“Maine and Her Soil, or Blood!": Political Rhetoric and Spatial Identity during the Aroostook War in Maine

Michael T. Perry

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mainehistoryjournal

Part of the Political History Commons, Social History Commons, and the United States History Commons

Recommended Citation
Perry, Michael T. ""Maine and Her Soil, or Blood!": Political Rhetoric and Spatial Identity during the Aroostook War in Maine." Maine History 47, 1 (2013): 68-93. https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mainehistoryjournal/vol47/iss1/5

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in Maine History by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine. For more information, please contact um.library.technical.services@maine.edu.
General Winfield Scott, a veteran of the War of 1812, helped to mediate the conflict between Maine and New Brunswick over the Aroostook territory in early 1839. Scott’s mediation eased tensions on both sides of the disputed border, and bloodshed was averted. Maine Historical Society Collections.
“MAINE AND HER SOIL, OR BLOOD!”:
POLITICAL RHETORIC AND SPATIAL
IDENTITY DURING THE AROOSTOOK
WAR IN MAINE

BY MICHAEL T. PERRY

The Aroostook War was a two-month standoff during the winter of 1839 between Maine and New Brunswick. Overlapping boundary claims had created a disputed territory rich in timber but lacking organization. Troops were mobilized, but war was averted when national leaders in Washington and London recoiled at the prospect of a third war between the two nations. The “war” has been dismissed by contemporary observers and historians alike because of the lack of shots fired. What has largely been overlooked, however, is the large body of political rhetoric churned out by Maine’s Democrats and Whigs during the dispute. In examining this rhetoric, themes of honor, rights, and obligation emerge. While the war drums eventually faded, this rhetoric contributed to a new self-identity in Maine. A “phenomenalized” (or imagined) geography of the state emerged, in which residents of the young state were able to project their values and ambitions upon the undeveloped disputed territory. The author is a Ph.D. candidate in Canadian-American History at the University of Maine and a recipient of the University of Maine Canadian-American Center’s New England, Quebec, and Atlantic Provinces research fellowship. His current research interests include the northeastern borderlands, identity in nineteenth-century North America, and the employment of rhetoric in early republican politics. He resides in Brewer with his wife, Rebeckah, and daughters Lucy and Clara.

ON FEBRUARY 26, 1839, a peculiar sight in the annals of Maine’s history “engrossed the general attention” in the state capital. Governor John Fairfield, in office not yet three months, stood as Maine’s “commander in chief,” reviewing two columns of troops passing before him. In two days, these militiamen would be making their way into a frozen strip of disputed forestland, fully expecting to spill the blood of New Brunswick’s soldiers, who fought for the most formidable
em pire on the planet. In two months, they would be back on their
homesteads, preoccupations with honor and ambitions of glory re-
placed by the rhythm of another Maine planting season. Throngs of ex-
cited men, women, and children looked on as the soldiers formed “into a
hallow square,” faced the governor, and listened as he began his address:

Fellow soldiers: It is with feelings of the utmost satisfaction and pride,
that I witness the promptitude with which you have responded to the
call of your State, and taken up arms in her defense. This is no ordi-
nary crisis. The time has arrived when ye must stand up boldly as men,
as patriots, or meanly crouch with the servility of slaves. The time has
arrived when we must make a vigorous and manly defense of our soil,
or ignobly permit it to be wrested from us by a foreign power. At such
an alternative can a freeman hesitate? No– is the responsive and simul-
taneous shout of this whole people. That spirit of patriotism which
lighted up the fires of the Revolution, glows in the bosoms of our citi-
zens with undiminished force. May it never be extinguished while we
have rights to contend for, or aggression to oppose.¹

Nearly two centuries removed, it seems entirely out of place that a state
governor would be raising an armed force and sending it into a “crisis”
to face a foreign foe. It is more peculiar still that a relatively small state at
the northeastern edge of the country would be the one mustering its
troops.

In February 1839, however, Maine found itself at the climax of a ter-
ritorial dispute with Great Britain and the British colony of New
Brunswick. Militia activation, political posturing, and diplomatic pro-
ceedings sent officials and opinion-makers into a frenzy of rhetoric and
debate that captivated not only the adolescent state of Maine but the en-
tire North American continent.² A multitude of interests within Maine
began a simultaneous push for war with Great Britain over what General
Winfield Scott, who helped mediate the conflict, called, “a strip of land
lying between two acknowledged boundaries, without any immediate
value except for the fine ship-timber in which it abounded.”³ While
Scott may have been correct in the literal value of the land in question,
clearly to Governor Fairfield, the militiamen, and the enthusiastic
crowd, the strip of land in question was a sum greater than its individual
pine trees and pastures. The Aroostook War is today a footnote of his-
tory, but in February 1839, far more was at stake.

Despite General Scott’s dismissive comment, in the minds of Main-
ers there was more than simply an economic value to the disputed terri-
tory in the northeastern borderlands. In fact, officials and opinion-makers in Maine used war rhetoric to manufacture a new “phenomenalized” (or imagined) geography in the young state. All of the talk about the disputed territory created an imagined form, one which did not map out trees and rivers but instead “mapped out” elements of identity and ambition in the state and projected them metaphorically onto the physical thing of the land. To take the land, therefore, was to grab hold of one’s masculinity, display one’s patriotism, and legitimate Maine as a state. Although historians have typically sought to reduce the Aroostook War to the simplest terms possible, the decades between statehood and the Civil War in Maine were a time in which the notions of being an “American,” a “Maine,” and an honorable individual were interwoven. Politicized newspaper accounts and official public statements from the Aroostook War offer a point of entry into how Mainers conceptualized their “standing” in the world, in terms of both physical and societal space. As such, examining the rhetoric of the Aroostook War – the words employed by officials and opinion-makers to yield an audience’s acquiescence to a specific agenda – can help to “map out” a model of spatial identity in 1830s Maine that is more complex than most of the existing historiography allows.

For six weeks in the winter of 1839 a long-simmering boundary dispute on the northeastern frontier of the United States came to a boil. Contradictory understandings of the location of the “highlands” and the identity of the “St. Croix River” in the Treaty of Paris (1783), which ended the American Revolutionary War, created a mass of territory to the northeast of Maine and the west of New Brunswick that was claimed and administrated by both sides. The American state and British colony had become fed up with the attempts by the other to regulate lumbering in the disputed territory, and when a Maine land agent was arrested and sent to a New Brunswick prison, war seemed inevitable.

Enthusiasm for the mobilization of Maine’s militia to defend the disputed territory was widespread. On March 8, the Portland Advertiser declared that “the pomp and circumstance of glorious war has been enacted in every street.” This excitement was both a product of and an impetus for bold rhetoric from Maine’s leaders. As Maine and New Brunswick organized “posses” to defend hastily built defenses in the sparsely populated forestland of the northeastern borderlands, the United States and Great Britain begrudgingly prepared for war as well. Fortunately, more ink was spilled than blood, and soon after the arrival of “Old Fuss and Feathers” (the aforementioned General Scott), Maine
and New Brunswick reached a truce. Three years later, in 1842, the Webster-Ashburton Treaty between the United States and Great Britain settled the border between the United States and Canada, establishing the boundary much as it rests today.

When examining the Aroostook War, several questions emerge. What confluence of political, cultural, and economic conditions would lead the state of Maine towards war in 1839? How does one account for the bold words employed by Governor Fairfield? What was the significance of the disputed territory in the minds of the people of Maine? More generally, how can rhetoric be examined to better understand the identity of both speaker and audience? Before exploring these questions, a frame of reference is needed in understanding the history already written on the Aroostook War.

As alluded to above, oversimplification has been a hallmark of the historiography on the Aroostook War. With a few notable exceptions, past study on the dispute has been an exercise in forcing historical events into a preexisting mold, glossing over contradiction, and truncating layers of complexity. There are two separate schools of historians that have partaken in this practice. The first, and perhaps most common, is represented in the tomes of diplomatic history. In the longue durée of American diplomacy and armed with national myth, the bloodless dispute is handled with varying degrees of indifference and disinterest. Parsing the words used in these volumes makes for an interesting study of peripheral neglect in histories of the center, but they contribute little to understanding the actual events of the dispute from a level of narrative beyond national metahistory.

The most valuable of these diplomatic studies are those that specifically focus on Anglo-American relations. Many of these works place the Aroostook War within a series of border tensions leading up to the 1842 Webster-Ashburton Treaty. Unfortunately, more detail does not provide a greater understanding of the hearts and minds of those immediately involved in the dispute. On the contrary, Mainers and New Brunswickers are often treated as “belligerent,” simple-minded “hot-heads…[who] kicked the dogs of war” and needed proper “statesmen” to prevent them from killing one another. Although not defensible, acquiescing to the easy narrative of a shortsighted local spat being settled by level-headed national diplomats is perhaps understandable given the methodological choices made in the above studies. Their documentary support is derived almost entirely from official national sources and, of those, international correspondence and treaties are emphasized.
This approach has very real advantages for the historian looking to briefly illustrate the close relationship of the United States, Canada, and Great Britain over an expansive chronological space. It also narrows their study’s focus down to those forces that had the biggest direct involvement on the boundary’s final demarcation. Yet, relying solely on national-level sources has led diplomatic historians to gaze out upon the periphery from an unsympathetic metropole. A teleological sense of the northeastern boundary dispute is the result, informed more by the coming Webster-Ashburton Treaty and other Anglo-American border crises than the actual events that transpired in Maine and New Brunswick. Under these conditions, it is easy to disregard the concerns of borderlands inhabitants and indifferently bemoan how “the diplomatic dispute became exposed to the hazards of local rivalries, local politics, local personalities.”

On the other hand, historians crafting local histories about the Aroostook War as part of works on Maine or New Brunswick represent a second school of oversimplification. As a large number of these studies have been penned by amateur historians, the body of literature reflects scholarly trends less than do the aforementioned works of diplomatic and political history. Instead, they form narratives largely from recollection, oral tradition, literal readings of sensationalist local newspapers, and the accounts of fellow amateur historians, an approach conducive to histories that seek to justify the actions or exaggerate the honor of local agents. The act of defending the periphery’s role in the dispute comes in several forms, whether seeking to emphasize the value of the disputed territory, or characterizing local officials as single-handedly defending the nation’s honor while “the politicians dipped their diplomatic fingers into the brew” and “the diplomats dawdled along in a half-hearted manner.” This bias carries with it the often implicit intention of pushing back against the marginalization of the periphery perceived in the actions of the metropole and the words of those who have written metrócentric history, a tonic for the disaffected population of a forgotten peripheral state.

There are scattered examples of studies that have begun to bridge the gap between meta- and micro-historical methodologies. One historiographical tradition that has been applied to the Aroostook War to great effect is that of environmental history. As a principal concern of Mainers and New Brunswickers was access to valuable timber, those writing histories of resource extraction and lumbering have sometimes dealt with the boundary dispute. Analyzing the dispute through the lens of tim-
ber interests lends itself well to a transnational perspective of events, as economic interests frequently ignore national demarcations when profit is at stake. Richard Judd’s chapter on “The Aroostook War and its Aftermath,” from *Aroostook: A Century of Logging* is perhaps the strongest example of this approach, successfully illustrating the specific concerns of individual residents of the area while not losing sight of the greater forces of national interest at play. Judd’s significant contribution to the historiography of the boundary dispute is his ability to avoid both the warped telescope of survey-writing historians and the (often unintended) microscopy of personal investment evident in local history, uncovering a complexity that other studies fail to unearth:

At the local level this complicated disturbance involved state and provincial officials attempting to save an important source of government revenue, settlers of mixed nationality defending their allegiances to rival governments, lumbermen from Maine and New Brunswick struggling to free their season’s cut of logs from the jurisdictional snarls of three competing land agencies, and finally trespassers, ranging from settlers hoping to get out a few sticks of pine to operators logging for some of the largest firms on the East Coast. National allegiances blur in this complex mixture of conflict and cooperation.

This passage accomplishes a dimension of complexity and contingency not found in many of the aforementioned works. Judd avoids constructing rigid dichotomous relationships to force upon the narrative – the United States v. Great Britain, Maine v. New Brunswick, state v. nation, local passions v. national reason/importance, “professional politicians” v. an “amateur” governor – and instead gives a careful reading to how individual actors experienced the dispute from an array of perspectives and allegiances. For any given actor, the “blur” of allegiance and “complex mixture of conflict and cooperation” amounts to the building blocks of identity.

Spatial identity in all its forms is an historical phenomenon that cannot be entirely separated from individual subconscious, nor can it be broken down into separate or non-contradictory pieces. At the same time, identity is a key consideration to make in fully accounting for the actions and ambitions of historical actors. How, then, does one go about understanding more about the identity of Maine’s inhabitants during the Aroostook War? With few primary sources that display the private thoughts of Maine residents themselves, a careful approach to public rhetoric, such as Governor Fairfield’s aforementioned address, can provide a vital point of entry. These sources have been heavily utilized by
historians and the merit of their words taken for granted by some and
summarily dismissed by others, but under a more careful analysis, rhet-
oric can yield more than a politically motivated version of the Aroost-
ook War’s basic narrative. 19

Historian Kristen J. Hoganson has argued that scholars should take
public rhetoric seriously, “treating it as something that illuminates moti-
vations, convictions, and calculations of what is politically efficacious.” 20
Although Hoganson examined public rhetoric during the Spanish-
American War, her methodology is applicable to the question at hand.
Identifying the rhetorical themes deemed “politically efficacious” in the
case of the Aroostook War allows one to consider what these calcula-
tions of efficacy say about how residents of Maine crafted their spatial
identity in the 1830s. 21

The above consideration is not designed to give rhetorical verbiage a
free pass; it is undeniable that politicians and the media should often be
taken at less than face value. As such, rhetoric should not be used as a
perfect reflection of the personality or ideology of the speaker; nor
should it be mistaken as a complete reflection of an audience. Rhetoric is
best used as an illustration of the ideas that the speaker (or author) be-
lieved would carry meaning for his audience significant enough to yield
their acquiescence to the speaker’s agenda/goals, although filtered
through the personality of the speaker and the limited nature of lan-
guage. At the same time, rhetoric should not be dismissed as “empty.” In
his discussion of rhetorical “keywords” and their history in American
political parlance, historian Daniel T. Rodgers reasons, “clearly political
words do more than mystify. . . . Words make mass actions possible.
With words ringing in their heads, masses of men have made revolutions
and crusades, flung themselves into war, savaged other human beings
who refused to give up some contrary form of talk.” 22

Crafting words to move men to war for land over which it had never
clearly exerted control, Governor Fairfield’s speech on February 26,
1839, was designed to motivate in precisely this manner. After the open-
ing of this speech, quoted above, Fairfield turned to recount the events
that led to his call to arms:

_Fellow soldiers_— An unfounded, unjust and insulting claim of title has
been made by the British Government, to more than one third of the
whole territory of your State....in the meantime, its subjects are strip-
ping this territory of its valuable growth of timber, in defiance of
your authority and power. A few days since you sent a civil force,
under your Land Agent. . . [who was] seized, transported beyond the
Rufus McIntire, a state land agent, led an armed posse of approximately two hundred Mainers to the disputed territory in February 1839. His capture and arrest by New Brunswick authorities helped spark the Aroostook War and was used as part of the heated debate by the partisan press in Maine over the mobilization process. From John Francis Sprague, *The North Eastern Boundary Controversy and the Aroostook War* (Dover, ME: The Observer Press, 1910), opposite p. 60.

bounds of the State, and *incarcerated in a Foreign Jail under British authority* . . . And perhaps before this moment, your soil has been *not only polluted by the invaders' footsteps*, but the blood of our citizens may have been shed by *British myrmidons*.23

Those who gathered for Governor Fairfield’s message would not have been hearing such language for the first time. Boundary controversies had been a fact of life in Maine for decades and had reached a boiling point a few weeks prior with the arrest of “your Land Agent.” In early February, “an armed posse” led by land agent Rufus McIntire, had been sent by the Maine legislature for “driving out or arresting the trespassers, and preserving and protecting the timber from their depredations.”24 The mission was made in response to a report that $100,000 worth of timber had been taken out of Maine-claimed forests by New Brunswick lumbermen in the previous year.25 After an exhausting trek northward,
McIntire, who had aged considerably since his enthusiastic service in the War of 1812, accepted the hospitality of a local settler who offered him a warm bed for the night.26 McIntire’s host was less than gracious: in a set-up, the house was surrounded by hostile provincial lumbermen. The fifty-four-year-old was placed under arrest and imprisoned in Frederic-ton for invading British lands.27

As Rufus McIntire was an appointee of the majority Democratic Party, it is no surprise that the Bangor Whig and Courier, one of the minority Whig Party’s major press outlets, ridiculed the land agent by publishing a satirical poem: “Run, Strickland, run! / Fire, Stover, fire! / Were the last words of McIntyre.”28 Democratic newspapers were outraged. The Eastern Argus, for example, called for “public scorn [on] those prints, which, like the Bangor Whig and Portland Gazette, are shameful enough to ridicule the proceedings of their own government, and exult over the seizure of its citizens.”29 Two days previous, the Bangor Whig and Courier had already justified its use of satire:

> When we first heard of the capture of the Land Agent and several others, and the sudden retreat of the Sheriff with his posse, we supposed . . . that the prisoners would be released after a short detention and that this whole manner and the way it had been conducted and terminated was a fair subject of ridicule. . . . It was the proper subject of game, which anyone had a right to hunt down.30

The Whig and Courier continued, claiming that, although the Whigs “stand ready to shoulder our musket and take our chance in the front rank of militia...to defend the territory purchased by the blood of our fa-
thers,” they had the “right to demand wise counselors” led the Aroostook expedition rather than “such weak, inefficient, and feather-bed men as have recently been shoved forward.”31 For good measure, the editorial suggests that recently ousted Governor Edward Kent, a Whig, would have had “little or no trouble in driving off the trespassers.”32 The McIntire affair inspired multiple jabs back and forth between newspapers before the Bangor Whig and Courier eventually relented: “We have no time to waste now in answering the attacks of the Argus and other...papers. They may bring false accusations against the Whigs now as did the To-
ries of the Revolution; our acts will be a sufficient defense for us. We are ready and ever have been to join heart and hand in all measures of Gov. Fairfield tending to protect the honor and rights of our State.”33

Given the nature of the press in the nineteenth century, this sort of back-and-forth between newspapers run by rival political parties is cer-
tainly not surprising. War rhetoric may not have been so radical, however, nor have played so significant a role in the Aroostook War had Maine not been such fertile ground for its use. Its own state (separate from Massachusetts) for less than two decades, Maine represented an open battleground for the second party system, which had begun in the 1820s as a rivalry between Andrew Jackson’s populist Democratic Party and Henry Clay’s upstart Whig Party, usually supported by fewer but wealthier Americans. According to historian Richard P. McCormick, by the 1830s, Maine was “in the throes of political reorganization.” “The politics in Maine was more popular, less sedate, than in Massachusetts,” McCormick notes, and Maine’s Whigs and Democrats were early examples of large-scale party organization and high voter turnout in the United States.

Because of political realignment and the state constitution’s creation of one-year gubernatorial terms, election-year radicalization was an eternal reality in the state. Maine also possessed an abundant and active body of printers ready to disseminate party materials. Maine’s creeping frontier and abundant amounts of newly settled land ensured there was a steady stream of new markets for aspiring printers to try their hand at print media, and “party organs had sprung up in the new territory.”

Inheriting the print culture of its former state capital, Maine saw “sons and apprentices of Massachusetts printers, especially from Boston, had left their cases and... had founded papers in Vermont and Maine.” The Bangor Whig and Courier, for example, was created in 1833, within nine months of the official organization of the Whig Party itself; by July the following year, it was printing daily. In 1835, Portland alone boasted more daily papers than the entire island of Britannia outside of London. By July 1, 1839, Maine boasted more newspapers and periodicals than Connecticut, New Jersey, or Washington, D.C. Maine was a contested political space, and this encouraged the partisan press culture of the nineteenth century to spring into action, jockeying to create a foothold in the new state. As an open frontier space connected to the booming Boston print industry, Maine offered plenty of new outlets for excited party rhetoricians to use to their advantage.

Although each party’s printers sniped back and forth on a variety of issues, the papers in Maine largely did not disagree with one another on the question of war. Although at odds with the Eastern Argus, a Democratic newspaper in Portland, the Bangor Whig and Courier was clear in its support of the Aroostook expedition and even claimed its willingness to stand “in the front rank of militia.” With few exceptions, Demo-
By the late 1830s, Mainers had already developed a strong metaphorical sense of the disputed territory, but in some cases knew little else about it, as this short article makes clear. Bangor Whig and Courier, February 28, 1839.
ocratic and Whig papers shared both their support for Maine’s land claims and the rhetorical strategies employed to encourage the same stance amongst their readership. From Canada, the *Montreal Aurora* marveled: “Whigs and Democrats, so opposed on almost all other questions, think alike upon this, and demand war with equal enthusiasm.” A Boston newspaper agreed: “both of the political parties unite hand and heart on the subject, and seem to vie with each other to sustain their executive.”

In reality, it was precisely because of the divisive quality of party politics in Maine that both sides ran hard-line rhetoric in favor of the Aroostook expedition. Historian David Lowenthal reasons that “the Whigs had offered to bury the hatchet, to act the part of true patriots” because of the prevailing attitude that any party painted as anti-Maine in its stance on war would pay heavy political dividends. The *New York Gazette* predicted that “nine-tenths of the democracy of numbers would go for a war – a general war. . . . To belong to, or have any sympathy with, the ‘Peace Party’, will ruin a man unto his third or fourth generation.” This concern would be particularly pressing for both parties since gubernatorial elections were held yearly, making election-year posturing a constant occupation. Further, state politics were impossibly tight: the Whigs and Democrats were so evenly matched in Maine that in 1840, for example, Governor Fairfield lost his bid for reelection by 0.074% of the state electorate. Neither party could afford to be left behind in the march to war, thus relegating their disagreements to sidebar jabs over proper strategy and leadership qualities. General Winfield Scott wrote, “the popular cry being for war, the Whigs were unwilling to abandon that hobby-horse entirely; but the Democrats were the first in the saddle and rode furiously.” Maine’s numerous politically charged newspapers were thus nearly identical in their rhetorical stance over the question of war.

Reviewing the body of press literature and the posture employed by state officials, there are three interrelated *leit-motifs* to consider from the war rhetoric of 1839. The first is that of honor. In the nineteenth-century Western world, historian Kristen J. Hoganson notes, “assertions that men from various walks of life valued honor as a standard for individual and national behavior made it clear that a man who denied that honor was at stake or who hesitated to defend it would no longer represent [it] . . . [some argued that honor] should transcend ideological differences and unite all men.” This mantra was clearly visible in the rhetoric during the Aroostook War.
Many Mainers believed that honor—of the nation, state, and individual—was at stake in a boundary dispute with Great Britain, and it was up to each Mainer to defend that honor. This sense of honor was often connected with patriotism and the American Revolution. In his speech to the assembled militiamen, Governor Fairfield spoke of the “spirit of patriotism which lighted up the fires of the Revolution, glows in the bosoms of our citizens with undiminished force.” In a letter to his son, Fairfield argued, “Now, although it is wicked to fight under most circumstances, it is not wicked, in my opinion, to fight for the defense of our country.”

Fighting also had the advantage of proving one’s manliness, imagery used to goad Maine men into militia service, as we see from the opening section of Governor Fairfield’s address (“stand up boldly as men, as patriots”) and implicitly in his assertion that Britain was acting “in defiance of your authority and power.”

The rhetoric of honor in the McIntire affair was applied not only to the nation and the individual, but to the state. In the wake of McIntire’s arrest, the Augusta Journal lamented, “how much longer will the people of Maine submit to such indignities?” Likewise, the Bangor Whig and Courier declared, “our State has been for the third time invaded and our citizens carried away and incarcerated in a FOREIGN JAIL! We now appeal to arms . . . upon this question the whole state is united to a man.”

Both invocations of honor are designed to appeal to the individual reader’s sense of belonging to the meaningful demarcation of “Maine.” What honorable Mainer, after all, could sit at home whilst his state suffered insult, or could dare cower at home as the rest of the state, “united to a man,” marched off to war? That state honor would be so prevalent in war rhetoric from this period makes a strong case for the idea of “Maine” holding a prominent place in the spatial identity of its residents.

Closely linked to the rhetorical concept of honor was the theme of rights. That it was dishonorable for Maine and the United States to yield the disputed territory to Great Britain suggested an innate ownership of the land, and with it the rights and jurisdiction of a landowner. “Maine will not falter,” wrote the Augusta Age, “until her rights are established and her jurisdiction extended to the utmost limits of her territory. And may God defend the right!” The Belfast Republican noted simply: “Maine and her soil, or BLOOD!” A common justification for land rights came from the rhetorical power of the American Revolution, claiming the disputed territory as an American spoil of war. Mainers were urged to rekindle “a little of the spirit of ’76” and “fall back upon...
[the] original sovereignty” gained by the Treaty of Paris. Rhetoricians also invoked the fact that most Mainers could easily trace their family’s connection to the Revolution. The opening stanza of lyrics published in the Bangor Whig and Courier read: “Soldiers of Maine, your weapons prepare, / your frontiers are rising the clouds of grim war, / Your rights are invaded, invaded your soil, / Which your fathers have purchased with life, blood and toil.

So deep was the sentiment that Maine held an innate right to control the disputed territory that Governor Fairfield declared to the state legislature, “the object in the first place was to protect public property...you sent what was deemed a sufficient military force to . . . repel any invasion of our soil that should be attempted.” Taking it a step further, the governor addressed the rights of Maine, independent of the nation, to exercise jurisdiction over the disputed territory:

But if it had been otherwise, and the Government of the United States had agreed that the British Government should have exclusive jurisdiction and possession of this territory, which it acknowledges to be ours, would it have been binding upon Maine? Clearly not. The respective States of the Union are sovereign and independent, except so far as that sovereignty has been restrained or modified by the Constitution of the United States. The General Government is one of limited and defined power. The power to alienate the territory of a State, or to transfer a portion of it, or the jurisdiction and possession of it, to a foreign power, for an indefinite period, or for one hour, is no where granted.

Here Governor Fairfield was assuming a political position that certainly would have been espoused by a large number of Democrats in the antebellum era – especially the southern faction.

Yet it is surprising that a governor in New England, a region generally considered more in favor of strong national authority, espoused a states’ rights position. Fairfield was not the only Mainer raising the rhetorical banner of states’ rights during the Aroostook War, a sentiment that was noticed in other parts of the country. The Boston Patriot called Maine’s stance “an experimental lesson in the science of nullification,” and the Boston Evening Mercantile Journal demanded, “how like idiots or madmen people will act in the middle of a war excitement! What good will this mad movement do the state of Maine?”

The translation of Maine’s jurisdiction over the disputed territory into claims of states’ rights in diplomacy and war may seem an extreme
shift, if not akin to the position of South Carolina nullifiers in the late 1820s and early 1830s, or even southern secessionists in the 1860s. Under further consideration, however, the governor’s message was closer to a rhetorical device than an actual push for nullification. As historian J. Chris Arndt points out, “Maine’s reliance on principles of states’ rights was, above all, reluctant. State leaders acted only when federal officials refused to do so, and even then, they continued to entreat, or to coerce, the national government to support their cause.” Arndt’s thesis – that state economic woes created the need for a quick settlement of the land dispute and thus spurred state officials to press Washington all the harder – serves as a pivot from the rhetorical invocation of rights over the land to a third major theme: obligation.

The concept of obligation manifested itself on multiple levels within the rhetoric of the Aroostook War. In the above case, the issue at hand was the United States’ obligation to Maine. From the beginning of the dispute, Maine had darted back and forth between demanding Washington’s support and rejecting national control over the boundary settlement. State leaders were desirous of the added negotiating (or pure fire) power of the federal army whilst anxious over how U.S. diplomats would “settle” on the boundary issue in the name of overall national interest. To wit, as the Portland Advertiser put it: “what would these faultfinders have us do? – negotiate? We are sick—utterly and completely sick—of hearing the word. . . . The General Government must sustain Maine. It has guaranteed to her the possession of her territory and it must perform the guarantee.”

President Martin Van Buren was not quick to make good on Maine’s shouts of federal obligation. Concerns over war with Great Britain were very real amongst southern plantation owners and northern financial interests, and the last thing the president wanted was to further test the factional cracks beginning to grow in the Democratic Party. At the same time, losing Maine and its two senators would be a considerable blow to the Democrats, something Fairfield endeavored to use to his advantage. “Maine is democratic to the backbone,” Fairfield wrote to Van Buren. “Her democracy is ardently attached to yourself. But should you go against us upon this occasion—or not espouse our cause with warmth and earnestness and with a true American feeling, God only knows what the result would be politically.” The president tread carefully between appeasing Mainers by backing their land claims and provoking Great Britain to war by enforcing them.

It was then, as Maine’s war fervor was at its height and the initial excitement throughout the country began to wane, that the rhetoric con-
cerning the Aroostook War began to adopt a tinge of peripheral resentment. “If he throws cold water upon us,” wrote one Mainer about Van Buren, “and treats the subject coolly, and in his non-committal style, he may bid farewell to the votes of Maine forever.” A Boston newspaper even ranted over the unwillingness of the federal government to come to Maine’s direct aid: “Maine ought not to withdraw her armed force, and if the Union will not sustain her rights, she will be justified by patriotism, equity, and common sense, in sustaining them herself.” The hope in Maine of leading the nation into a victorious war turned into a feeling of betrayal and abandonment, a sentiment that endured even as the excitement of the Aroostook War faded. Maine’s concern about its status as a neglected peripheral state persisted well into the twentieth century.

These three rhetorical themes – honor, rights, and obligation – also reverberated in Washington as Maine’s congressional representatives looked to secure federal support for the state’s boundary claims. The major debate centered on a bill that would give President Van Buren a wider scope of powers in relation to the “Maine Boundary Question.” On February 27, 1839, the day after Governor Fairfield sent militiamen on a northward march to the boundary, Senator Reuel Williams, a Democrat, warned that Maine “hopes to obtain her rights peaceably; but be assured that the delay will soon be regarded as a denial, and then the gallant spirit and perseverance of her sons will accomplish for her what ages of negotiation have thus far failed to secure.” The most impassioned remarks on the floor, however, were made by Representative George Evans, a Whig, who, in a long speech on the floor of Congress, demanded:

Will you make no demonstration in behalf of our rights? What can you then expect but that the most arrogant demands of Great Britain will be renewed and insisted on? Will you do nothing? Will you leave Maine to herself? Such is the course already predicted by one of the British presses in this country. The United States, they say, will abandon Maine to the consequences of her own folly. We are now to see how that is. I have already told you that Maine is in arms, determined to maintain her rights. She is solemnly pledged on this subject. She cannot retreat. She will most certainly maintain herself in the position she has taken. Will you stand by, and see her cut down? Will any man say that is a result which this nation can witness without disgrace and dishonor?

The questions of honor and rights so apparent in the Maine press are here cast directly upon the nation, framed entirely within the obligation of the nation to one of its states.
With the increasing anxiety in Maine over whether or not Washington would indeed act on its behalf, Evans gave his fellow congressmen an image of an unsupported Maine, determined to keep its honor even at its own peril:

You may see her trod in the dust by military power which she cannot resist, if you will; you may see her cut off from the Union, and incorporated with the colonial possessions of a foreign power; but you will not see her quailing before the enemy, nor abandoning the high ground she occupies, while she can lift an arm to uphold her flag.  

70

It was soon after this debate that President Van Buren sent his resident boundary arbiter, General Scott, to assuage growing frustrations in Maine over the executive’s delay and to buy time for a diplomatic solution. Representative Evans’ comments show there was bipartisan support for war amongst the Maine delegation and that rhetorical strategies were shared by state and national officials. In at least one instance, the
sharing of strategy and information between Washington and Augusta was deliberate and direct, as Senator Reuel Williams and Governor Fairfield were in constant contact during the crisis. 

Whether aired in Maine or Washington, each of the three major rhetorical themes of the Aroostook War, honor, rights, and obligation, were interrelated, and each can be tied to very real elements of Mainers’ identity in the 1830s. Rhetoric was chosen, as Hoganson states, to be “politically efficacious.” Officials and opinion-makers drew upon powerful cultural values, a sense of belonging to political parties or to the state at large, appeals to self-pride, and the allure of glory through manly conquest. Significantly, each rhetorical device was connected in one way or another to the disputed territory. Honor had to be gained through the restoration of the territory’s integrity. Rights had to be asserted through restored jurisdiction over the territory. Obligations must be fulfilled through the territory’s defense. Rhetoric “mapped out” the significance of the northeastern borderlands rather than its physical features. The result was the development of a phenomenalized geography in which the disputed territory became a powerful metaphor. Mainers did not sit down to alter physical maps of their state when confronted with war rhetoric. Rather, the words they heard and read affected their ephemeral mental image of their state and more significantly, their understanding of exactly how they fit into the world around them.

This phenomenalization was manifest in the opening scene in Augusta. The “soil” of the disputed territory was not valued as literal dirt, but rather as the object of “manly defense” and an opportunity to assert one’s position as a “freeman.” This was the value that Winfield Scott failed to ascertain when he marveled at Maine’s enthusiasm for “a strip of land.” Even the governor’s role was steeped in metaphor. Writing to his wife the day after his address to the militia, he wrote, “You will perhaps be surprised to learn that I have turned soldier. . . . I mounted my horse and acted the Commander-in-Chief.” John Fairfield never considered himself a military commander, but the circumstances of the Aroostook War made him represent the violent potential of his state’s land claims.

Unquestionable and universally applicable conclusions about the past are, of course, impossible to make. Rhetorical verbiage carries with it inherited meanings of previous generations, and any observation as to the connection between the above rhetoric and the identity of Mainers later necessarily carries a measure of post hoc estimation. There is also the basic truth that, no matter the circumstance (and especially when
war is in question), there is no perfect “unity of spirit” as events unfolded. Detractors likely existed even amongst those who cheered on the governor’s rousing speech, although there is comparatively little record of the actual experience of the militia. There were rewards offered for militia deserters, but this fact speaks as much to possible dissatisfaction upon reaching the front as it does to opposition to the mission on an ideological level. It is quite possible that the colorful exhortations of newspapers and speeches raised hopes in militia participants that were not realized in the dull white, greens, and browns of the northern Maine woods in February. The only widely recorded example of a militia member opposing the mission on ideological grounds is that of Reverend Caleb Bradley, who wrote in his journal: “both our political authorities are mad—and worse. It seems as though they had combined to ruin our country. I detest them! I abhor their doings in this respect! O contemptible, contemptible, disgraceful, horrible, abominable!”

Despite Reverend Bradley’s strong feelings in opposition to the Aroostook expedition, the majority of the evidence suggests that the rhetoric of the Aroostook War was greatly successful in exciting and uniting Mainers, serving as both a reflection of identity in Maine in 1839 and a catalyst for its change. Through their bipartisan push for aggressive land claims, officials and opinion-makers reflected the urgency of Maine’s political and economic climate. In the language and imagery they chose to espouse, they reflected the values and perceptions deemed most “real” to their readers. Yet their rhetorical invocation of the disputed territory as a symbol for these values and perceptions also changed its meaning on an epistemological level, and with it affected the spatial identity of their audience.

Further, the words these rhetoricians chose to present to audiences in Maine make it clear that the traditional model of spatial hierarchy—nation, then region, then locality, each subordinate to and entirely distinct from the other—was in the case of the Aroostook War an inaccurate generalization. The rhetorical themes employed show the application of disputed space to the identity of Mainers caused the constant blending and repositioning of the national with the individual, the state with the individual, and the national with the state within public discourse, resulting in a hybrid form of identity that was distinct from the prevailing norms of the greater north Atlantic world. The complexity of the situation in Maine during the Aroostook War belies clear dichotomous pairs to drive a narrative of the war.

On February 26, 1839, Governor John Fairfield closed his remarks with a benediction:
This, fellow soldiers, briefly, is the case as now made up. Are you prepared to act upon it? I know you are. I know you will not tamely submit to such indignities – to such arrogant pretensions– that, you will not quail under British threats....Go—and carry with you the consciousness that your cause is just, and that the patriot's blessing will accompany you on your way. Go—and may He, who holds the destinies of nations in his hand, in due time, return you to the bosom of your families, crowned not only with the laurels of victory but the more enduring wreath won by DUTY PERFORMED.76

The governor's wish came half-true. The men indeed returned to their families, yet the awarding of laurels on either side of the boundary was, thankfully, unnecessary. Taken at face value, such an outcome makes it easy to read the Aroostook War as a minor diplomatic incident, the study of which will provide little. A more nuanced approach, however, yields a depth of complexity and a wealth of relevant application in the words of officials and opinion-makers during the winter of 1839. Home to a fluid boundary for decades, the temporal and physical northeastern borderlands provide a valuable case study in nineteenth-century spatial identity.

NOTES

2. Maine had been a state for nineteen years when the Aroostook War occurred.
6. Rufus McIntire, “Report of the Land Agent, 1840,” in Documents Printed by Order of the Legislature of the State of Maine During its Session A.D. 1840 (Augusta, ME: William R. Smith & Company, 1840), pp. 4-6; 9-11. McIntire's report is merely one example in which the word “posse” is used in official state documentation; the same verbiage has been widely adopted in secondary literature as a result.
8. See, for example, Francis M. Carroll, A Good and Wise Measure: The Search for the Canadian-American Boundary, 1783-1842 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001); Howard Jones and Donald A. Rakestraw, Prologue to Manifest Destiny: Anglo-American Relations in the 1840s (Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 1997); Howard Jones, To the Webster-Ashburton Treaty: A Study in Anglo-American Relations, 1783-1842 (Chapel Hill, NC:


13. White, “Bloodless Aroostook War,” pp. 262-264: “the ‘War’ itself has been regarded as more or less a huge joke, yet it was no joke to the patriotic men who left their homes in the dead of winter.” White also makes the incredible statement that Bangor was “as busy as Belgium’s capital the night before the battle of Waterloo.” Porter, “Volunteer Troops,” p. 122: “The war was real to them; just as much so as it was to men who went to the Civil War.” Marriner, *Maine Remembered*, p. 113: “[The dispute] was the fault of European monarchs who knew little and cared less about the geography.”

14. John Bartlett Brebner’s work is an early example of this scholarly trend, although he does not include the Aroostook War in his list of boundary tensions leading up to the Webster-Ashburton Treaty. See Brebner, *The North Atlantic Triangle*.


19. Stella White King takes even sensationalist correspondence published in the *Bangor Whig and Courier* and other newspapers as literal source material when, in many cases, serious documentary criticism is required.


30. *Bangor Whig and Courier*, February 16, 1839, p. 3.

31. *Bangor Whig and Courier*, February 16, 1839, p. 3.

32. Kent, ousted from office by John Fairfield as part of a Democratic sweep of Maine offices, kept his name in print through occasional op-eds in the *Bangor Whig and Courier* and other Whig newspapers. He successfully retook the governorship in 1840 by a razor-thin margin.

33. *Bangor Whig and Courier*, February 21, 1839, p. 3.


42. *Bangor Whig and Courier*, February 16, 1839, p. 3. Those interested in the rhetoric of nineteenth-century gender would no doubt note the contrast made in the *Bangor Whig and Courier* between the “weak” and “feather-bed” Democrats and the brave, rifle-wielding Whigs.


49. Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood*, p. 82.


53. *Augusta Age*, February 17, 1839, p. 2.


56. *Bangor Whig and Courier*, February 28, 1839, p. 3. Though the land was given the rhetorical value of forefathers’ blood, the intimacy of most Mainers with the disputed territory was perhaps called to task by an article preceding the quoted lyrics, beginning with: “RESTOOK AROOSTOOK AROOSTIC ARESTOOGH How shall we spell it? How do the Indians pronounce it?”

57. John Fairfield, “March 22, 1839,” in *Documents Related to the Disputed Territory*, pp. 4-5. Fairfield had used similar language in private correspondence with his son: “I have ordered out...militia to meet the troops of Sir John Harvey and resist his insolent pretensions, an unjustifiable attempt to drive us from our soil.” See John Fairfield to Walter Fairfield, in *The Letters of John Fairfield*, p. 267.


61. Arndt, “Maine in the Northeastern Boundary Controversy,” p. 222. While Arndt may
go a bit far in downplaying the sincerity of states’ rights positions in Maine, his analysis of the true nature of such rhetoric and the ultimate reason for Maine’s urgency — state economic woes — is a valuable addition to the historiography of the Aroostook War.


63. Lowenthal, “Maine Press,” pp. 325-326. It was generally assumed war with Great Britain would threaten both the cotton and tobacco markets and cause price inflation on agricultural supplies, crippling the South’s economy.


65. *Bangor Whig and Courier*, March 2, 1839, p. 3.


72. John Fairfield to Anna Fairfield, February 27, 1839, in *Letters of John Fairfield*, pp. 268-269.

73. For example: “$10 REWARD: Deserted from a detachment of Riflemen under my command, SAMUEL F. JONES, a citizen of Bangor. The above reward will be paid to any one who will deliver him to the Commander within three days. WILLIAM H MILLS, Captain; Bangor, Feb. 21, 1839.” See *Bangor Whig and Courier*, February 24, 1839, p. 3.


75. Laven and Baycroft argue that “simply by applying the epithet ‘national’ or ‘regional’ or ‘local,’ we appear to be making a qualitative or hierarchical distinction between what are fundamentally the same sort of identities...they might be better described collectively as ‘spatial’ identities, in the sense that what they all share is a foundation in the geographical.” See Laven and Baycroft, “Border Regions and Identity,” p. 256.

76. L., “From Augusta,” *Portland Advertiser*, February 28, 1839, p. 3. The Democratic *Eastern Argus* called Governor Fairfield’s closing and benediction the most effective part of the remarks. See *Eastern Argus*, February 28, 1839, p. 3. The rival *Bangor Whig and Courier*, meanwhile, noted that “we have room only for the following extract” and printed all but the closing. See *Bangor Whig and Courier*, March 1, 1839, p. 2.