

THE GUILFORD REGISTER

ADVENTURES & STORIES FROM THE MAINE HIGHLANDS



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WATERFALLS OF PISCATAQUIS COUNTY

CHASING THE RUSH

VIBRANT COLORS

THE WORKS OF MILT CHRISTIANSON

BENNY H.H.

A SHORT STORY BY DANA GREEN

HAPPINESS IS CONTAGIOUS

DO CANADIANS HAVE IT RIGHT?

100-MILE WILDERNESS

A TRUE TEST OF THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL

SEE THE WORLD

HOW MAINE TOWNS TOOK ON FOREIGN NAMES

The Value of Community

By John McNamara

Community is not a place. It is a practice. It is the accumulated result of thousands of small decisions — to show up, to lend a hand, to give a few dollars or a few hours — repeated so consistently that a place starts to feel less like a collection of houses and more like a shared life.

We moved to Maine not because of the community, but because of a business opportunity: The Guilford Bed & Breakfast. That was our goal, my focus. The plan was to retire to a quiet corner of the world and lead a simpler life. I was looking for the life depicted in Hollywood movies about small-town America. My wife even bought a bicycle to ride through our angelic town like Angela Lansbury in 'Murder She Wrote.' Instead, I discovered a town of separated people; a county of isolated towns; a community working together, separately. I saw a disconnect and heard lots of complaints about anything and everything, but no one was taking action. No one was igniting the community to bring about positive change.

For those not familiar with this part of the world, Piscataquis County is rural, sparsely populated, and geographically spread out — the kind of place where the nearest hospital or grocery store might be a thirty-minute drive, and where the old economic engines of paper mills and manufacturing have long since slowed. Places like this face a real risk: without deliberate effort, the connective tissue that holds a community together can quietly erode. Young people leave for opportunity elsewhere. Main streets empty out. Neighbors who once knew each other by name become strangers separated by a few miles of woods. The value of community, in a place like this, is not sentimental — it is structural. It is the difference between a county that slowly hollows out and one that finds a way to keep reinventing itself.

That is precisely the gap Piscataquis Forward was built to fill. The organization exists on the premise that no single town, business, or agency can carry the weight of revitalization alone — but that a coalition of people who care can. The description of our mission is telling: success is framed not as the work of an institution, but as "the collective efforts of many individuals." That framing matters. It signals that Piscataquis Forward sees itself less as a service provider and more as a convener. In this place, town managers, nonprofits, chambers of commerce, and ordinary residents can pool their energy toward something bigger than any one of them could accomplish alone. Together we can push Piscataquis County forward.

You can see this philosophy in action through our initiatives. Riverfest brings the county together along the Piscataquis River for a shared celebration of place. The Farmers Market gives small growers and makers a reliable venue and gives neighbors a reason to see each other every week. Sangerville Days and Christmas in Guilford root community pride in specific towns, honoring the fact that Piscataquis County isn't a homogeneous place but a patchwork of small communities, each with its own identity worth celebrating. Clean Up Piscataquis will turn civic pride into physical labor, the kind of shared task that builds

relationships faster than almost anything else. And longer-term projects like the Ice Arena and Story Bridge initiatives show that Piscataquis Forward isn't only thinking about a single festival weekend — it's thinking about the infrastructure of belonging: places for kids to play hockey, ways to preserve and tell the county's own stories, reasons for people to stay.

What makes this work is not any one event or building. It's the people. A county this size runs on volunteers — people who show up to set up folding tables before Riverfest, who staff a farmers market booth on a Sunday morning, who sit on a board not because it advances their career but because they love where they live. Our board is a collection of dedicated residents "passionate about making a positive impact on our county" — not professional administrators, but neighbors who decided to do something. That is the quiet secret of rural community-building: it rarely depends on outside saviors or big institutional money. It depends on a critical mass of local people deciding together that their town, their county, is worth the effort.

This is where the real value of community reveals itself. A strong community is a kind of insurance policy against isolation and decline. It means a family that falls on hard times has neighbors who notice. It means a small business has customers who choose it on purpose. It means when a river festival needs volunteers or a farmers market needs vendors, the county doesn't have to look far to find people willing to help. Organizations like Piscataquis Forward function as the scaffolding for that kind of mutual reliance — not replacing the goodwill of individual people, but giving it structure, a calendar, and a shared name to rally around.

In the end, Piscataquis Forward's tagline — "growing, together" — captures something true about how rural community actually works. Growth in a place like Piscataquis County was never going to come from a single large employer or a single grand plan. It comes from Riverfest, a cleanup day, a revived ice arena, each one built by people who decided to participate. That, ultimately, is the value of community: not a feeling, but a habit of showing up for the place — and the people — you call home.

I say all of this not just to remind everyone of the importance of community or to "sell" the idea of Piscataquis Forward, but because it is sometimes easier to moan and groan than to stand up and make a difference.

With this essay, I am challenging everyone in Piscataquis County to step up; to come together; to work together to ensure that our county thrives for generations to come. I challenge everyone to put aside differences, frustrations, anger, and miscommunications and misconceptions and instead work together on every possible project to strengthen our county for future generations.

We can survive without a festival or an ice rink, but we cannot survive if we remain divided; if we do not come together as a community and build a better world; a better county for our children.



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THE GALLERY

ARTIST STORIES, ARTWORK & INTERVIEWS

Each month we will highlight a Maine artist or art gallery. If you are a Maine artist or art gallery, or know of one who would like to be showcased here, reach out to us at john@genthnerhousepublishing.com

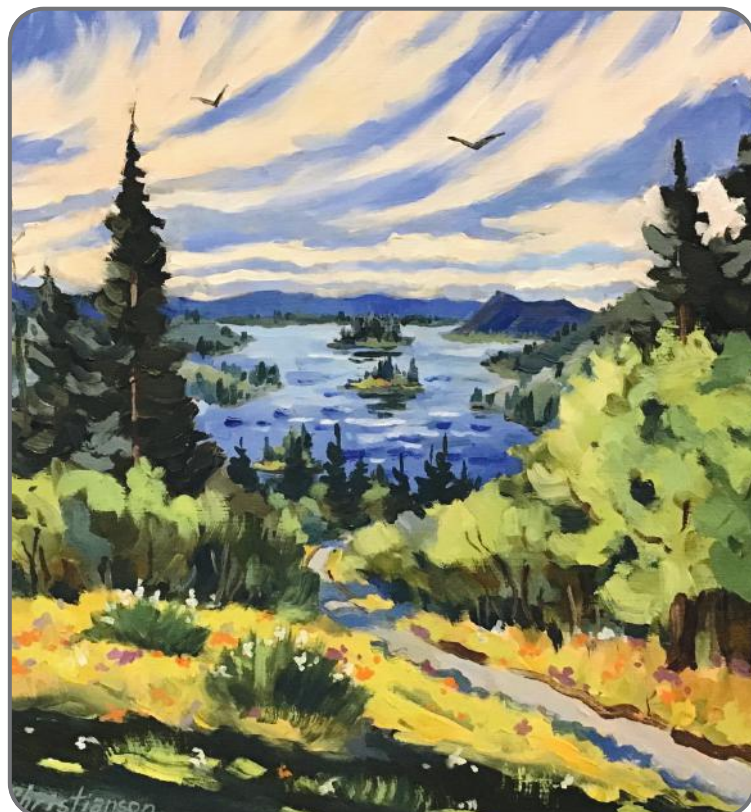
Capturing Maine on Canvas

By John McNamara

I had the pleasure of sitting down with Milton “Milt” Christianson recently. If you are an avid art lover and frequent the art scene in the Maine Highlands, you probably know his name and most certainly his work, even though he has not exhibited in many galleries.

Milt did not grow up in Maine, but the rural beauty of this state has been his home for more than half a century, and the subject of much of his art. His journey and career in Maine began at Colby College, where he worked on graphic design projects. He spent a short time there before buying land in Wellington and building his home by hand. As we talked, Milt described his home to me, and in that moment, as he used words to describe it as he uses color in his works, I wished we had conducted the interview there. He described dozens, if not hundreds, of works of art on the walls and stacked up everywhere—50 years of creativity, enjoying the quiet rural Maine life, waiting to be hand-framed and sold.

Not only does Milt create amazing watercolors and, as of late, oils, but he also cuts the mats and builds each frame by hand. But before Milt became known for his incredible watercolors, he was a successful T-shirt graphic designer. In fact, for more than 25 years, Milt designed and sold his screen-printed T-shirts. In fact, two of his more famous designs, Strawberries and Fiddleheads, are still available for sale through Liberty Graphics here in Maine.



After his success in screen printing, Milt stepped away from T-shirts and began focusing more on his watercolors. Being a theater student, he had to teach himself how to paint watercolors. He drew on all his years of painting backdrops for the stage and read a lot of books on watercolor (and later videos on oil painting) until he got really good at it and began to sell his work.

One of the more amazing things about Milt is that he is 80 years old, but you’d never guess it by looking at him. He is young at heart and active, and, most interestingly, his painting career did not begin until his early 50s—giving hope to people like me who might want a late-life career change. Unlike many artists who figure out early in life that they want to be an artist, Milt was busy discovering what he wanted to be while having fun designing and printing T-shirts that have been seen worn around the world.

To begin your painting career in your 50s and to sell a great deal of your work regularly is not only something to be proud of, but something to be admired, especially when you discover that most of Milt’s sales are not coming through gallery connections. Of course, he is in a couple of galleries (one in Maine and one in Arizona), but most of his sales come from the craft and art shows where he sells directly to art enthusiasts. Milt loves setting up his booth and showcasing all this beautiful talent directly to the people who want to buy his imagery.

(MILT, continued on page 10)

Chasing Water: The Top-Rated Waterfalls of Piscataquis County

By John McNamara

Piscataquis County doesn't just have a few pretty waterfalls tucked into the woods — it has hundreds of them. Local boosters like to point out that more than a hundred falls have been formally cataloged in the southern part of the county alone, with new ones still turning up as hikers push deeper into the KI Jo-Mary country and the 100 Mile Wilderness. For a county with a population smaller than some Portland neighborhoods, that's an almost absurd concentration of falling water. Here's a tour of the ones that consistently rank at the top of visitors' lists.

Gulf Hagas: The Grand Canyon of the East

No conversation about Piscataquis County waterfalls gets far without landing on Gulf Hagas. This slate gorge on the West Branch of the Pleasant River has earned its nickname honestly — three-mile-long canyon walls, some rising more than 100 feet, wrap around a chain of dramatic drops. The full loop through the gorge runs about 8 to 9 miles and connects to the Appalachian Trail; along the way, hikers pass four major named falls: Screw Auger, Buttermilk, Stair, and Billings. Each has its own personality — Screw Auger twists through a narrow slot in the slate, while Billings tumbles over broad ledges — which is part of why people treat the whole gorge as a day-long pilgrimage rather than a quick stop. It's remote enough that a plan matters: pack water, expect exposed rock near the rim, and give yourself the whole day.

Little Wilson Falls

If Gulf Hagas is the marathon, Little Wilson Falls is the reward for a much shorter effort. Sitting within the Appalachian Mountain Club's 100 Mile Wilderness Conservation Area in the northeast part of the county, this one drops about 32 feet into a pool below, and the hike in is a family-friendly half mile. It's earned a reputation as something of a hidden gem — well known enough to have fans, but not so trafficked that it feels crowded. The catch is the same one that shows up at a lot of Maine's swimming-hole falls: the rocks near the drop get slick, so sturdy footwear isn't optional.

Katahdin Falls

Technically the tallest waterfall in the state, Katahdin Falls sits inside Baxter State Park on the flank of Mount Katahdin itself, dropping as much as 800 feet in tiers with a main plunge of around 280 feet. It's not the kind of waterfall you casually stumble into on a Sunday drive — reaching it means committing to serious Baxter terrain — but for anyone chasing the biggest vertical drop in Maine, this is the one. Its scale and setting, framed by the state's highest peak, put it in a category of its own among the county's falls.

The Katahdin Region's Roadside and Trail Falls

Closer to Baxter's entrances, a cluster of smaller falls draws steady traffic because they're easier to reach without a full wilderness trek. Abol Falls and Little Abol Falls are along a moderate 0.8-mile trail that offers views of Katahdin's southwest face and the rushing water. Nesowadnehunk Falls offers a distinctive seven-foot horseshoe drop on the West Branch of the Penobscot. These aren't the tallest or most dramatic falls in the county, but their accessibility and mountain backdrops make them favorites for families and photographers who don't have a full day to spend.

Big Wilson Stream and the Wellington-Kingsbury Falls

Big Wilson Stream is home to an eight-foot-high waterfall slide, notable for something rare in this rugged county: a short, wheelchair-accessible access trail that opens the experience to visitors who can't manage a rock scramble. Further north, in the Wellington and Kingsbury area, a segmented eight-foot cascade is visible from Airport Road — though access is limited to the bridge view due to surrounding private property. Kees Falls, also in this stretch of the county, cascades down several rocky ledges surrounded by dense forest, and tends to get mentioned by anyone compiling a statewide "best of" list.

(WATERFALLS, continued on page 11)



piscataquisforward.org



THE LIBRARY SHELF

SHORT STORIES, POEMS & CHAPTERS WRITTEN BY MAINE AUTHORS

Each month we will highlight a short story, poem or serial written by a Maine author. If you are a Maine writer, or know of one who would like to be showcased here, reach out to us at john@genthnerhousepublishing.com

Benny H.H.

By Dana Green

Chapter 1: Greenville, Maine

I fell in love with her the moment our eyes met that sultry summer day. She stopped to ask me if I had caught any fish yet? She was wearing a bright yellow, daisy flowered mini summer dress. I admired her graceful figure and her kind, angelic smile. It all took place three years ago. On the shore of Tussle Lagoon in Lilly Bay. Such a beautiful memory.

Then three months following our summer romance at my camp in Rockwood, our world turned a bit sideways. Madeline began to struggle with reoccurring bouts of depression. She asked for my patience and understanding. I agreed to her unending requests, and I did my best to support her moody demeanor. Her bipolar disorder was on a late summer rampage.

Blair Hill, Greenville

On a Saturday, September 6th, one month before our planned wedding it happened. I held her close, and she nestled her head on my shoulder. I could feel her heart beating ... thump, thump, da-thump. In perfect sync with my heart's rhythm. She sighed. Her tear-stained cheeks weeped once again across my neck. A lingering moment passed before she frantically rushed up the walkway to her front steps. She glanced over her shoulder as she closed the door to her "safe haven." I leaned back against the front fender of my truck and heard her scream.

Chapter 2: Misery Gore

When I found Benny the following March 20th in the snow-covered Misery Gore thicket he had not eaten for several days. His border collie fur was falling out due to starvation. His sinful owner had left him to die.

When I found him, I did not know his name. I did know his breed. Benny's legs and back had dry blood markings as evidence of a severe whipping. As I carried him to my truck, I saw an area of snow that was dark red. I found it close by a bloodied half inch-thick tree branch. A brutal weapon. If I ever find the monster that did this to Benny, I will hang "the dog abuser" with a short rope from a branch of a sugar maple.

Rockwood Camp

The next afternoon I took Benny to see my veterinarian, Mary Myers. She told me that I needed to tend to Benny's care and try and gain his trust. During the first week he did not eat a full meal, and he barely drank a cup of water each day. On day eight he showed growing signs of minimal trust. By the second week he ate some canned dog food. It had to be from the palm of my hand. He would not eat out of a bowl. On day twelve he took a few licks of whole milk.

On the evening of day fourteen, he climbed up on the couch and nuzzled next to my left thigh while I sat. reading. He drifted off with his head pressed firmly against my leg. I looked down to see his belly rising and falling in rhythmic breathing. I dared not move. For over an hour, he laid motionless after finishing my reading, White Fang. I decided to join him in his repose. I covered us both with a wool blanket and I drifted off to join Benny in his newfound peaceful retreat. Benny had accepted me as his companion and friend.

Chapter 3: April 5th

My five-room northern Maine camp has an old-fashioned Glenwood, a wood fired cook stove. It kept Benny and me warm for twelve hours once I created a base of two or three inches of red-hot fire bed coals. By the end of the second week, Benny would lay about six feet away from the stove while I ate breakfast at the dining room table. He seemed to like the warmed hardwood floor more than the living room's Maine black bear skinned rug.

Benny's legs, back and feet were healing with every other day an application of "Surgeon's Ointment" and bandages. On the morning of day sixteen, I cleaned and polished his worn brown collar. It had an underside inscription Benny H. H., 01/11/88. He had no other tags or markings. Looking at my wall calendar, I figured old Benny to be 40 months and 17 days old. He now had a name that he would respond to. I became hopeful that we could become best friends.

Chapter 4: April 7th on a Road Less Traveled

Benny had stared out his door window for the first half a dozen miles as if trying to see his way back to the northern woods. Around mile twenty he sprawled out on the bench seat in repose for the remaining twenty- five seldom traveled miles. He drooled a bit on the black leather and gave it a wet shine. The next 22 miles were uneventful for Benny H.H. He finally laid down and got some shut eye.

I wanted to get Benny back to my three-bedroom farmhouse, in Lake Moxie, to show him around "our bachelor estate" of one-hundred acres. However, Maine weather be damned. After a two-hour freezing rain excursion around the base of Mosquito Mountain, I began to wonder if I would ever get home. My old '72 Chevy V-6 pickup truck swayed on the corners of the Crooked Road. I prayed for some patches of bare hot top when we got to the foot of Indian Hill. My prayers were answered. Our last two miles were the easiest stretch of the night.

As I drove up the driveway, my new best friend seemed downright happy as we approached "The Enchanted Farm." His tail was wagging against the seat with a loud thump, and he licked the door window trying to see outside. He turned to look at me when I stopped and turned off the truck headlights. His eyes were glistening. I swear he had tears of joy. He showed me his teeth. Benny smiled. Dogs can smile, right?

(BENNY, continued on page 7)

You're Not Angry, Are You?

By Walter Boomsma

One of the more “touristy” things we did while in Canada a few years ago was to visit the Alexander Graham Bell Museum in Baddeck, Nova Scotia. For the record, it's a beautiful and extremely educational spot. When we entered the building and approached the ticket desk, a tour member slipped in front of us to approach the bright and chipper “ranger” (the museum is a provincial park). She began peppering Ranger Rachel (not her real name) with questions, requests, and observations that were actually demands.

Ranger Rachel kept her composure throughout, even while it was apparent that Terry Tourist was, for the most part, not really listening and unlikely to be satisfied with anything Ranger Rachel said or did. Since we were on vacation and in no real hurry, I attempted to see the humor in it. When Terry Tourist ran out of steam and left, I approached the counter wearing my best international diplomatic smile.

Allowing her body to noticeably relax, Ranger Rachel sighed, “Why is everyone so angry this morning?” My guard was down, and I said, “I’ll bet you’ve dealt mostly with Americans today.” To her diplomatic credit, she didn’t confirm or deny my suspicion. We did, however, briefly discuss attitudes in general and tourists in particular.

It wasn’t until later I realized my spontaneous response reflected an unconscious observation I’d been recording. We encountered a lot less anger in Canada, at least among Canadians. And, with the possible exception of Terry Tourist, it seemed contagious. It’s hard to be angry with someone who is smiling and being nice. Or at least it should be.

Sure, it was a vacation, and I was probably wearing my rose-tinted (not as strong as rose-colored) glasses. But I’m convinced Canada—at least in the provinces we were in—is a happier and more relaxed place. Heck, even the Canadian Facebook Groups and Pages I visited and interacted with were friendly and peaceful. (Conversely, when I posted a photo on my timeline about a Canadian Ale I found quite tasty, it didn’t take long for a comment to appear stating that all beer is rotten stuff, etc., and accusing me of encouraging people to ruin their lives.)

I don’t doubt for a minute that something in the commenter’s past influenced his thinking. But I am struggling to understand why he’s so angry, because that anger will have a greater negative effect on him than a pint of Canadian Ale. I was tempted to reply, “Don’t worry, I won’t buy you one.” I suspect he would not have seen the humor in that.

Ranger Rachel’s question stuck with me longer than the museum tour itself did. “Why is everyone so angry this morning?” She meant tourists at a ticket counter, but the more I turned it over, the more it seemed like a fair question about the rest of us too — Terry Tourist, beer-guy, plenty of people I follow online who seem to be one honest opinion away from a fight.

Why are we so angry? I do think part of the answer lies in society’s tendency to engage in victim-thinking. It’s easy to blame someone or something for any unhappiness or difficulties that come our way. Lots of energy goes into figuring out who to blame that might be better spent figuring out how to solve the problem.

From victimhood, it’s not a big leap to feeling that everyone and everything is against us. Once we’re there, it becomes very



easy to feel abused and hopeless. Sometimes when we’ve had enough, we become vicious in word and, potentially, in action. That viciousness can be directed towards ourselves as well as others.

There's some science involved. Anger often arises when we face perceived threats or injustices, and the brain's amygdala activates the “fight or flight” response. Note the word “perceived” in that sentence. While the amygdala gets us ready to fight, the prefrontal cortex is yelling, “Wait a minute! Is this threat real or at least manageable?”

The amygdala often wins. In scientific terms, we're angry and ready for the fight. Instead, we could engage in some uniquely human neurological regulation and evaluate the context of the situation. We could end up suppressing the anger in favor of more socially acceptable behavior.

Eleanor Roosevelt in *This Is My Story* observed, “No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.” I think she’d agree that “No one can make you feel angry without your consent.”

There is no logical reason for us to be victimized by our feelings. How we choose to respond to situations and people is well within our realm of choices. Anger is not the only option.

I still don't have a good answer for Ranger Rachel. But I suspect she already knows: nobody made those tourists angry that morning. They brought it with them.

Knowing that, you aren’t angry, are you?



*Walter Boomsma is an educator, writer, and the author of **Small People—Big Brains**. With a background in teaching and public speaking, he blends practical wisdom with a deep appreciation for lifelong learning. His work often explores themes of personal growth, communication, and community engagement, encouraging readers to think differently and discover meaning in everyday experiences. Through his writing and outreach, Walter strives to spark conversations that lead to understanding, empathy, and positive change.*

Chapter 5: Madeline's Cold Case

It had been a year and 10 days since my dear Madeline had been taken from me. I still have nightmares. I recall vividly her screams, rushing into her house, and finding her in her blood-soaked dress. It all happened so damn fast. And now months later, "The Killer's name, the reason for her murder and "The Killer's" whereabouts is still a mystery to local law enforcement. The medical examiner recorded that the knife wound in her belly was made with a Tulip serrated blade.

Maine State Police Detective Jim Howard told me that the medical examiner's office records documented that they had never seen that type of knife used in any attacks in the state of Maine. No other reports of Tulip bladed weapon assaults in the Tri-State region. Never in our state's two-hundred-year history had a Tulip bladed knife been connected to a victim-based crime. Madeline's murder four weeks after her death had become a "cold case." I have recurring thoughts of the hours after her attack and her emergency surgery. Madeline's operations began within an hour of her brutal assault. Her abdominal stabbings were extensive. My sweetheart died six hours post-op as I wept next to her in room 12 of C.A. Dean Hospital.

Chapter 6: Remembering

Thirteen months after Madeline's death ... Madeline's younger sister, Billie, and her older brother, Glen, asked me to go to meet them at Madeline's home on Blair Hill the last weekend in September. They needed my help with the interior cleaning and some back steps and porch painting. They had decided to sell her property and donate the profits of the sale to her favorite charity. She served on Moosehead Caring for Kids Foundation for six years. It seemed to me like a wonderful remembrance by her siblings.

Since I figured it would be a full day of work, I took Benny with me on that Saturday. I took my first assignment of the day. I started on the outside rear porch windows. Step one, scraping three out of four windows and step two would be painting the windows an off white and the screen door a forest green. An hour into my work I stirred slowly my new can of green paint. I had tears welling up with each turn of the stir stick. I tried to think of one of my favorite moments with Madeline. I remembered how we would cuddle in her backyard gazebo's hammock on a warm summer night and watch the fireflies flutter about. Her backyard became our romantic hideaway.

Chapter 7: Dead Trophy

Benny had a downward tail when we first got in the fenced backyard that morning, but it improved when he spotted two squirrels scurrying across the dew-covered grass and up the brownish-red leafed Northern Red Oak. The squirrels and chipmunks kept him occupied for an hour of chase, stop and hide. Ole Benny was not very good at the game. He got twisted into knots and rolled on his back as if to "cry uncle."

About two hours into my porch painting, I realized Benny was out of my vision of sight. I went down the rear half of the

unpainted porch steps and hurried across the backyard in search of him. As I approached the backside of the gazebo, I heard some serious dirt digging taking place. I started to panic and had thoughts of a skunk or ground hog tearing up the lawn. Instead, I found Benny, had been "doing his impression of bad dog behavior" behind the oak tree. I found him sitting on his butt next to a freshly dug dog pawed hole.

He looked smug and proud of himself. I figured he was trying to bury a dead trophy. Either a gray squirrel or a small chipmunk. Instead of a dead catch, I found dirt covered leaves and a couple of wooden sticks. As I turned the sticks over the sunlight, Benny nosed to my attention a shiny object with a brass handle.

I got down on one knee to get a closer inspection. It was then-and-there that I realized Ole Benny had dug up Madeline's murder weapon. I got a pair of rubber gloves on and placed the Tulip shaped knife in a plastic bag for the State Police.

Chapter 8: Benny Bites Back

Two days later the forensic team at the Maine State Police Crime Lab raised a couple of partial fingerprints off the knife handle. It took another several days of computer image studies and manual book fingerprint searching by a barely eyed CSI specialist before they had solid evidence. The pathologist had confirmation of "The Killer's" ID and linked it to a photo. The crime lab couriered it overnight to Detective Howard's field office. He called me the following morning. Madeline's killer's whereabouts had been tracked to the murderer's last known address. An FCI. The Federal Corrections Institution, Federal Bureau of Prisons in Danbury, CT. Detective Howard said, "Madeline's case is closed. Mark Merrill, her murderer, died during a fight with another inmate. It took place two weeks ago. Mr. Merrill's killer stabbed him through his heart with a pool stick."

"That's a shame," I said.

"Well, you and her family are spared the pain of a messy trial," said Detective Howard.

"Anything else about this Merrill fellow?" I asked.

"Strange you should ask? Yes, they found in his prison cell a shoe box of personal belongings. There was a picture of his dog or should I say his former dog."

"Whataya mean his former dog, Detective?" I followed up.

"Mr. Merrill had three photos of a black and white border collie. He had printed the name Benny H. H. on the bottom of one of the pictures. On the backside of another, he wrote a couple of monstrous phrases. I am going to give you my edited version," said Detective Howard. The Detective paused for a moment. I said, "I am listening."

"His Highness, I killed him (meaning Benny) with my dirty scoundrel hands in the northern woods of Misery Gore."

"You, don't say?" I said smugly as I thought "Ole Benny, His Highness, striking back."



Dana L. Green is a 71 year old Mainer. He is a "native cogger" who has lived a charmed life as a small-town farm boy to a college graduate. Now retired from a mid life career in medicine he writes to uncover the mysteries, marvels, and musings of everyday life. He has scribed over 100 short stories that include crime mysteries, historical creative fiction, memoirs, and downeast Maine fables as uttered by a gifted storyteller.

The 100 Mile Wilderness: Maine's Last Great Test of the Appalachian Trail

By John McNamara

Ask any northbound Appalachian Trail thru-hiker what stands between them and the summit of Katahdin, and they'll give you the same answer: the 100 Mile Wilderness. Stretching roughly 100 miles between Monson and Abol Bridge, at the doorstep of Baxter State Park, this stretch is widely considered the most remote section of the entire 2,193-mile trail. For thru-hikers, it's the final gauntlet. For everyone else, it's one of the last places in the eastern United States where you can walk for days without crossing a paved road.

Despite the name, the 100 Mile Wilderness isn't a single protected area like a national park. It's a working landscape — a patchwork of commercial timberland, conservation easements, and public reserved land, crisscrossed by an active network of logging roads even as the footpath itself winds through unbroken forest, past ponds, and over a string of remote peaks. The Appalachian Trail is the spine that ties it together, and it's largely thanks to organizations like the Appalachian Mountain Club, which has spent decades acquiring and conserving land along the corridor, that the wilderness feel has held up even as logging operations continue nearby.

That contradiction — genuine backcountry isolation existing alongside working forest roads — is part of what makes the region unusual. Hikers can go days without cell service or a resupply point, yet a logging truck might rumble across a nearby road at any hour.

The northbound route out of Monson climbs almost immediately into a demanding rhythm of ridges and river crossings. Early highlights include Little Wilson Falls, a roughly 60-foot drop near the 6-mile mark, and the approach to Barren Mountain, where the Barren Ledges open up, offering sweeping views back toward Monson and Lake Umbagog. From there the trail threads past Gulf Hagas — often detoured into as a side trip, since the slate gorge and its four major waterfalls are considered one of the signature sights of the entire AT — before climbing White Cap Mountain, the highest point on the Appalachian Trail between the Bigelow Range and Katahdin itself. On a clear day, the summit delivers a rare payoff: a direct line of sight to Katahdin, still days away, along with glimpses north toward Canada.

Beyond White Cap, the trail eases into a gentler middle stretch, tracing the shores of Cooper Pond, Crawford Pond, and Pemadumcook Lake, with long, flat miles along Nahmakanta Stream and past Antlers Campsite on Lower Jo-Mary Lake. This section is where moose sightings become almost routine, and where the sand beaches at Lower Jo-Mary and Nahmakanta Lake offer some of the best swimming on the entire route. The final miles push hikers back into rugged terrain as the trail closes in on Abol Bridge, with Katahdin looming larger with every mile.

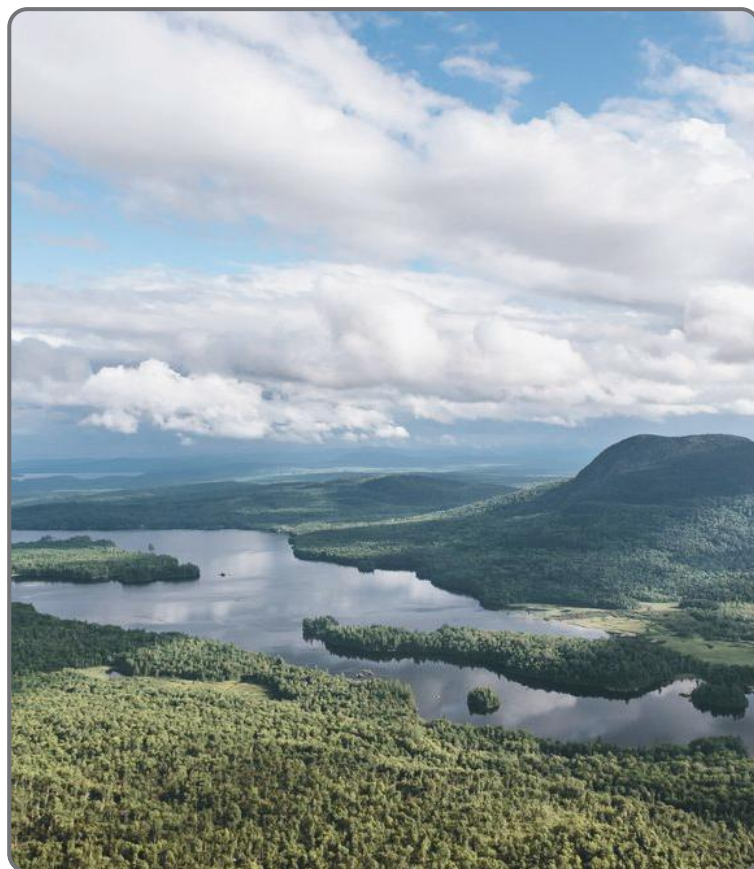
Thru-hikers moving with loaded packs typically budget eight to ten days for the crossing, and most people — even strong hikers — end up on the longer end of that range once stream fords, weather, and fatigue are factored in. Day-trippers and section hikers have plenty of options too. Because logging roads cross the corridor at several points, it's possible to shuttle in and out

for shorter overnight trips or even slackpack sections, using local outfitters or hiker hostels to arrange pickups and drop-offs along the way.

The defining challenge of the 100 Mile Wilderness isn't any single climb — it's the sheer absence of services. There's no town, store, or paved road access for the entire stretch, which means every hiker needs to carry enough food and fuel to cover the full distance, or arrange a resupply drop in advance. Hostels in Monson and Millinocket, along with a handful of outfitters based in the region, offer food drop-off services for hikers who'd rather not carry ten days' worth of meals at once. It's worth noting that opinions on this vary — some hikers consider a mid-route resupply an essential comfort, while others treat carrying the full load as part of the point.

Navigation deserves real attention too. The logging road network can be disorienting, and while a smartphone app helps, cell coverage is unreliable at best across most of the corridor. Paper maps published by the Appalachian Trail Conservancy or the Appalachian Mountain Club remain the standard recommendation, and most experienced hikers carry at least one as a backup, regardless of what's loaded on their phones.

For a stretch of trail without a single town along it, the 100 Mile Wilderness has an outsized reputation, and it's earned. It's the last big psychological hurdle before Katahdin, a place where thru-hikers who've walked from Georgia get a final reminder of what true remoteness feels like. But it's just as meaningful for Mainers and visitors who never intend to walk the whole AT — a section hike through White Cap, a weekend at Gulf Hagas, or a shuttle-assisted overnight to Little Wilson Falls offers a taste of the same wildness without the ten-day commitment. Either way, it stands as one of the last places in the eastern U.S. where the woods still feel bigger than the roads running through them.



Why Does Maine Have So Many Towns Named After Foreign Cities and Countries?

By John McNamara

Drive inland from the Maine coast and something strange starts to happen to the map. You leave Denmark and head toward Norway. Sweden is just up the road. If you keep going, you'll pass through Mexico, Peru, Poland, China, and Rome — all before you've left the state. Maine has more than 40 cities, towns, and villages named after foreign places, according to DeLorme's **Maine Geographic Book of Lists**, and the story behind that odd geography says a lot about what it meant to be a brand-new American in the early 1800s.

Maine's foreign-sounding towns aren't scattered randomly across the state — they cluster inland, and they cluster in time. Maine's population roughly tripled between the Revolutionary War and statehood in 1820, growing from under 100,000 to about 300,000 people. That boom happened right as the region stopped being a British colony and started filling in with new, independent settlements that needed names of their own.

The coastal towns had already been named, mostly by English and Scots-Irish settlers who brought familiar names with them — York, Falmouth, Scarborough, Berwick. But the towns founded later, pushing inland in the early 1800s, were being named by a different generation: Americans just a few decades removed from their own revolution, still working out what it meant to build something new. Rather than reach for another English name, a lot of these towns reached outward, toward the wider world.

New York experienced the same population surge in the same period — from 340,000 to 1.3 million between 1790 and 1820 — and ended up with a strikingly similar list: Amsterdam, Naples, Palermo, Paris, Peru, Rome, Stockholm, Sweden. Massachusetts, by contrast, has only a handful of towns with any international flavor. The pattern seems to track less with "Maine is quirky" and more with which states were rapidly founding new towns at that particular cultural moment.

It's worth separating what's actually being honored here, because the two categories tell different stories. The great majority of Maine's foreign names are cities, not countries: Paris, Rome, Moscow, Vienna, Madrid, Stockholm, Naples, Verona, Sorrento, Calais, Belfast, Belgrade, Lisbon, Dresden, Frankfurt, Limerick, Bremen, Corinth, Athens, Bristol, Cambridge, Dover, and Oxford. Only a smaller handful are literal countries — Mexico, Peru, China, Denmark, Norway, Poland, Sweden, Lebanon, and Wales.

That's a meaningful distinction, because the "city" names carry the clearest, best-documented stories. In contrast, the "country" names turn out to be a much more mixed bag — some genuinely political, some accidental, some just following a trend.

The single clearest thread running through Maine's naming spree is admiration for other nations fighting for their own independence. This cause resonated deeply with Mainers who'd only recently won theirs.

Paris is the best example. The town took its name specifically to thank France for its help to the American colonists during the Revolutionary War. Three years later, a clerical error at the Massachusetts provincial government turned a neighboring settlement — meant to be called Norwich or Norage — into Norway instead, and the misspelling stuck.

Mexico and Peru follow the same pattern, but for more recent news. Mexico was named in 1818, while the country of that name was still fighting its war of independence from Spain. Peru, originally called Partridgetown, changed its name in 1821 — the very year Peru itself declared independence. Moscow got its name in 1812, after townspeople were impressed by Russia's repulse of Napoleon's invasion. Belgrade may have been named in sympathy for Serbs caught in the middle of wars between Austria and Turkey.

Of all the country names on Maine's list, only Mexico and Peru genuinely fit this "we admired your fight for freedom" narrative in a well-documented way — even though it's the story most often told about the state as a whole.

Not every name has a political story, and some of the most "exotic"-sounding towns turn out to have the least dramatic origins. China — often cited as the strangest example of Maine's foreign naming — was actually named after a hymn called "China" that was popular among the town's settlers. Poland, similarly, is likely named after a religious song its founder was fond of, not the nation itself.

The Bible supplied another whole category of names: Lebanon, Hebron, and Mars Hill (a hill in Athens where the Apostle Paul once preached) all trace back to scripture rather than any foreign country. And the early 1800s saw a surge of interest in classical history, which shows up in names like Athens, Palermo, Rome, and Troy — Mainers naming towns after the ancient world they were reading about, long before anyone crossed an ocean to visit.

A separate cluster of names has nothing to do with revolutionary sympathy or hymns — it's about who actually moved there. New Sweden and Stockholm, both in Aroostook County, were named for the Swedish immigrants recruited to settle the area by Maine diplomat William Thomas; New Sweden was incorporated in 1870, Stockholm in 1881. The nearby town of Sweden, in Oxford County, is a different story — it seems to have followed the naming trend when it incorporated in 1813, with little documented rationale.

Calais, on the Canadian border, likely borrows its logic from geography rather than sentiment: it sits directly across the water from Dover, New Brunswick, echoing the real Calais-Dover pairing across the English Channel. Denmark and Sweden, similarly, may have been named for their positions relative to each other, mirroring the way the countries sit side by side in Scandinavia.

One quirk historians keep coming back to is Maine's small constellation of towns named for Italian cities — Rome, Verona, Sorrento, Palermo, and Naples — despite the state having very few residents of Italian descent at the time. It's a reminder that most of these names weren't chosen because settlers had a personal connection to the place. They were chosen because the name meant something — independence, history, faith, sound — regardless of who actually lived there.

Taken together, Maine's foreign place names aren't really one story — they're several overlapping ones stitched together by the accident of timing. A wave of new towns needed names at the exact moment a young United States was watching revolutions unfold across the globe, still steeped in Biblical and

(MAINE, continued on page 11)

(MILT, continued from page 3)

He often cuts out the middleman, which keeps his prices down, even though he includes handmade frames. That is the other wonderful thing about buying directly from Milt—his prices are extremely affordable. Some prints are \$50. Keeping his work local and his prices affordable makes it easy for Milt to sell a lot of work, and that has been a deliberate business decision. He could go to the coast and even showcase in many more galleries, but he chooses not to. Still, there is something about buying local and walking away with something original—something to hand down for generations.

Outside of Maine, Milt showcases his work in Tucson, Arizona, where he sells quite a bit of his desert and mountain pieces—and not much of his forest or coastal work. But, back here in Maine, and through the end of this year, you can see Milt's work, along with art by 17 other artists, at the Gascoine Gallery in Monson, where Milt is part of their latest exhibit called Naiad Flow, focused on artists creating fine artwork touched by rivers.

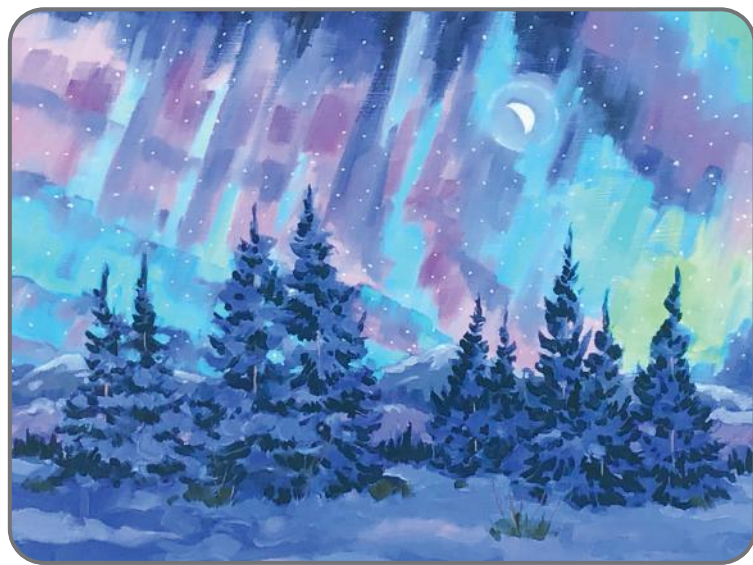
Milt sells a lot of prints, and unlike some artists who send their digital work away to be printed, Milt works locally. All of his prints are produced in Waterville, and most of his work is perfectly photographed by the printer to ensure the best color quality.

In the winter months, Milt can be found in his home, painting dozens of new works, then framing them and getting them ready for the spring, when he emerges from his little oasis to sell his art in person at local markets. However, it will be rare to get a studio tour. There is so much art stacked against walls that, for the novice, the experience can be overwhelming, but for the avid collector of art, specifically Milt's work, spending a day sifting through all that stacked art can be the experience of a lifetime.

One thing that stood out to me, as someone who has spent a lot of time in the art world over the last three decades, is that Milt does not have a website. If you want to see some of his work you can find him on Facebook.

If you want to experience his work in person or purchase any of his work, you need to contact him directly or visit the Gascoine Gallery in Monson, Maine Minerals in Greenville, or the Monson Art Gallery.

www.facebook.com/milton.christianson



Bunker Brook and the Lesser-Known Cascades

Shirley's Bunker Brook waterfall doesn't always make the glossy travel roundups, but it's the kind of spot locals point visitors toward precisely because it isn't overrun. It's part of a broader pattern in Piscataquis County: for every falls with its own parking area and interpretive sign, there are a dozen more known mainly by word of mouth, reached by unmarked pull-offs and old logging roads.

Planning a Waterfall Trip

A few things hold across nearly all of these: cell service is spotty to nonexistent in much of the county, trail conditions shift with the seasons (spring melt means bigger, faster water and slicker rocks), and swimming isn't permitted at every falls, so it pays to check before packing a suit. The Piscataquis County Chamber of Commerce maintains a running list and map of the region's most popular falls, and it's a solid starting point for anyone plotting a multi-stop waterfall trip through the county.

Whether it's the all-day commitment of Gulf Hagas or a half-mile stroll to Little Wilson Falls, Piscataquis County offers a version of "waterfall hunting" for just about every level of ambition — which is exactly why it keeps showing up at the top of Maine's outdoor recommendation lists.

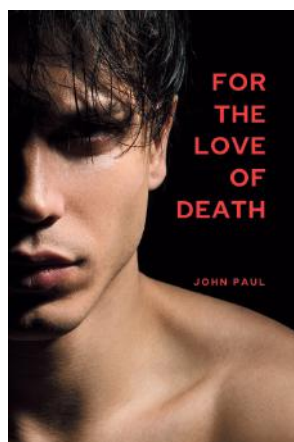
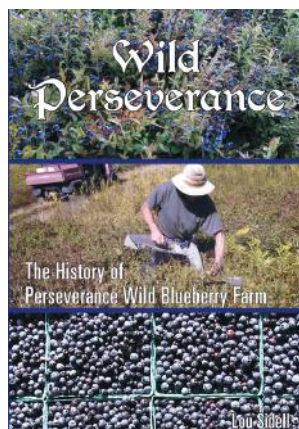


classical references, absorbing waves of new immigrants, and — every once in a while — making an honest clerical mistake that stuck for two centuries.

The next time you drive from Paris to Norway to Denmark without ever leaving Oxford County, it's worth remembering that you're not just passing through a novelty road sign. You're driving through a fairly literal map of what mattered to the people founding towns in Maine two hundred years ago: freedom, faith, history, and the sense that a brand-new country belonged, in some small way, to the whole world.



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