that would unlock for me the riches of the academic job market? He had three prospects for me: first, a history of dreaming; second, a history of the chicken in American social life; and third and of course, a community study of some place on Cape Cod. For a time I joked that my dissertation would be a history of dreams about chickens on Cape Cod. As my then advisor saw it, the history of America could only be found at its imagined center—Massachusetts—and not at its imagined peripheries like Maine. But because I had grown up in Maine, I did not find the prospect of life and academic employment there as grim as my advisor did. So I stubbornly persisted in my ambition but quickly switched faculty advisors to a more sympathetic historian. And at conferences I soon found plenty of kindred spirits, especially in western American history, fellow scholars who wanted to study peoples long dismissed as marginal. I was especially pleased when, at a Western History Association conference, Patricia Limerick explained to me that she had created in her imagination an organization known as the International Association for Peripheral Studies and that she would make me a vice-president for the northern hemisphere.

As historians redeem the places and peoples previously dismissed as marginal, as peripheral, we can perceive the truth that every region is in the center of some wider network of human exchange of peoples, goods, and cultures. As the national story becomes more subtle and less demanding of our full attention, we start to perceive a fuller North American history where borders are invitations rather than walls. Liberated from a national story that insists on one representative center, Maine

ceases to be a picturesque but insignificant periphery. Instead, it becomes a key and especially active site for cultural and economic work, at a crossroads between the Maritimes, the United States, Quebec, and a variety of persistent and adaptable native peoples. Certainly from the deep-time perspective of Micmac, Malecite, Passamaquoddy, and Penobscot peoples—who have been here far longer than the United States, the border is new, tenuous, and at odds with their traditions and history of migration and exchange through a region now called Maine and the Maritimes. Properly understood as a meeting place of northeastern cultures and economies, Maine becomes more representative of a North American history reimagined in its diverse fluidity. So reconceived, Maine's experience is more representative of North American history than those artificially homogenous towns of colonial Massachusetts.

NOTES

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2. “General George Ulmer,” *Hancock Gazette*, Jan. 11, 1826; François-Alexandre-Frédéric, duc de La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, *Travels Through the United States of North America . . .* (London, 1799), 1:431, 434, 443; Paul Coffin, “Memorial and Journals of Rev. Paul Coffin, D.D.,” *Maine Historical Society, Collections*, 1st ser., 4 (1859): 325; Jacqueline June Watts, ed., *Lincolntonville Early Days* (Camden, Me., 1976), 1:19–23; Alan Taylor, *Liberty Men and Great Proprietors: The Revolutionary Settlement on the Maine Frontier 1760–1820* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1990), 155–60, 217–18; Alan Taylor, “The Rise and Fall of George Ulmer: Political Entrepreneurship in the Age of Jefferson and Jackson,” *Colby Library Quarterly* 21 (June 1985): 56–60; Ulmer to King, July 28, 1812, William King Papers (WKP hereafter), Maine Historical Society (MeHS hereafter), Portland.
3. “Eastport’s Smuggling Days,” *Lewiston Journal Magazine*, Oct. 6–10, 1906; Moses Greenleaf, *A Statistical View of the District of Maine* (Boston, 1816), 57; Kilby, *Eastport*, 142–51.
4. Davis, *International Community*, 92–99; “Eastport’s Smuggling Days,” *Lewiston Journal Magazine*, Oct. 6–10, 1906.
5. George Ulmer to William King, Dec. 1, 10, 24, and 27, 1812; Jan. 15, Feb. 7, and 12, and Mar. 26, 1813, WKP, MeHS; B. Vance to King, Feb. 16, 1813, WKP, MeHS; Ulmer to John Armstrong, April 16, 1813, Secretary of War, “Letters Received,” Reel 58, National Archives (NA hereafter); Kilby, *Eastport*, 164–65.
6. Kilby, *Eastport*, 161; George Ulmer to William King, Feb. 12, and Mar.

- 19, 1813, WKP, MeHS; William Loney to Thomas G. Thornton, April 10, 1813, Thornton-Cutts Papers, MeHS; Ulmer to John Armstrong, May 29, 1813, Secretary of War, “Letters Received,” Reel 58, NA.
7. Col. Joseph D. Learned to John Armstrong, May 18, 1813, Secretary of War, “Letters Received,” NA; “Results of the George Ulmer Court of Enquiry, July 3, 1814,” Isaac Lane Papers, MeHS.
8. George Ulmer to William King, Feb. 24, and Oct. 27, 1814, WKP, MeHS; Thomas H. Cushing to Isaac Lane, Apr. 15, 1814, and “Results of the George Ulmer Court of Enquiry, July 3, 1814,” Isaac Lane Papers, MeHS.
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10. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York, 1991); Alfred Leroy Burt, *The United States, Great Britain, and British North America from the Revolution to the Establishment of Peace after the War of 1812* (New Haven, 1940); Marcus Lee Hansen and John Bartlett Brebner, *The Mingling of the Canadian and American Peoples* (New Haven, 1940).
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15. MacNutt, *New Brunswick*, 138–39, 147–49.
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