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John R. Muether

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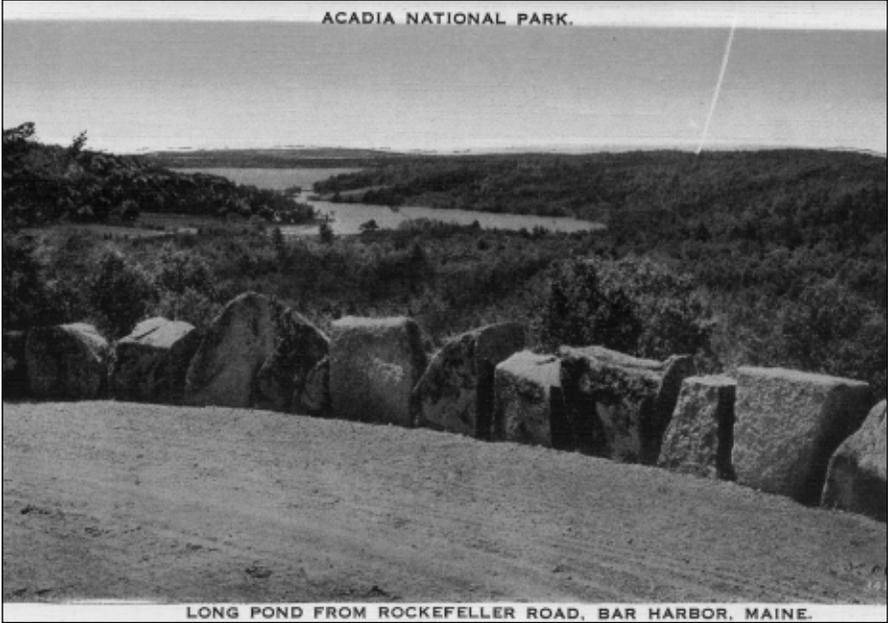


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Long Pond from Rockefeller Road, Mt. Desert Island, ca. 1929. John D. Rockefeller is renowned for his extensive philanthropy. Much of his generosity was focused on Maine's Mt. Desert Island, which he called his summer home. He donated thousands of acres to Acadia National Park and built its miles of carriage roads. This photograph hints at the incredible beauty of the landscape that Rockefeller helped to preserve. *Courtesy of the Maine Historical Society.*

“SEAL HARBOR’S PATRON SAINT”: JOHN D. ROCKEFELLER, JR., AND THE MOUNT DESERT LARGER PARISH

BY JOHN R. MUETHER

The Mount Desert Larger Parish (1925-1984) was the brainchild of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., who sought to apply modern industrial models to meet the religious needs of towns on the island where he established his summer home. Beyond his personal philanthropy, Rockefeller’s active involvement in the Parish extended to fund-raising and staff recruitment. Rockefeller was persuaded that Mount Desert was the perfect setting for this experiment in interdenominational cooperation, and he imagined its success would generate similar partnerships that would reshape American Protestantism. The challenges the Parish experienced through its six decades reveal the tensions between the island’s “summer people” and its year-long residents as well as rural Maine’s resistance to Rockefeller’s business models. John R. Muether earned his B.A. from Gordon College in Wenham, Mass., and masters degrees from Westminster Theological Seminary and Simmons Graduate School of Library and Information Science. Since 1989 he has served as Library Director and Associate Professor of Church History at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida, when he is not vacationing in coastal Maine. His most recent book is SEEKING A BETTER COUNTRY: 300 YEARS OF AMERICAN PRESBYTERIANISM (co-authored with D. G. Hart). Together with his wife Kathryn he has co-edited LITERARY MOUNT DESERT: AN ANTHOLOGY (forthcoming in 2008 from Islandport Press).

JOHAN D. ROCKEFELLER (1874-1960) was an ambitious philanthropist, his legacy evident across the American landscape. His restoration of colonial Williamsburg in Virginia, for example, or his generous endowment of the United Nations headquarters in New York speaks to his benevolence. The wealthy heir of the Standard Oil Company, Rockefeller’s good works left an imprint on Maine’s Mount Desert Island as well: he donated thousands of acres to Acadia National Park and built its

miles of carriage roads, aptly described as “Mr. Rockefeller’s Roads” in a study by Ann Rockefeller Roberts.¹

In spite of the popular association between Rockefeller and the island he made his summer home, one connection has gone largely overlooked: Rockefeller’s concern for the religious needs of the island. This concern prompted his long-time leadership in the Mount Desert Larger Parish. A “larger parish” describes a federation of small churches, usually representing different denominations, which extends over a township or several townships, united under a central council and sharing ministerial staff. Five larger parishes were established in rural Maine in the early twentieth century, where the isolation and rigors of Maine’s winter months made it difficult for small churches to maintain services and ministries on their own.²

Despite his sincerity and determination, Rockefeller was never able to secure a permanent place for the Mount Desert Larger Parish. This failure stemmed from his chronic inability to see beyond his own vision and consider the importance of local custom for the year-round residents of the island. A closer examination of the effort behind the Mount Desert Larger Parish reveals three sources of failure: Rockefeller’s liberal Christian values and his abhorrence of denominationalism; his adherence to standards of efficient bureaucracy embedded in big-business principles of the time; and his own position as one of the Island’s “summer people.”

Rockefeller’s Religious Philanthropy

Rockefeller’s involvement in Mount Desert religious affairs was natural, given the close tie between his philanthropy and his religious convictions. Raised in a liberal Baptist home, Rockefeller was a devout Christian. Religious faith, wrote his authorized biographer Raymond B. Fosdick, “gave impulse and direction to almost everything he did.”³ His early religious philanthropy included support for the Interchurch World Movement (1918-1921), a grandiose but short-lived effort of Christian world evangelization and social reform. Rockefeller went so far as to boast that the IWM was “capable of having a much more far-reaching influence than the League of Nations in bringing about peace, contentment, goodwill and prosperity among the people of the earth.”⁴ He later funded, in the amount of \$3 million, the Institute for Social and Religious Research, an organization that sought to apply modern scientific methods to contemporary religious problems. He contributed significantly both to the Federal Council of Churches and to its successor, the

National Council of Churches. Toward the end of his life, he was instrumental in the erection of the Interchurch Center in New York City. His Sealantic Fund made the Manhattan west side property available, and he donated \$2 million toward its construction and another \$500,000 for its limestone exterior.

All of these projects shared the goal of the reunification of Christendom. Rockefeller deplored the “splintered state of Protestantism” in America, and he carried throughout his life a vision for the interdenominational cooperation and eventual union of American Protestants. The First World War especially impressed upon him the urgency of religious cooperation and the need “to bring the warring factions of Christianity together.” In his postwar address, “The Christian Church: What of its Future?” he described his hope in this way: “I see all denominational emphasis set aside. I see cooperation, not competition.... I see the church molding the thought of the world as it has never done before, leading in all great movements, as it should.” After the Second World War, Rockefeller repeated this talk in an address to the Protestant Council of the City of New York on January 31, 1945, adding his frustration in seeing his ecumenical vision unfold at a pace that was “too slow and too little.”⁵

As a child of Protestant liberalism, Rockefeller was nurtured in the activism of the Social Gospel, a movement begun in the late nineteenth century that sought to apply the Christian faith to social problems, such as poverty, race relations, and labor issues. Traditional religion, Rockefeller feared, had fallen behind modern times; it was structurally unable to meet the religious needs of modern men and women, and it would continue to fail as long as it was defined by creeds and doctrine. Rockefeller was convinced that the religious spirit in humanity was unquenchable, but the church, as the institutional expression of that impulse, was becoming obsolete.

Along with his fellow religious progressives, Rockefeller joined the effort to preserve and shape mainline Protestantism as an American common religion. Although Protestant liberals were actively challenging traditional religious expressions, there was also a conservative impulse in Rockefeller’s religious goals. Rockefeller was a strong moralist (with strict sabbath-keeping and prohibitionist convictions) even while he was thoroughly in step with the emergent theological modernism of the early twentieth century. Rockefeller thus sought to preserve the substance of traditional religion in modern forms. The outmoded religious form that Rockefeller especially targeted for elimination was Protestant denominationalism.



The Riverside Church in the upper west side of New York City. Begun in 1925 and opened in 1930, the Riverside Church, modeled after the thirteenth-century Gothic cathedral in Chartres, France, was the largest of Rockefeller's ecumenical projects. Rockefeller donated the church's twenty-floor story tower and dedicated the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial Carillon to his mother. The carillon's twenty-ton bourdon bell was the largest turned bell in the world. *Courtesy of the Riverside Church, New York; photography by Tinoa Rodgers.*

As a modernist, Rockefeller was committed to industrial efficiency. In his business practice he "inherited a tendency to consolidate and trim wastefulness," and he was eager to apply this principle to American Protestantism, which he viewed as an inefficient wasteland of sectarianism, strife, and competition.⁶ Rockefeller was extremely confident in his ecumenical expectations. What worked for business would surely work for religion as well. In a 1931 address to the Layman's Foreign Mission

Inquiry, he acknowledged the divided state of American Christianity. Yet all quarters shared the “spirit of Christ,” in his judgment, and so he dared his listeners to dream: “probably all of the religions of mankind will ultimately unite in recognizing this spirit, for all of these great religions have their own way of moving toward the realization of God.”⁷

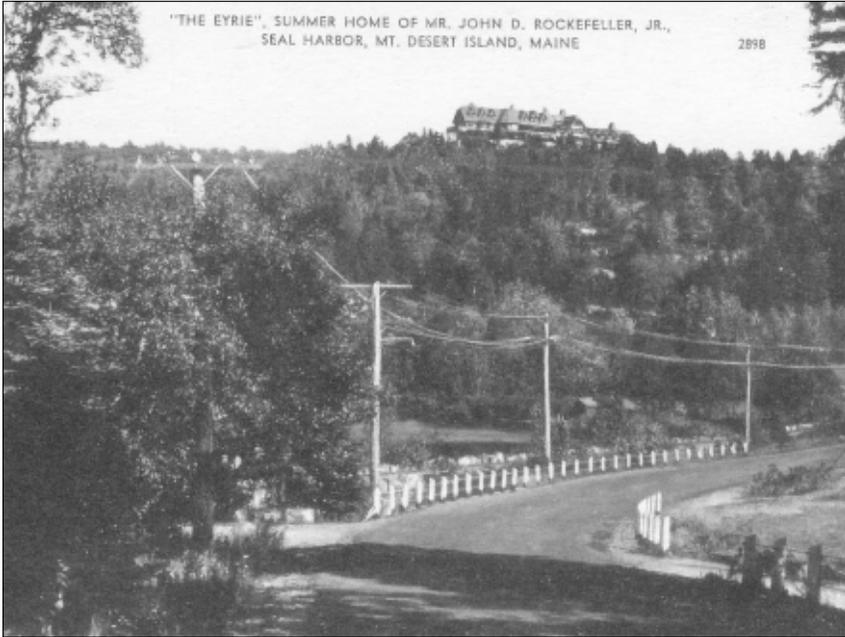
By far the grandest of his ecumenical projects was the Riverside Church in the upper west side of New York City, begun in 1925 and opened on October 5, 1930. Modeling the church after the thirteenth-century Gothic cathedral in Chartres, France, architects spared no expense in its construction. Rockefeller chaired the building committee, and he donated the twenty-floor tower and the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial Carillon, named after his mother. The carillon’s twenty-ton bourdon bell was the largest turned bell in the world. According to Raymond Fosdick, this was the “most complete expression of Rockefeller’s ideal of a unified church.”⁸

Forming the Larger Parish

This grand ecumenical vision was also writ small in Rockefeller’s summer home in Seal Harbor, Maine. Rockefeller’s fondness for Mount Desert Island began when he vacationed in Bar Harbor with his family in 1908, staying in the Sears cottage on Wayman Street.⁹ The following summer he rented a home in Seal Harbor, preferring its quieter and less ostentatious atmosphere.

In 1910 he purchased a sixty-five-room cottage, which he and his wife, Abby, would eventually expand into 107 rooms. Many biographers describe the “Eyrie” like the other Rockefeller homes: a place of intense family seclusion. In the words of one writer, Rockefeller’s homes were “fortresses, places designed to shield his family from the outside world.”¹⁰ There is certainly some truth in that description, but it belies Rockefeller’s passionate civic-mindedness. If other summer residents came to Mount Desert to escape the world, Rockefeller himself was inescapably active in his local community.

This is most clearly evident in his leadership in the Mount Desert Larger Parish (hereafter MDLP). In 1925, three small churches on Mount Desert Island were without pastors: Northeast Harbor Union Church, Seal Harbor Congregational Church, and Otter Creek Congregational Church.¹¹ These independent churches were living hand to mouth, and they struggled to secure regular pulpit supply. What might they accomplish, Rockefeller imagined, if they worked in partnership rather than in isolation?



Summer home of John D. Rockefeller jr. in Seal Harbor, Maine on Mount Desert Island. In 1910 Rockefeller purchased this sixteen-acre, 65-room “cottage” which he and his wife later expanded to 107 rooms. Known as the “Eyrie,” the home was characterized as a place of family seclusion, much like most of the other Rockefeller homes. One writer described these homes as “fortresses, places designed to shield his family from the outside world.” *Courtesy of the Maine Historical Society.*

Rockefeller was interested in learning of the development of a new rural parish concept by social worker Malcolm Dana, called the “Larger Parish.” At Rockefeller’s request, Dana conducted a survey of the religious and social conditions of Mount Desert Island, and he determined that Mount Desert was ideally suited for his larger parish plan. As Dana wrote to Rockefeller: “it is evident that ... the churches as a whole are not making a serious impact upon the possible constituency. The men, in particular, are reported as having nothing to do, as far as church attendance, with the churches. This is not, I am told, on good authority of both native and summer people, because the people do not believe in religion or the church – but they do not believe in them as they are doing business now, in their utter lack of PROGRAM. There seems little sense of being ... or of IMPORTANCE as a social factor on the island.”¹²

Simply put, Dana’s larger parish concept united several congregations under a broader administrative umbrella – a Parish Council – that

would ensure an active continuous ministry. As Dana later described it, the larger parish would be a “knitting of all of the moral and religious agencies in Mount Desert into a common program.”¹³ At first glance, the MDLP appeared merely a means of getting rural churches adequately staffed. In some respects the plan was hardly revolutionary, as a spirit of cooperation was well-established in Maine Protestantism by this time. Union churches were common: the Maine Seacoast Mission, an ecumenical program that provided religious services to many of the islands off coastal Maine, was established in 1905, and the Maine Inter-denominational Commission dated back to 1893.

Dana’s concept, however, was more than the return to the nineteenth-century model of a circuit-riding minister, for it included an emphasis on modern, industrial efficiency. In his business life, Rockefeller was immersed in a world of vast, consolidated, and bureaucratized organizations, all very efficient, but also very hierarchical and very homogenized. The Larger Parish idea, although deceptively simple, reflected the ideals of this business culture. As Dana explained it, the goal was to serve a geographic area and not particular institutions or denominations. Rockefeller enthusiastically embraced the concept, and he expressed confidence that it would meet the religious needs of Mount Desert and at the same time serve as a model for struggling rural churches elsewhere. One factor Dana and Rockefeller failed to consider, however, was the individualism embedded in the island’s culture. Islanders’ adherence to local custom would prove to be one of Rockefeller’s biggest obstacles.

After Rockefeller talked with other summer residents, the Mount Desert Larger Parish was born on the front porch of Professor Francis Peabody’s Seal Harbor home in 1925. Rockefeller met with early disappointment when he failed to secure Dana’s services as pastor of the combined churches. Despite that setback, the Parish’s first year went well, according to parish records. Although the winter was particularly severe, only one service was canceled. “The spirit of enthusiasm prevails in the three churches,” MDLP Director Lee Hanchett reported. A typical weekly calendar included Sunday services in each of the three churches and Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts programs in each town. In addition, there were occasional joint services, women’s meetings, and joint Christian education and youth programs. As Charles Savage, chairman of the MDLP Council, wrote, “the Larger Parish was meeting local needs long neglected, and people were quick to sense its many values.” Dana himself described it as a “splendid beginning.”¹⁴

The arrangement was so successful that by its second year the Town

Hill Federated Church applied to join the Parish, and the Parish Council extended invitations to Southwest Harbor and the Cranberry Isles as well. Rockefeller's personal ambitions aimed higher still. "It would appear," he wrote to Dr. Clifford W. Barnes, "that we had been thoughtless in not having sought to gain the cooperation of the Episcopalian group in our original move last summer ... for it is by far the largest and the strongest religious group in our section."¹⁵ Throughout his years of involvement in the Parish, he persistently sought to incorporate the Episcopalians, though his recruitment efforts were unsuccessful.

Rockefeller insisted on serving only two three-year terms on the MDLP Council, but when he resigned in 1931 he remained active in the work for twenty-nine more years until his death in 1960. That he is not well known for this benevolence is a testimony to his success in remaining out of the limelight. Together with his wife Abby, he expressed "genuine satisfaction in being privileged to be silent partners" in the work.¹⁶

As one would expect, Rockefeller was diligent in his financial support of the Parish. Though paling in comparison with his other religious philanthropy, his contribution was substantial. His annual giving generally met a third of the MDLP's modest budget. In addition, he also supported a neighboring (and short-lived) larger parish project, the Southwest Harbor-Tremont Larger Parish. As that work struggled for ten years between 1930 and 1940, Rockefeller encouraged it to secure its total support from within its own boundaries.

Another aspect of his involvement in the Parish was his recruitment of the MDLP ministerial staff. He corresponded with friends and associates in search of graduates from area seminaries, and he often conducted initial interviews of candidates in his New York office. Consistent with his progressive religious convictions, Rockefeller looked for young men and women who were theologically modernist in viewpoint. The difficulty in retaining parish staff was an ongoing frustration for him, and he expressed his frequent disappointment with ministers who left the MDLP for other calls and larger parishes.

Rockefeller also aggressively solicited funds from other summer residents. One steady contributor was Edsel Ford, to whom Rockefeller wrote in 1937: "I look upon the money I contributed to this work as one of best investments that I make, and I think you may safely feel the same."¹⁷ He was less successful in other cases. One failure that provides a window on his religious convictions involved his brief correspondence on behalf of the Parish with a prominent religious conservative. J. Gresham Machen was a Professor of New Testament at Princeton Theologi-

cal Seminary who at the time had recently authored a searing indictment against Protestant modernism titled *Christianity and Liberalism*. Machen was also a summer resident of Seal Harbor, and he joined other Protestant ministers in filling the pulpit on occasion at the Seal Harbor Congregational Church, where Rockefeller likely heard him preach. When Rockefeller sent a solicitation letter to Machen, the latter regretfully declined to participate because in his judgment the social programming of the Larger Parish was subordinating the truly religious purpose that the church was called to perform. “The function of the Christian Church,” Machen wrote to Rockefeller, “is to proclaim to a world otherwise lost in sin and alienated from God the good news of the redemption accomplished by Christ.” The coalition of religious modernists in the Larger Parish – especially Unitarians – compromised the accomplishment of that task, as Machen noted in a follow-up letter: “I cannot continue to enroll myself as a supporter of a type of religious teaching which is contradictory to what is dearest to my own heart and what I hold to be absolutely necessary for the salvation of souls.”¹⁸

In his response to Machen, Rockefeller conceded that theirs was a difference of a fundamental character. Yet he gently pressed Machen to consider a pragmatic case for the Parish. “Is it not better,” he asked, “for all of us to join in this community in supporting a church that stands for the religious aspirations of the community, even if you or I or someone else may not wholly agree with the particular doctrine that may be preached from time to time? Is it not better, I say, to maintain such a church than to have no church at all? . . . [M]ay this not be an instance where a compromise is justified?”¹⁹ In the end, Rockefeller failed to persuade Machen, who claimed that his conservative Presbyterian scruples were as conscientious and compelling as the Episcopalians who also had not united with the cause.

Rockefeller’s engagement with the Parish extended beyond fundraising. He developed strong interest in the personal lives of the staff he recruited. He was unfailing in his encouragement of the Parish staff, which was frequently noted with gratitude: “your interest in and loyalty to the work of the Larger Parish makes many of the discouraging times seem much brighter,” wrote one staff member. Another summer resident and long-time member of the MDLP Council dubbed the philanthropist “Seal Harbor’s Patron Saint.”²⁰

Clearly, Rockefeller perceived that more was at stake than Mount Desert. He considered the Larger Parish to be a revolutionary new form of ministry in the United States, and he constantly reminded the MDLP



New York Times headline of March 5, 1934 criticizing Rockefeller's Larger Parish concept. This article embarrassed Rockefeller, who worried over the damage it might cause to the public relations campaign supporting the Larger Parish concept. The Larger Parish effort reflected Rockefeller's deep commitment to anti-denominationalism, a position to which he remained committed until his death in 1960.

Council that the world was watching its experiment. If the Larger Parish "can be made a permanent success on Mount Desert Island," he wrote to Dana, "a tremendous gain for the movement will have been achieved." But "if it fails there, then the future of the movement is bleak."²¹ It was therefore a matter of considerable embarrassment for him that severe criticism of the work came from another Rockefeller-supported philanthropy, a study by the Institute for Social and Religious Research. Its 1934 report offered a frank and unflattering assessment of the movement. "There are more speeches made and pamphlets written about Larger Parishes than there are Larger Parishes," the report contended. Well over half of them had closed, due to their failure "to take into account patent sociological considerations." Rockefeller expressed particular objection to a *New York Times* article on the ISRR report, and he worried about the public-relations damage from the article. "With all the defects of the movement," he wrote to Galen M. Fisher of the ISRR, "I have felt that it was a great improvement over the individual unrelated churches that existed in the communities before. While a critical analysis of the movement is highly desirable and its friends should not fear the light of criticism, unless something better can be offered it seems too bad to undermine such good that has been done."²²

At the same time, Rockefeller well understood the limits of his philanthropy for the success of the Parish. Throughout the years of his in-

volvement he was frustrated by the meager giving of the year-long residents, and he encouraged the ministerial staff to engage actively in membership drives and fundraising among those residents. MDLP Director Merton P. McKendry warned that “overindulgences [by the summer community] is a danger, and it is of the utmost importance that the people carry their own burdens insofar as they are reasonably able.” Rockefeller agreed. Yearly residents, he wrote, “cannot expect summer residents to make good this loss indefinitely.” Changes in giving were needed for “the salvation of this Parish.” To Charles Savage he wrote, “the permanent residents of Seal Harbor are not contributing generally or largely to the support of this work. The work cannot be permanently successful unless all of the permanent residents of the Island who are included in it take a personal, unselfish, self-sacrificing interest in it.” To Malcolm Dana, Rockefeller was even more frank. The MDLP, he wrote, “has been largely financed ... by a group of people that could be counted on less than the fingers of two hands.”²³ Rockefeller’s expressions of frustration gloss a deeper problem with the larger parish idea: its failure to come to terms with the social and cultural, as opposed to institutional barriers to ecumenical Protestantism on Mount Desert Island.

At other times Rockefeller expressed his frustration that the MDLP’s vision was not ambitious enough. Although they often participated in some union services, educational programs, and social outreach ministries, Episcopalians never joined the parish. Another disappointment was his failure to secure cooperation from the Roman Catholic Church. In 1944, Rockefeller engaged in extensive correspondence to secure either the purchase or the winter rental of a Seal Harbor Catholic Church building that had been abandoned during the war. He went so far as to appeal to the Catholic former governor of New York, Alfred E. Smith. Smith referred the request to New York Bishop Francis J. McIntyre who in turn consulted experts in Catholic canon law. Their conclusion was that Catholic law excluded the rental or sale of Catholic church property “for the purpose of holding services of another denomination.”²⁴ Thus the Catholic Church declined either to sell or to rent its building to MDLP.

Rockefeller’s naiveté in this episode was particularly revealing. Catholic standoffishness was understandable to anyone familiar with the history of Protestant anti-Catholicism in Maine. Even the most ecumenically-minded Protestants continued to fear the “alien blood” of the French Canadian and Irish immigrant mill workers. Here again, Rockefeller’s appeal demonstrated some ignorance of local culture and its resistance to his progressive agenda. Moreover, it is possible that Rocke-

feller, as a Baptist, had underestimated the ecclesiological impediments for Catholic and Episcopalian cooperation. His frustration underscored the limits to Protestant ecumenism in the mid-twentieth century. Despite the grandeur of his vision, Rockefeller's Mount Desert religious coalition was limited to low-church Protestant modernists.

In the summer of 1947, the year of Bar Harbor's disastrous conflagration, Rockefeller was busy extinguishing a very different fire. John Paul McGee resigned from the MDLP staff, opting instead to pastor a single congregation. In his resignation he expressed skepticism about the administration of the Larger Parish. It was, he charged, a "dictatorship" of the summer residents that generated a "smoldering discontent" among the yearlong residents. Control of the parish was too top-down, he claimed, and a more democratic and less condescending approach was needed. Local churches were losing their identity to the larger parish, resulting in member apathy and indifference. "Listen to the people," McGee exhorted, "find out what they want, and abide by their desires."²⁵

This was a time, Rockefeller conceded, of "Parish unrest," and he broke his characteristic reserve by speaking at the annual meeting on July 29, 1947 at the home of Mrs. W. Rodman Peabody in Northeast Harbor. At that meeting he acknowledged that the principles and policies of the MDLP should be reviewed from time to time. Still, he vigorously defended the Larger Parish ideal. The "notable achievements" over the past twenty years provided "ample proof" of its sound principles. "What a sad commentary," he went on to argue, "that the principle of cooperation (the only hope of the world) ... would be lost and [the churches] revert to the isolationist basis of former years." He concluded by pleading: "May we not give up our birthright for a mess of pottage!"²⁶

MDLP Director Merton McKendry was pleased with Rockefeller's timely intervention, and he characterized Rockefeller's remarks as "an admirable statement pointing up the pertinent facts and abiding principles with clarity and brevity."²⁷ Rockefeller and the Larger Parish survived the storm, but the Parish continued to struggle financially, and the problems Magee described as a subtle class and cultural tension were far from solved.

Three years later, the unrest of 1947 was followed by an experience that may have constituted the highlight of Rockefeller's experience with the Larger Parish. The connection between the grand ecumenical project of the Riverside Church and the modest experiment of the MDLP was never more apparent than in 1950, when Rockefeller arranged to

have Harry Emerson Fosdick speak at the twenty-fifth anniversary celebration of the Parish. By that time Fosdick was minister emeritus at the Riverside Church, and, in Rockefeller's mind, the perfect speaker, as he noted in a letter to Fosdick's wife: "because the Larger Parish was conceived and has carried on in the broad spirit of Christian tolerance and cooperation, which your husband's life and preaching have proclaimed so unequivocally and so effectively for the past half century, there is no one who could have spoken on this important anniversary with greater appropriateness, force, and significance." Fosdick did not disappoint his friend; he delivered a "moving and inspiring address" that was well received by 400 listeners.²⁸

Throughout its struggles and despite the criticism, Rockefeller remained a faithful apologist for the Parish, from its founding until his death. The project was always intimately tied to his deepest religious ideals. Reflecting on his long-time association with the project, Rockefeller later told an interviewer that

The Larger Parish movement, as exemplified on Mount Desert Island where I have been closely in touch with it since its inception, combines economy in operation, a highly trained staff, a richer social and spiritual program, with community co-operation and Christian tolerance. Nothing is lost in the religious liberty of the individual, while much is gained in the spiritual and social life of the people. May it not well be that Christ's prayer at the Last Supper, "that they may be one," is finding at least a partial answer in this unique and highly successful venture in religious co-operation?²⁹

The Larger Parish played no small role in reinforcing Rockefeller's religious convictions. Professor Francis Peabody suggested in a letter to Rockefeller that his "experiences on our little island" had forged his ecumenical vision. In turn, Rockefeller had changed the religious culture on Mount Desert Island. Peabody wrote that the Union Church of Northeast Harbor and the Larger Parish had "done much to emancipate me from the ideals of denominationalism."³⁰

The Larger Parish after Rockefeller

John D. Rockefeller, Jr., died on May 11, 1960, at the age of 86. On July 31, 1960, the MDLP memorialized his leadership and support with a "Service of Remembrance and Appreciation." For a time, his vision



Portrait of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., heir to the Standard Oil Company fortune. Rockefeller's ambitious philanthropic legacy is evident across the American landscape. Some of his more renowned projects included the restoration of colonial Williamsburg in Virginia, his endowment of the United Nations headquarters in New York, and his donation of thousands of acres to Acadia National Park on Maine's Mount Desert Island. Less well known was Rockefeller's devout Christian faith and his substantial dedication to religious philanthropy.

continued to sustain the work he had begun. Two of his sons, David and Nelson, served briefly on the MDLP council, and in a 1961 fundraising letter, David reiterated his father's dream: "for 36 years the shocking spectacle of a divided and competitive Protestantism has been absent from a central part of Mount Desert Island." Rockefeller's ecumenical spirit lived on when the MDLP and the Seal Harbor Congregational Church voted unanimously to join the United Church of Christ in 1962.

But difficult times continued to plague the Parish. Property maintenance expenses drained the Parish's budget, and after its last service on July 1, 1984, the Seal Harbor church passed into the hands of a private buyer. The small congregation now meets in the Abby Chapel, named after Rockefeller's wife.³¹ In 1989, after sixty-four years, the Mount Desert Larger Parish was dissolved. Soon thereafter, two of the member churches of the Parish, Town Hill and Otter Creek, closed their doors, victims of declining populations and changing demographics. Thus came to an end "this lovely center of Christian unity."³² In Raymond Fosdick's words, Rockefeller's religious work could be summarized as "the story of his attempts – many of them unsuccessful – to discover some means of cultivating a true spirit of cooperation among the various religious groups."³³ As we have seen, this vision did not go on holiday during Rockefeller's summer pilgrimages to Seal Harbor. Rather, he was active in improving the religious condition of the island, and he was eager to see it embody his vision for Protestant cooperation. But in the end, did the MDLP count among Rockefeller's successes or failures?

Rockefeller himself was generally given to exaggerate the success of the Parish. Writing to his long-time friend Harry Emerson Fosdick, Rockefeller asserted that "in many ways [it has] revolutionized the social as well the religious life of the southern half of the island."³⁴ This hopeful and unsubstantiated claim bore his naïve confidence in industrial solutions – in this case, the efficiencies of consolidated enterprise – for rural problems. It would be too cynical to reduce the Mount Desert Larger Parish to another diversion in the playground of the island's wealthy summer residents; indeed, Rockefeller himself was careful to restrain himself from micromanaging the mission. Yet his besetting frustration in securing the financial support of the island's year-long residents revealed his failure to reckon fully with the class and cultural differences between summer and year-long island residents and their respective religious needs. Rockefeller consistently underestimated the extent to which the permanent residents resisted the loss of local control that the MDLP structure demanded. His cosmopolitan ambitions blinded him to the independence and individualism of rural Maine life.

As Ben Primer has argued, the Gilded Age was a period of vast bureaucratization in American Protestantism. The emphasis on organization, specialization, and expertise transformed churches into highly centralized bureaucracies that vested administrative structures with power and money.³⁵ This efficiency tended to run roughshod over local customs and practices, and the Mount Desert Larger Parish story seemed

marked by its resistance to the ideology of organizational efficiency that was accepted elsewhere. Perhaps this constituted the “patent sociological considerations” about which ISRR warned in its criticism of the larger parish structure, as Rockefeller’s religious aspirations and business zeal obscured the degree to which he was perpetuating a WASP cultural hegemony over local culture.

Rockefeller was by no means alone. The *Christian Century* warned in 1928 that Christian ministry in Maine was not meeting “the standard of progressive Christian education” and urged the spread of the larger parish concept throughout the state.³⁶ This perspective was understandable at a time when mainline Protestant liberalism reached the height of its power and influence in American culture. Rockefeller’s life coincided with the rise of the Protestant mainline, and the years since his death have marked its fall and the transition in American religion from the Protestant establishment to established secularism. The demise of the Mount Desert Larger Parish may have embodied that transition as well.

Finally, Rockefeller’s post-denominational vision may have pronounced a premature end to the vitality and diversity of the institutions he sought to displace. Perhaps a dissenter like Machen was right after all: a homogenized theological modernism that ultimately accommodated itself to culture was not as effective as the more angular richness and particularism of traditional Protestant denominationalism.

In sum, John D. Rockefeller, Jr.’s labors on behalf of the Mount Desert Larger Parish, for all of his progressive and ecumenical spirit, entailed a commitment to a form of religious and cultural modernism that now – eighty years later – seems very dated.

NOTES

1. Ann Rockefeller Roberts, “Mr. Rockefeller’s Roads:” *The Untold Story of Acadia’s Carriage Roads and their Creator* (Camden, Maine: Downeast Books, 1900).

2. Hilda L. Ives, “Maine’s United Parishes,” *Christian Century* 45 (July 19, 1928): 900-901.

3. Raymond B. Fosdick, *John D. Rockefeller, Jr.: A Portrait* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956), p. 202. Raymond Fosdick, brother of Harry Emerson Fosdick, was himself a secularist who conceded that he lacked enough faith “to put on the back of a postage stamp” (quoted in Albert F. Schenkel, *The Rich Man and the Kingdom: John D. Rockefeller, Jr. and the Protestant Establishment* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995], p. 89). This explains the largely secular tone of his authorized biography of Rockefeller.

4. Quoted in Charles E. Harvey, "John D. Rockefeller and the Interchurch World Movement of 1919-1920: A Different Angle on the Ecumenical Movement," *Church History* 51 (1982): 202.
5. Fosdick, *Rockefeller*, p. 203; Peter Collier and David Horowitz, *The Rockefellers: An American Dynasty* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976), p. 150; address (December 11, 1917) published in *Saturday Evening Post*, February 9, 1918; John D. Rockefeller, Jr. *The Christian Church: What of its Future?* (New York: Protestant Council, 1945).
6. Collier and Horowitz, *Rockefellers*, p. 150.
7. Fosdick, *Rockefeller*, p. 224.
8. Fosdick, *Rockefeller*, pp. 222-23.
9. Bernice Kert, *Abby Aldrich Rockefeller: The Woman in the Family* (New York: Random House, 1993), p. 131.
10. Cary Reich, *The World of Nelson Rockefeller: Worlds to Conquer, 1908-1958* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), p. 16.
11. Over the course of its history the membership in the Larger Parish would change. It would grow as large as six, including at different times Town Hall, Salisbury Cove, Somesville, and Hall Quarry.
12. Malcolm Dana, "Findings – Visit of Rev. Malcolm Dana to Mount Desert Island," September 1-10, 1925 (Rockefeller Archives Center [hereafter "RAC"], III.2.I, box 65, folder 656).
13. Dana to John D. Rockefeller (hereafter JDR), August 14, 1928, RAC 65, 656.
14. Hanchett to Dana, March 27, 1926, RAC 65, 656; Savage in Leigh Mitchell Hodges, *A Church Co-op that Works* (s. l.: Mount Desert Larger Parish, 1942), p. 6; Dana to JDR, August 14, 1928, RAC 65, 656.
15. JDR to Barnes, April 20, 1926, RAC 65, 656.
16. JDR to Ellsworth Smith, December 18, 1929, RAC 65, 657.
17. JDR to Ford, October 15, 1937, RAC 65, 658.
18. J. Gresham Machen to JDR, October 28, 1926; September 9, 1927, J. Gresham Machen Archives, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia.
19. JDR to Machen, September 14, 1927, Machen Archives.
20. Eunice B. Shaw to JDR, January 14, 1931, RAC 65, 657; Katharine C. Angell to JDR, ca. August 1939, RAC 65, 663.
21. JDR to Dana, March 11, 1931, RAC 65, 662.
22. *New York Times*, March 5, 1934; JDR to Fisher, March 14, 1934, RAC 65, 657.
23. McKendry to JDR, March 2, 1944, RAC 66, 664; JDR to Arthur Packard, March 13, 1944, RAC 66, 664; JDR to Savage, January 11, 1927, RAC 65, 656; JDR to Dana, March 11, 1931, RAC 65, 662.
24. Bishop Francis J. McIntyre to JDR, September 15, 1944, RAC 66, 664.
25. From JDR notes of McGee's statement, July 1947, RAC 66, 668.

26. "Statement as Prepared by JDR, Jr.," July 1947, RAC 66, 668.
27. McKendry to JDR, July 26, 1947, RAC 66, 668. (McKendry was commenting on an advanced copy of Rockefeller's remarks.)
28. JDR to Mrs. Harry Emerson Fosdick, July 28, 1950, RAC 66, 665; JDR to H.E. Fosdick, August 16, 1950, RAC 66, 665.
29. Rockefeller in Hodges, *A Church Co-op that Works*, p. 12.
30. Rockefeller in Schenkel, *The Rich Man and the Kingdom*, p. 200.
31. Isabel K. Bechtle, *A History of the Congregational Church, Seal Harbor, Maine* (Bangor: Northeast Reprographics, 2002), p. 22.
32. Hodges, *A Church Co-op that Works*, p. 11.
33. Fosdick, *Rockefeller*, p. 204.
34. JDR to H.E. Fosdick, November 28, 1949, RAC 66, 662.
35. Ben Primer, *Protestants and American Business Methods* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1979), p. 36; Ives, "Maine's United Parishes" p. 900.