



Picturing Old New England

Image and Memory

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Changing New England: 1865–1945

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This book examines some of the ways New England has been represented during the period between the Civil War and World War II. Those eighty years span the decades in which the modern United States took shape and when New England came to look like “New England.” A wide chasm separates these two historical developments, however. The modernization of American society evokes a vision of cities, factories, and mass culture. It is a tale of unending change, turmoil, divisiveness. A very different set of terms is needed to describe most of the images you will encounter in this book: calendar-perfect villages and rugged seacoast, a place of steadfast tradition, serenity, cohesion.

America in flux, New England at rest—the tension created by the gulf between those two stories is the subject of this book. The rift between the two does not mean that the images of New England described here are false. It does mean that images and realities cannot be easily disentangled. The pictures we hold in our mind’s eye often determine not only what we see but what we do, whether as painters, as tourists, or as citizens. In that way, images can reshape external facts, even the very contours of the landscape.¹ The interaction between images and other kinds of reality has played a powerful role in the history of New England and the nation as well.

New England Transformed

As the Civil War ended in 1865, New England was triumphant. The region’s writers—Emerson, Hawthorne, Longfellow, Lowell, Whittier—were being established as representatives of an American national culture. Its reformers, once dismissed as radical extremists, were now embraced as heroic figures who helped bring about the abolition of slavery. The Republican Party, barely a decade old but now in firm control of the federal government, was driven by New England-based principles of individualism, order, and self-control. Looming behind it all, New England’s industries supplied consumer goods to the nation and the world beyond. For forty years and more, such new mill towns as Lowell and Lawrence, Massachusetts (built along the Merrimack River in 1823 and 1845, respectively, and named for two prominent investor families), had been a tremendous source of regional pride. (New England’s industrial dominance was linked to its cultural flowering. Abolitionist poet James Russell Lowell belonged to the family known for its dominance of the textile industry, and his Harvard colleague Henry Wadsworth Longfellow married into another industrialist clan, the Appletons.) During the 1860s the wartime economy led to an astounding 61.8 percent increase in Massachusetts’s manufacturing output—the single greatest increase that the state had yet seen (or would ever see again).² It seemed as if New England had won it all.

Frances Benjamin Johnston, *Mill Girl* (Shoe Factory, Lynn, Massachusetts), 1895, photograph. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

But New England also emerged from the Civil War a troubled and transformed region, and its difficulties stemmed from the roots of its triumph. The Republican Party was beset by division. Abraham Lincoln, its first president, had fallen to an assassin's bullet. Andrew Johnson, his successor, proved so controversial that he was impeached by the House of Representatives. He was followed by a president who would become mired in scandal and corruption. By the end of Ulysses Grant's first administration in 1873, the party had split into irreconcilable factions. Antislavery allies divided over how far to extend equal rights to the newly freed slaves (and how to win back the loyalty of their former masters).

New England's industrial development gave the very landscape of the region an unfamiliar look. By 1865 New England had become the most highly urbanized region of the United States. Rhode Island was the single most densely populated state, with Massachusetts coming in a strong second. By 1875 more than half the inhabitants of Massachusetts lived in cities. Furthermore, the region was filling up with people of swarthy complexion and strange languages—with more immigrants and more Roman Catholics than the rest of the country. Back in the 1830s and 1840s industrialization seemed to go hand in hand with moral and social improvement. It had been possible then to believe that the new factories would bring prosperity without also bringing ethnic and class divisions, unskilled and ill-paid foreign workers, or strikes, lockouts, and violence. But now, after 1865, such hopeful prospects were clouded, and it seemed that New England would not avoid the class struggles that had long beset industrial Europe.

Over the next fifty years, in the half-century ending with the outbreak of World War I, these trends intensified and expanded into new parts of the region. In 1890 Fall River, Massachusetts, now the world's largest producer of printed textiles, surpassed Lowell as the American city with the greatest number of industrial corporations. Far to the north of the industrial centers of southeastern Massachusetts, the Amoskeag Manufacturing Company's massive textile mills dominated the northern Merrimack River and the city of Manchester, New Hampshire. Maine's industries started late, but they grew to giant proportions. By 1871 Lewiston, Maine, contained seventeen large factories, and eighty percent of its population came from French Canada. Maine's greatest period of industrialization was still to come, between 1880 and 1910, when great conglomerates built hydroelectric plants on the state's rivers. The new kilowattage enabled these corporations to construct the paper mills that would dominate the state's economy for many decades. One of these corporations, the Great Northern Paper Company, created the new city of Millinocket almost overnight in 1900, complete with hydroelectric plant, paper factory, and tenement housing for thousands of French Canadian workers.³

Prosperous New Englanders were inclined to celebrate these regional triumphs, to congratulate themselves on the ingenuity and character that had produced such amazing technological and economic progress. But dark clouds loomed on the horizon. Although New England's industries were thriving in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, a sharp-eyed observer could have noted that the industries of other regions were expanding even more rapidly. New England was no longer in the economic vanguard.

More important, many native-born middle- and upper-class New Englanders were not entirely happy with the byproducts of industrialization. For some, the great cities filled with immigrants were more disturbing than gratifying. These New Englanders were prompted to ask serious questions: What if the hard work and sobriety of their New England ancestors had inadvertently created a place where individual actions were lost in the industrial grind, where the search for money replaced honesty and integrity, and where (as they saw it) slovenly Italians and shiftless French Canadians replaced hard-working Yankees?

Worse still, the transformation of the region was not confined to the tenements and factories of the new industrial centers. What had meant growth for New England's cities meant crisis for its countryside. Actually, for decades before 1865 New England farms had been competing with new lands opening to the west, and New England farmers had been losing the fight. After the Civil War rural people found it more difficult to keep their children at home on the farm. Between 1860 and 1910 the population of America's largest cities (those with a population of more than one hundred thousand) grew by almost seven hundred percent. Much of that growth came from the countryside. The population of most small towns hit its peak in 1830, declining in many places for the next eighty years. The frontiers of Maine continued to gain population (the vast Aroostook area did not open as a potato-growing region until the 1890s), but most small towns in northern New England lost ground. For example, between 1850 and 1900, about forty percent of all those born in Vermont moved out—in each decade.

The forces pulling people away from the hinterlands dramatically transformed the rural economy. In the 1850s few New England villages had been without their woolen mills, their furniture factories, or their broom-making establishments. Local artisans and manufacturers had served and employed the farm families of New England. Now cheaper goods from the growing industrial centers (the same inexpensive cotton prints and cheap shoes that were making manufacturing centers out of New Bedford and Lynn, Massachusetts) replaced locally made goods, and young men and women followed their jobs to the cities. Small-town New England economies were significantly less diverse in 1900 than they had been half a century earlier.⁴

The cities and villages of coastal New England suffered a similar long, slow decline. In some places the great seafaring enterprises that had made New England famous in the eighteenth century had begun to suffer even before the Civil War. Nantucket's dominance of the international whaling industry was fading even before the market for whale oil was threatened by the discovery in 1852 that kerosene could be used for lighting. The island's harbor was too small for the increasingly large ships employed in the whaling trade, so that Nantucket was losing out to its nearest competitor, New Bedford. Moreover, through the end of the nineteenth century whaling was becoming less and less profitable because of a dramatic decline in the population of sperm whales, which made it necessary to launch ever lengthier and wider-ranging expeditions.

A similar fate overtook the deep-sea fishing industry that had shaped so many coastal communities. At the beginning of the Civil War more deep-sea fish were caught off the coast of Maine than anywhere else in the nation. Within a generation, the state's share of the industry had declined to a point of insignificance. Hit hard by Civil War disruptions and price increases, the deep-sea fishery faced even more difficulties in the years afterward, when technological innovation and financial pressures pushed the industry toward increased centralization. By 1880 more than half of all fish caught by New Englanders was shipped from Boston. By then, competition from the fisheries of the American West and the Gulf states also worked against New England fishing. More important, salted cod, mackerel, and herring—long the staples of the poor—could not compete with fresh meat, newly inexpensive and shipped by rail from the West. As deep-sea fishing declined and became centralized, working conditions worsened dramatically. By the end of the century eighty percent of Maine fishers worked not in the high-risk, high-profit, deep-sea enterprises but in small-scale coastal industries, fishing for sardines caught near shore and, increasingly, trapping lobsters, an industry supported by the three hundred thousand tourists who came through Maine in 1900. In Massachusetts only three towns still relied chiefly on fishing for their livelihoods at the end of the century: Provincetown and Chatham, both on Cape Cod, and Gloucester, on Cape Ann.

The Uses of Decline

In the eyes of some observers, rural New England's decline was not completely negative. In fact, it seemed like an answer to their prayers. Before the Civil War articulate New Englanders had emphasized the countryside's progressive characteristics—the bustling commerce of the small towns, the high literacy rates, the embrace of progressive reforms, even the presence of rural industry. These characteristics set small-town New England far above rural culture elsewhere in the nation (and especially the South). To be sure, some parts of the antebellum countryside, especially in its furthest reaches, remained culturally backward, and New Englanders reacted with embarrassment or even hostility to the fact. Now, in the decades following the Civil War, those outlying places began to seem attractive and the very “backwardness” of the countryside became its most valued attribute.

Writers heralded this change. Some of New England's most prominent authors conspicuously disengaged themselves from the problems of social reform, retreating with astonishing speed into the quiet pleasures of country life. The Quaker poet John Greenleaf Whittier had won fame in the antebellum decades for his impassioned antislavery verse. By 1866, one year after the end of the war, Whittier achieved even greater fame with a very different kind of poem, *Snow-Bound*, an elegiac evocation of childhood and family life in the New England countryside. An even more striking example is found in the career of New England's most celebrated writer, Harriet Beecher Stowe. Stowe had made her name as the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), the most influential and widely read antislavery work ever written. By 1860 she had abandoned the theme of political reform and begun to produce homespun novels about life in old-time rural New England, novels whose very titles evoked nostalgia: *The Minister's Wooing* (1859); *Old Town Folks* (1869); *The Pearl of Orr's Island: A Story of the Coast of Maine* (1862).

By the 1880s a full-scale movement of New England “local-color” literature had been fashioned, largely by women writers, including Rose Terry Cooke, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps Ward, Mary Wilkins Freeman, and Sarah Orne Jewett. In their writing, rural New England took on a new texture. The bustling small towns boasted of by antebellum writers were replaced by villages, where, as Jewett wrote, “all the clocks and all the people with them, had stopped years ago.”⁵ In local-color stories New England sometimes encountered modernity—but not often and not easily. Now New England villages were increasingly portrayed as a national repository of everything industrial society was leaving behind—pastoral scenery, quaint Yankee customs, rural simplicity. This literary transformation required some fictional sleight of hand. As Jewett wrote her beautifully turned stories about rural isolation for the *Atlantic Monthly*, she could hear the factory bells calling women to work at the Portsmouth Manufacturing Company down the street. But mills and workers rarely appeared in her stories.

Outside of books, in the actual landscape, promoters of tourism fashioned a self-consciously antiquated New England as an antidote to modernization. Entrepreneurs in many farm towns and seaports saw an opportunity to put their dilapidated buildings and grass-grown streets to work as waves of tourists set out in search of a nostalgic New England experience. Old, out-of-the-way places passed by in the surge of industrialization began to look attractive. For people fatigued and stressed by the rush of business, the ghostly quiet of rural backwaters like Deerfield, Massachusetts, now felt serene. For those who feared the corrupting influence of luxury and ease produced by industrial society, there was reassurance to be found in the hardy fisherfolk who lived tucked away in coastal villages.

Signs of Nantucket's commercial failure—its rotting wharves and empty factories—were recast for tourists as symbols of a Yankee heritage and the island's historic virtues. Even the lost whaling trade itself became a source of interest, as pro-

motors celebrated the last representatives of a sturdy race whose bravery and vigor had once been known around the globe—the “boldest and most enterprising mariners that ever furrowed the seas.”⁶ Quaint old seafaring men, retired from their dangerous and exciting work, provided a unique attraction to tourists, who hoped to be regaled by harrowing tales of hardship and courage.

Nantucket promoters claimed to offer an environment reassuring in another way. For people frightened by unfamiliar faces and languages, New England’s backwaters now seemed ethnically “pure”—populated by people who were coming to be called “Anglo-Saxons.” As an Old Colony Railroad pamphlet put it, “Nantucket’s population [was] not increased, nor has it ever been, by . . . discordant elements from varying climes and nationalities.”⁷ This statement was patently untrue: Native American, African-American, and Portuguese sailors had long worked on Nantucket’s whaling ships since the days of their glory. The claim that Nantucket was ethnically “pure” was necessary, however, if the people of Nantucket were to be linked with New England’s ancestral past.

Other New England communities were shaped by vacationers with a somewhat different approach to the past. The summer communities near the city of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, for example—York, Ogunquit, and Kittery in Maine, the Isles of Shoals and New Castle in New Hampshire—attracted visitors who yearned for a return not to primitive simplicity but to the grace and elegance of “colonial” days. For these wealthy summer people, the “colonial” architecture of the old seaport towns symbolized a return to a world where the order, stability, and hierarchy they associated with the past still held sway—a place where their own ancestors had held unchallenged authority and where working people had been deferential and contented. “Colonial” vacationers worked hard to recapture the power of that vision, by restoring old houses, digging for treasures in antiquarian libraries and antique stores, and founding historical societies.

They also photographed, sketched, and painted re-created colonial landscapes. Many summer people were not simply vacationers. They were also professional artists, working in various genres and styles. Arthur Little included several York houses in his groundbreaking collection of architectural drawings, *Early New England Interiors* (1878). Edmund C. Tarbell, cochair of the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, bought a summer home in New Castle and transformed it by adding remnants of eighteenth-century buildings scavenged from nearby towns. He used that setting for many of his paintings.

For visual artists as well as for tourists, isolated rural communities and quiet, deserted seaports offered new opportunities. By the turn of the twentieth century artists’ colonies closely linked with vacation communities thrived in many parts of New England. One of the oldest was in the White Mountains, where North Conway’s splendid views of Mount Washington had attracted artists since the 1840s. Later colonies sprang up in Dublin and Cornish, New Hampshire; Old Lyme, Connecticut; Gloucester; and perhaps the best-known artists’ haven, Provincetown, Massachusetts. Such places had several things in common. They were rural, they were isolated, and they were in obvious decline—fishing shacks no longer in use, wharves rotting, cemeteries grown up to weeds.

In the Maine village of Ogunquit, not far from Jewett’s home in South Berwick, Charles Woodbury, Boston painter and art teacher, established a summer art school in 1898. A few years later in the same village, Hamilton Easter Field opened another school, this one oriented more toward New York and modernism. In the same neighborhood Childe Hassam painted at the Isles of Shoals (just off the coast); and a few miles to the south, Russell Cheney worked in Kittery Point, as did Tarbell in New Castle.

Painters in Ogunquit were attracted to the rugged landscape and to the marks

left by history on that landscape. (They also liked the inexpensive but picturesque fishing shacks they could use for studios.) Painters of a more modernist bent were particularly attracted by the objects created by old-time farmers and fishers. At his Ogunquit school Field displayed a collection of local folk art as evidence of an unbroken link between contemporary art and the indigenous traditions of the past. In nearby York, photographer Emma Coleman (*see* Figs. 9, 16) made a similar connection between her own work and that of local crafts people by photographing staged scenes of individuals engaged in traditional tasks.⁸

Escape into the world of historical reenactment was not enough for many old-stock New Englanders. The writer Thomas Bailey Aldrich was another literary figure associated with the cluster of summer resorts around Portsmouth. He achieved fame with *The Story of a Bad Boy* (1870), a charming memoir about his youth, when the “ghost of the old dead West India trade” dominated the landscape and no new businesses and few new people disturbed the peace of the city. Aldrich was not content merely to write elegies mourning the loss of that quiet and stable New England. He also produced an openly political poem, “Unguarded Gates” (1895), employing the classic elegance of a sonnet to argue for legislation to stem the flow of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. Aldrich preferred the Portsmouth of his childhood, where immigrants were few and old Yankee characters dominated the landscape. “Wide open and unguarded stand our gates,” began his poem, “and through them presses a wild motley throng.” Aldrich was a proponent of newly emerging racial theories that divided humanity among some two dozen “races” of Slavs, Celts, Hebrews, Teutons, with the “Anglo-Saxon” race at the pinnacle. Aldrich’s sonnet warned of the gathering power of darker races incapable of cherishing freedom, bringing with them “unknown gods and rites,” “strange tongues,” and “tiger passions.” The poem concluded with a warning against “the thronging Goth and Vandal” who had once “trampled Rome”: “Liberty, white goddess, is it wise / to leave the gates unguarded?”

The Empire Strikes Back

Aldrich was not satisfied with simply writing poems. He also joined the Immigration Restriction League, founded at Harvard in 1894, and worked with its members to close those gates of immigration permanently. League rosters include many venerable names of New England’s most powerful families—Abbott Lawrence Lowell, president of Harvard; Henry Lee Higginson, a founder of the Boston Symphony Orchestra; Henry Cabot Lodge, brahmin politician. Not all old-stock New Englanders shared Aldrich’s nativist politics, however. Others of similar background—native-born Yankees who deplored the changes that had come over New England—responded quite differently to the region’s transformation. Henry Lee Higginson’s own cousin, Thomas Wentworth Higginson (*see* Fig. 60), held to the egalitarian ideas that had shaped his earlier years as a radical abolitionist, suffragist, and colonel of the first black regiment in the Union army. A Unitarian minister, this Higginson spoke out against immigration restriction and racial and religious discrimination. Similarly, Caroline Emmerton of Salem and her architect, Joseph Everett Chandler, used their discomfort with the changes overtaking New England to create a fusion of old and new values. They restored the House of the Seven Gables (setting of the Hawthorne novel) for use as a settlement house, where Emmerton taught the children of Salem’s Italian immigrants (*see* Fig. 88).

In Aldrich’s generation, too, a new crop of experts diagnosed the problems of the countryside. By the end of the nineteenth century the perilous state of rural New England had been noticed far outside the region, in the halls of academia and among muckraking journalists. Popular magazines like *Harper’s* and *Atlantic Monthly*—and progressive journals like *The Nation*—filled their pages with such ar-

ticles as "Broken Shadows on the New England Farm" and "Is New England Decadent?" (A contributor to the *Atlantic Monthly* accused one western Massachusetts town of harboring tribes of incestuous half-wits, "pests and delinquents and dependents and defectives and degenerates.")¹⁰ Literary images of decline emerged in the same local-color writing that was shaping a nostalgic vision of New England. Stowe's loving depictions of village society were more and more replaced by visions of a New England filled with hopelessness and grinding poverty. For sheer grimness, perhaps no description of New England has ever matched Edith Wharton's novella *Ethan Frome* (1911).

Progressive reformers tackled rural problems by organizing the Country Life Movement. Entirely new fields of academic expertise arose to confront the problems of the countryside. Rural sociologists studied the structure of farm families, and agricultural extension agents promoted new crops and fertilizers. Country Life leaders like Massachusetts Agricultural College's Kenyon Butterfield and Cornell's Liberty Hyde Bailey promoted a complex agenda—consolidate rural schools and churches to promote greater efficiency, teach agricultural and home economics courses, advise farmers on labor-saving machinery and cost-accounting methods—all in an effort to remove the last vestiges of self-sufficiency and to promote participation in the marketplace: husbands as producers, wives and children as consumers.

Such experts found nothing appealing in the backwardness of rural culture. The "best and the brightest" were leaving the countryside because existence there lacked the challenge and zest of modern life in the city. Country life also lacked the competitive Darwinian "winnowing forces" that encouraged progress. To promote those forces, Country Life experts worked to make farms as efficient as factories. To be sure, such efficiency would require fewer rural workers and would thus drive thousands of people off the farms. But many Country Life advocates saw this process as both inevitable and desirable. As University of Illinois agricultural scientist Eugene Davenport argued, "Many individuals will be crowded out as agriculture exacts more knowledge and skill. . . . Progress is not in the interest of the individual, and it cannot stop because of individuals."¹¹

By the 1910s many rural (and urban) reformers were beginning to think that these competitive processes were not enough to weed out the unfit. Maybe the magazines had been right when they talked about "degenerates" and congenital deformities. Many experts came to think that intractable social problems were fundamentally genetic rather than economic. The 1920s witnessed a dramatic rise in the popularity among progressive reformers and scientists as well as old-guard reactionaries of what would today be called genetic engineering. In 1925, for example, University of Vermont Professor Henry Perkins launched a Eugenics Survey to identify the chief causes of "defect, dependence, and degeneracy" in Vermont. (Perkins, a biologist, had become convinced that something was terribly wrong with rural life when he learned that the draft board during World War I had found that Vermont had the highest percentage of any state of mental and physical "defectives.") The Eugenics Survey called for greater regulation of marriage, an increase in state care for the "feeble-minded," and a statewide law permitting sterilization of the "socially inadequate." Such a law was passed in 1931.¹²

These scientific programs, designed to improve the population through breeding, existed alongside a resurgence of older styles of racial politics. The infamous trial of Italian immigrants Nicola Sacco and Bartholomeo Vanzetti began in Dedham, Massachusetts, in 1921. Their execution in 1927, on the basis of flimsy evidence, reflected great hostility toward immigrants and radicals of all kinds. On a national level, the Anti-Immigration League won its final victory. In 1924 it succeeded in influencing Congress to cut the massive flow of European immigrants down to a trickle. In that same year the Ku Klux Klan claimed fifty thousand members in Maine.

The Rise of Labor

By 1920 more than two-thirds of the Massachusetts population consisted of first- or second-generation immigrants. Control by old-stock Yankees over the economy and politics of New England was in jeopardy. The stage was set for a series of battles between Yankees and second-generation immigrants—at the factory gates, in the voting booths, and in the culture wars.

Workers had been organizing since the mid-nineteenth century, but their position was strengthened with the establishment of the United Textile Workers in 1901. The power of the growing labor movement was tested in the very heart of the old elite Yankee dream of a painless Industrial Revolution—in Lawrence, Massachusetts, where by 1890 forty-five different languages were spoken. In 1912 Lawrence workers pitted their power against the great textile corporations in a strike that made headlines all over the country. The International Workers of the World, an umbrella union known as the “Wobblies,” struck a brilliant blow with its appeal for an Exodus of Children into supportive communities and out of harm’s way. The victory in Lawrence, although modest (a one-cent an hour raise and recognition of the right to organize), marked a turning point for labor in New England.

Signs of political change were in the wind, too. The Republican Party, symbol of New England’s Civil War victory, had become in the late nineteenth century the advocate of elite control and untrammelled capitalism. Republicans held unchallengeable sway in most of New England through the early twentieth century, but there were hints of a new attitude. In Massachusetts even firmly Republican governments found themselves forced to pass laws protecting public health and recognizing the right of labor to organize as well as mandating a ten-hour workday and limiting the working hours of women and children. In 1928 Republican hegemony in New England began to crumble. Democrat Al Smith received the majority of Massachusetts votes for president that year, inaugurating an occasional but notorious Massachusetts tradition of voting against the presidential tide.

The Long Recession

These victories for Democrats and labor unions were far from decisive. The 1920s saw not only racial backlash but also the collapse of New England’s two most important industries. Textile and shoe production was heavily concentrated in a few places. For example, 82 percent of New Bedford’s workers and 78 percent of those in Fall River worked in textiles; while in Haverhill 84 percent of the work force labored in boot and shoe factories. By the beginning of the twentieth century these industries had already been weakened, but they had been temporarily buoyed by the production demands of World War I. Now, during the 1920s, the bottom fell out. Between 1919 and 1929 Massachusetts lost 154,000 jobs in manufacturing, most in its two biggest industries. New England suddenly found itself “deindustrialized.”

In 1924 the Borden family of Fall River moved its textile mills to Tennessee. In 1933, in a moment of great symbolic power, the Appleton Company, founding giants of New England’s textile might, moved to Alabama. Business leaders who made these decisions could cite the lower cost of doing business in the South, where textile mills would be closer to their sources for cotton. What they rarely pointed out was that production costs were lower in Alabama and Tennessee because those states had no unions and no child-labor laws. Many business leaders had made the decision years earlier not to reinvest their profits into modernizing and maintaining their factories in New England. A few parts of New England actually benefited from this development. In some areas of Maine non-unionized labor was so cheap during the 1920s that Massachusetts shoe companies moved there

instead of to the South. Maine's powerful combination of hydroelectric power and pulp mills continued to grow into the 1920s. But there was worse yet to come: the Great Depression of the 1930s.

The depression hit hard everywhere. The weakened textile and shoe industries were decimated, and the cities dependent on them were devastated. In 1936 the Amoskeag Manufacturing Company, after years of layoffs and declining wages, declared bankruptcy and closed its doors, throwing thousands of people out of work and bringing disaster to the city of Manchester. Even in the more diversified economy of Boston, nearly twenty percent of workers were unemployed; in some of the city's ethnic neighborhoods, unemployment reached forty percent. The countryside in general fared better, but only because farm families could return to the subsistence production discouraged earlier by the new agricultural experts. Products dependent on outside consumer markets—like milk—were hit heavily. By the spring of 1932 income in Vermont from milk checks had dropped fifty percent from 1929 levels.

New England's New Deal

New England developed a reputation for resisting the New Deal and the Roosevelt administration in the name of a bred-in-the-bone loyalty to the party of Lincoln. That reputation is based partly on fact. Massachusetts had fallen to the Democrats in 1928, but the rest of New England was still solidly Republican. In the dark year of 1932, every New England state, except Massachusetts, voted Republican, against Roosevelt and for Hoover. Even in 1936, when Connecticut, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island joined the New Deal, Maine and Vermont held out in a legendary minority vote against Roosevelt—the only two states in the United States to do so.

Even in these last bastions of rock-ribbed Republicanism, there were signs of change. When Maine went for Hoover in 1932, the state simultaneously elected a Democratic governor and two Democratic congressmen. And in 1936, when Vermont's voters resoundingly rejected Roosevelt, they also elected George Aiken as governor. Aiken was a Republican, but a new kind, pro-labor and pro-union in his sympathies. "Today the Republican Party attracts neither the farmer nor the industrial worker," Aiken lamented in a national radio speech in 1938, arguing that the party's leaders had become rubber stamps for business interests. (During his final term in the United States Senate, in the midst of the Vietnam War, Aiken made the wry proposal that became his best-known legacy: the United States government should simply declare victory in Vietnam and then withdraw its troops.) A vote for George Aiken was anything but a decisive rejection of liberalism.

Even if the voters of northern New England rejected the politics of the New Deal, they accepted its offers of help. Vermont and Maine received the largest portion of New Deal aid in New England. One week after the passage of the bill creating the Civilian Conservation Corps, the first CCC camp opened in Vermont. By 1934 eighteen camps were operating in Vermont. (Rural Republicans found work programs such as the CCC easier to accept than so-called direct-relief programs, since the work programs encouraged and rewarded hard work—usually outdoors—and did not appear to undermine personal independence or traditional notions of manliness.)¹³

New Deal programs had the greatest impact on northern New England's growing tourist industry. The CCC built Maine's section of the Appalachian Trail and also the campgrounds in Acadia National Park. Perhaps even more important, both state and federal governments invested heavily in the development of the skiing industry, which would come to dominate the economy of northern New England. In the winter of 1930 the Boston and Maine Railroad brought out the first of its "snow trains," which within five years had carried sixty thousand passengers to ski the

mountains of New Hampshire (*see* Figs. 154–157). By the 1930s tourism had become Maine's number one industry. In Vermont tourism produced more than twice as much revenue as quarrying, formerly the state's largest industry.

Tourism in New England depended on a vision of the region that had been forged in the Gilded Age of the previous century. New England (at least the tourist's New England) was a place of retreat, of nostalgic forgetfulness. *Yankee* magazine, founded in 1935, provided powerful reinforcement for this vision and for the tourist economy. But all those ski lifts and hiking trails put a new twist on the old image. For generations vacationers had been going into the wilds of Maine or New Hampshire to hunt or fish, but by the turn of the century many of them had begun to seek out a new self-consciously "wild" experience. Such wilderness vacationing was most often associated with the Adirondacks of New York and with the great expanses of wild country in the West, but even in relatively tame New England a new interest in "roughing it" had emerged by the turn of the century. Wilderness societies like the Appalachian Mountain Club and the Green Mountain Club actively promoted a new vision of outdoor recreation—rest for the jaded businessman and perhaps even for his exhausted wife. For the children, the summer-camp experience soon became a defining feature of New England: by 1920 Vermont had 75 summer camps, New Hampshire 85, and Maine an astonishing 230.

Many Americans now had become convinced that their salvation lay in new kinds of physical exercise—in hunting, hiking, camping, and skiing. Theodore Roosevelt's pronouncements on the "unhealthy softening and relaxation of fibre" among native-born Americans hit a raw nerve for some vacationers. Taken together, these cultural currents led many middle- and upper-class Americans to embrace a wide range of activities designed to bring overcivilized men (and some women) back into contact with the primitive. Skiing, along with other such college sports as rowing and football, was thought to toughen America's youth, to make them more like their hardy colonial ancestors. As early as 1910, when the Dartmouth Outing Club was founded, college students were beginning to ski in the White Mountains. The sport had become widely popular by the 1930s.

A Liberal New England?

Much had changed since New England was first transformed by the Industrial Revolution. Factory towns had filled up and emptied out. Generations of people of Italian, Irish, and French descent had lived and died, built churches and schools, learned English, and formed voting blocs. Labor unions, fostered by the New Deal, had established a foothold in the regional economy. Democrats or progressive Republicans held control of state governments that took some responsibility for the education and welfare of their citizens.

It is possible that all these changes might have taken place without altering the much-loved "New England" of calendars and vacation posters. All that was really necessary was to add a few photographs of winter scenes to bring the old images up to date. For some culture brokers, however, the 1930s offered a greater opportunity: to resolve the region's ethnic, class, and political conflicts by revising the very definition of New England. For example, take the guidebooks to the New England states written during the mid-1930s under the sponsorship of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), a New Deal agency that put unemployed writers to work on cultural projects. In the hands of these committed liberals, the heritage of the region became at once more inclusive, more egalitarian, and more democratic. The Massachusetts WPA guide, for example, was careful to include colorful ethnic celebrations along with the standard descriptions of eighteenth-century houses. (The customs of Portuguese fishing communities were a favorite.) The WPA writers were criticized for their extensive discussions of the Boston police strike of 1919 and the

Sacco and Vanzetti case. One critic even counted the lines devoted to Sacco and Vanzetti—forty-two—and noted that only nine lines were devoted to the Boston Tea Party.

But most important, the writers of the Massachusetts WPA guide attempted to capture the history of the region as their own. They described labor organizers as latter-day “frontiersmen” who came to the “defense of democracy” much as the Minutemen had done in earlier times.¹⁴ These writers reframed the history of the state as a story of successive uprisings caused by a periodic “salty breeze” that “blows through this most conservative of commonwealths”: a breeze that caused the American Revolution, that impelled the Lowell mill girls to strike, and that only died “to a flat calm at the beginning of the twentieth century.”¹⁵ Boston, in their view, owed its “color, its hope, and its unquenchable vitality” in the midst of the depression not to its old Yankee families but to its “newer stocks.”¹⁶

By 1937, when the poet Conrad Aiken wrote a sketch of Deerfield (site of a famous Indian attack) for the Massachusetts WPA guide, both the old conventional ethnic prejudices and virulent new genetic theories were coming under concerted criticism, as Nazi racial ideology became increasingly repugnant to the American public. In one of the most beautiful passages in any WPA guidebook, Aiken wrote that the “strange air of unreality” pervading the silent houses of Deerfield whispered a painful message: “the wilderness haunts me, the ghosts of a slain race are in my doorways and clapboards, like a kind of death.”¹⁷

But the WPA guidebook writers remained loyal to a vision of New England deeply rooted in its Puritan and English heritage, even as they attempted to universalize that heritage and make it play a progressive role. WPA guidebooks continued to suggest that small-town New England represented rural independence. Populated by self-sufficient, resilient folk, these villages would have no need of the New Deal. The writers of the WPA guides were hardly political conservatives, but when it came to their deepest cultural assumptions even Roosevelt liberals could continue to cherish the old ideas.

The paintings of Norman Rockwell, the most important American public artist of the 1940s, were similarly ambiguous. Rockwell’s famous *Saturday Evening Post* covers from this decade worked on several levels. They were an assertion of Yankee individualism and a hymn to American traditions, but the small-town world they portrayed was also deeply egalitarian. In Rockwell’s hands, the New England tradition was democratic down to its core. Although the conventional interpretation is that his art expressed antigovernment “individualist” values, Rockwell’s major work from this period tacitly supported the New Deal. His series “The Four Freedoms” (see Figs. 129, 143), based on a famous Roosevelt speech, provided important cultural backing for FDR’s internationalist agenda.

Epilogue: New England in 1945

War changed New England once again. Much as the Civil War had done eighty years earlier, World War II fueled the growth of industries and wealth. New England emerged from the war once again poised for economic resurgence. Government contracts led to the rapid expansion of research and development in weapons, electronics systems, and eventually computer technology. Cambridge, Massachusetts—home of Harvard University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology laboratories—was at the center of the new expansion, but other places also benefited: Portsmouth’s naval shipyards; General Electric factories in Lynn and Pittsfield; research facilities in Woods Hole, on Cape Cod; and Groton, Connecticut, home of Electric Boat Company, builder of the nation’s nuclear submarine fleet. The roots of the late-twentieth-century “Massachusetts miracle” were to be found here, in the expansion of industry created by World War II. Two decades of

war and cold war would add fuel to this military technology boom.

Because of industrial expansion, much of southern New England enjoyed the full-employment economy that has made the postwar period look in retrospect like a sweet dream. Fourth-generation immigrant families found themselves lifted out of factory jobs and into an increasingly white-collar, service-oriented economy. Ripples of the same economic transformation were felt in rural New England, too, as many previously overlooked places were transformed into new tourist destinations to meet the vacation demand of newly leisured workers. On Cape Cod, for example, a postwar building boom catered to a new Boston market, families who had only recently acquired sufficient prosperity and security to take a two-week vacation or buy a modest vacation home. Retirees, too, took advantage of the Social Security program and other New Deal-era pension plans to move to Cape Cod in large numbers during the 1950s.

But the battle for New England's heritage was not over. The end of the war generated an explosion of interest in making American history more widely available to the public. During the immediate postwar years, a number of "history theme parks" sprang up to meet both the demand for vacation entertainment and burgeoning public interest in historical New England. Six major museum villages were founded in New England, each inspired in part by two great prewar multimillion-dollar projects located outside the region: John D. Rockefeller's Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia, founded in 1926, and Henry Ford's Greenfield Village in Dearborn, Michigan, founded in 1929. Old Sturbridge Village, a re-created New England village of the early nineteenth century, opened to the public in 1947. Plimoth Plantation, founded in 1947, was committed to re-creating the life of the first generation of Plymouth settlers. Historic Deerfield, Inc., opened officially in 1952, as did Electra Havemeyer (Mrs. J. Watson) Webb's eccentric collection of buildings called the Shelburne Museum, in northern Vermont. Strawberry Banke, an assemblage of colonial-era buildings in Portsmouth, welcomed its first visitors in 1958. Mystic Seaport, a re-created seafaring town in Connecticut, had already opened on a very small scale in 1930.¹⁸

At their inception, the postwar village museums enshrined a vision of New England forged in the nineteenth century. In the years to come, they would be transformed by a new emphasis on historical accuracy informed by powerfully revisionist discoveries about the lives of ordinary people in early New England. But when they began, their interpretive roots lay firmly in the late-nineteenth-century model of old New England—rural, homogeneous, preindustrial. Historical interest in New England's ethnic and industrial past still remained a thing of the future. For a visitor to the postwar village museums in the early years, New England would be a place populated by hardy sailors (Mystic Seaport), rugged pioneers (Historic Deerfield), self-reliant farmers (Old Sturbridge Village), elegant colonial gentry (Strawberry Banke), and pious Pilgrims (Plimoth Plantation), with a penchant for antiquated spelling.

In these museums the old ideas about New England seemed more central than ever in the postwar years. With the rise of Hitler and the gradual alignment of American politics to resist Nazism, the outspoken racial theories of the Immigration Restriction League and the eugenics movement had become untenable. (Of course, immigration restriction had also done its work. After 1924 few immigrants were coming to the United States, and second-, third-, and fourth-generation Europeans were well on their way to assimilation.) If aliens and immigrants no longer seemed so threatening, they were replaced in the postwar period by another foreign enemy hovering over Europe and threatening to sap the loyalties of Americans: the specter of Communism. In 1952 the founder of Historic Deerfield noted: "our

young and powerful nation finds itself engaged in an ideological conflict with Communism." Under these circumstances the living history of "a New England village can be the most eloquent response to the strident falsehoods poisoning the air today."¹⁹ In such a highly charged atmosphere the dawn of the "American century" would enlist the old image of New England in a new struggle.

Notes

1. Historians have recently been making effective use of the idea that regional identity does not stem simply or inevitably from such intrinsic circumstances as those of geology, climate, or the ethnic composition of the region's population, but that such identity is also created and transformed by cultural images "invented" to meet particular cultural, economic, or political needs. Examples of this approach include Axelrod, ed., *Colonial Revival in America*; Giffen and Murphy, eds., *Noble and Dignified Stream*; Edward L. Ayers et al., *All over the Map: Rethinking American Regions* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Brown, *Inventing New England*; and William Robert Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and the American National Character* (New York: Braziller, 1961). For the general theme of "invented traditions," see Hobsbawm and Ranger, eds., *Invention of Tradition*; David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
2. Wilkie and Tager, eds., *Historical Atlas of Massachusetts*. All statistics about Massachusetts's economy come from this book.
3. Judd, Churchill, and Eastman, eds., *Maine*. All statistics about Maine's economy come from this book.
4. For a study of this process, see Barron, *Those Who Stayed Behind*.
5. Jewett, *Deephaven*, 71.
6. D. H. Strother, "A Summer in New England," *Harper's* 21 (November 1860): 745.
7. *The Old Colony: or, Pilgrim Land, Past and Present* (Boston, 1887), 66-67.
8. Openo, "Artistic Circles and Summer Colonies."
9. Aldrich, *Writing of Thomas Bailey Aldrich*, 2: 71-72.
10. Rollin Lynde Hart, "A New England Hill Town," *Atlantic Monthly* 83 (April 1899): 571-72.
11. Quoted in Danbom, *Resisted Revolution*, 40.
12. The Vermont project was initially aimed at the native-born rural population. In time it came to target a wide variety of people who were enmeshed in the web of charity programs. Its more brutal provisions probably fell most heavily on the Abenaki Indians, who lived along the margins of Vermont society. See Gallagher, "Perkins and the Vermont Eugenics Movement."
13. Judd, *New Deal in Vermont*.
14. Federal Writers' Project, *Massachusetts*, 65.
15. *Ibid.*, 3.
16. *Ibid.*, 145.
17. *Ibid.*, 223.
18. For information about these museums and much else, see Michael Kammen's magisterial book, *Mystic Chords of Memory*.
19. Flynt and Chamberlain, *Frontier of Freedom*, 1.