

Maine History

Volume 33
Number 2 *Norlands Universalist Church (1827)*

Article 6

10-1-1993

Brown Thurston's Year: Portland, Maine, 1855

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Recommended Citation

Storer, Allyn. "Brown Thurston's Year: Portland, Maine, 1855." *Maine History* 33, 2 (1993): 136-153.
<https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mainehistoryjournal/vol33/iss2/6>

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ALLYN STORER

BROWN THURSTON'S YEAR
PORTLAND, MAINE, 1855

As individuals, we can have a solipsistic self-awareness, but we can't really know *who* we are without reference to how we relate to everything else. And just as our individual life experience is largely in our personal memories, our collective experience, as a nation and as humankind, is largely known through our public memory, which we call history.

As historians, we know that history is the dynamic, exciting, always changing story of who we are, how we got here, how we have achieved what we have achieved, and how we've sometimes got ourselves into terrible messes. *History is vital and it's about us*, but unless we know about it, it can't be part of our experience. A knowledgeable understanding of our collective past, of who we are and where we've come from and of how things have got to be as they are, is as important to our well-being as a nation as our life experience and personal memory are to our mental health and well-being as individuals. As individuals and nations, we need to have a sense of who we are and how we relate to things; and the need is so fundamental that if we don't have such knowledge, we make things up. A people or nation without a collective memory *based on facts*, is like a person without memory, disconnected from past experience, incapable of making sound judgments, and susceptible to fantasy. In that case, both individual and nation are likely to get into serious trouble. Personal documents, diaries, or collections of letters can provide an exciting opportunity to introduce students both to the past and to history as a discipline by focusing on the experiences of a real person living in a particular place and time. A diary like Brown Thurston's is excellent for such purposes.¹ It's neither a literary diary nor a private confessional; it's a sort of day book, with brief notes about where he went and what he saw and what he did – mostly in Portland, Maine. As a document, the diary records no epochal events. It is not a literary diary, and Thurston, although

squally
FRIDAY, March 27th, 1855 Pleasant

A very busy day. Spent the evening at home, reading south side & holding baby.

Wife & I went over to the pool house to see a fugitive that I had recently been instrumental in getting into this institution - he having spent most of the time for three months in the open air, in getting away from slavery, is now made entirely helpless by rheumatism. He is getting better

The diary of Brown Thurston, Portland, Maine, 1855.

Courtesy of the author.

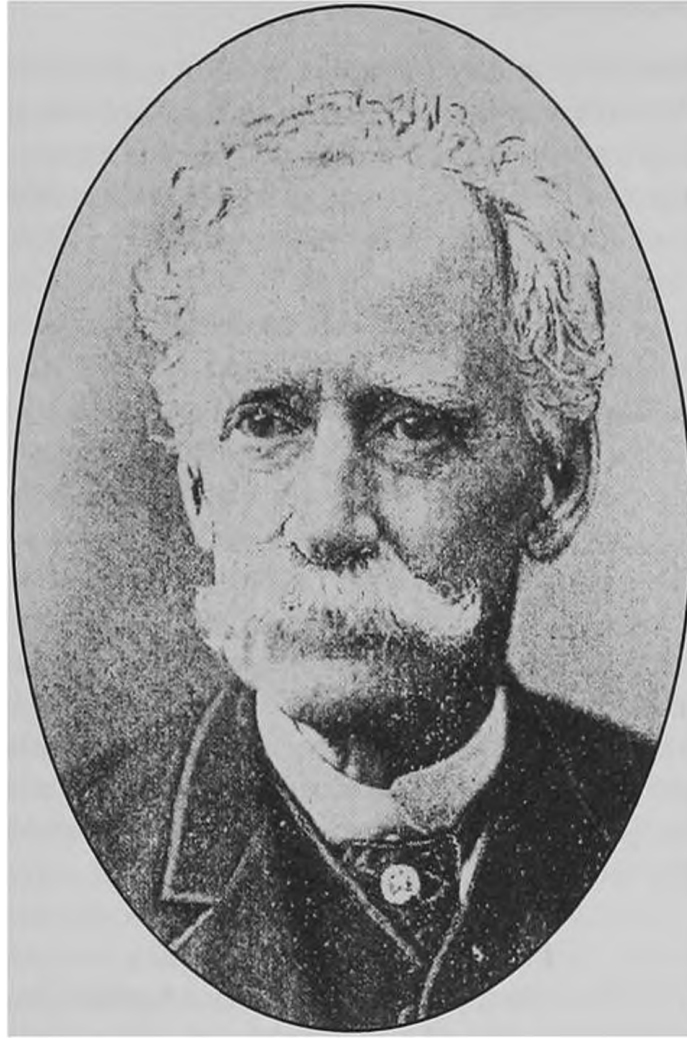
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a prominent and active citizen, was like most of us only a minor historical figure beyond his own family. The diary, however, with its cryptic references to people, events, and daily life, is ideally suited as a pedagogical tool: There is a great value in exploring *real* historical documents. They offer the excitement of a living detective adventure and have much historical value. The diary is personal and enigmatic, full of cryptic references to people and events. It's partly a puzzle and partly a mystery to be solved.

Brown Thurston (1814-1900) was the eldest son of the Reverend David Thurston and Prudence Brown Thurston of Winthrop.² His father was an eminent clergyman, an overseer of Bowdoin College, a trustee of the Bangor Theological Seminary, and one of Maine's leading abolitionists. Because of poor health at age seven, Brown was sent to live in Bucksport with an aunt, Mary Thurston Blodgett. In 1831, at age seventeen, his health having improved, Thurston went to Lowell, Massachusetts, to learn the art of printing at the *Lowell Observer*. After two years, he moved to New York, but found little opportunity for work as a printer. So, like many Maine men in such a situation, he signed on as seaman on a Nantucket whaler for what became a voyage of four years. Back in Maine in 1838, the twenty-four-year-old Thurston worked as a printer in Brunswick, Hallowell, and Bangor. In 1840 he started his own printing business in Augusta, and in the following year he moved to Portland, where he was in business with several partners until about 1847, when he became sole proprietor of his printing business.

By trade and profession, Brown Thurston was a printer, compiler, and publisher. Besides printing for others (including the *Portland Transcript* and the Maine Historical Society), he compiled and published maps and local reference works. In 1846, he became publisher of the Portland City Directory. He was the first printer in Portland to use a power press, electrotyping, stereotyping, and wood-engraving. At one time he printed all the school books for the city.

Besides business interests (he was also involved with railroads and other ventures), he was active in politics, in the temperance and anti-slavery movements, and in the founding of



Brown Thurston, photographed perhaps in the early 1890s. A printer, compiler, and publisher, Thurston completed work for the *Portland Transcript* and the Maine Historical Society. In addition, he published the Portland City Directory.

Courtesy of the Norlands Living History Center.

the Republican party in Maine. He was deeply committed to work in the High Street Congregational church and became a deacon in 1856. He was an active member of the Maine Historical Society.

At midcentury, Portland was a bustling commercial and shipping center with a population of about 25,000. Besides coastal and international shipping, Portland had regular transatlantic steamship service beginning in 1853. City leaders estab-

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lished a Board of Trade in 1854 and hustled to establish railway links with Montreal and Quebec in the hope of becoming the principal seaport for Canada. Portland was also a way station on the "underground railway" for fugitive slaves on their way to Montreal and to St. John, New Brunswick. By 1855, Samuel Dennis Warren's paper company in Westbrook was producing one-and-a-half tons of paper a day from rags imported to the Portland docks from Europe, India, and Japan. John Davis's Spruce Gun factory employed 200 workers and put up 1,800 boxes of gum a day. But Portland's leading entrepreneur was John Bundy Brown. His Portland Company manufactured railway locomotives, boilers, and heavy machinery; his Portland Rolling Mills produced steel for railway construction; and in 1855, his five year old Portland Sugar Company opened a new eight-floor sugar house which employed 1,000 men to turn molasses imported from the West Indies into 250 barrels of granulated sugar a day. City boosters predicted that before the end of the century, Portland would grow to become a city of half a million people (equal to the population of the whole state of Maine in 1855).

THE RHYTHM OF LIFE

If Brown Thurston can be considered typical (and there is nothing in his diary to indicate that his schedule was unusual), the routine of a Portland businessman was as follows:

5:00 a.m. Rise (In summer, as early as 4:00 a.m.)

6:00 a.m. Take a walk and breakfast.

7:00 a.m. Attend morning prayer meeting. (These interdenominational meetings seem to have been primarily for business and professional people, perhaps having the social function of a Kiwanis breakfast, but they were *daily* and they were essentially religious in character.)

8:00 a.m. The workday began.

Noon to 2:00 P.M. Dinner. (This was the principal meal of the day, taken usually at home.)

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2:00 P.M. Return to work, with a tea break at about 4:00 P.M., sometimes at the office, sometimes in the city with informal meetings.

5:00 to 6:30 P.M. Supper time. (This meal was usually at home; on busy days Thurston returned to the office and worked until 8:00 or even 10:00 P.M.)

Most evenings Thurston attended meetings, lectures or cultural events between 7:30 and 10:00 P.M. He went to bed between 10:00 and 11:00 P.M. on most days, but sometimes he was up as late as 1:00 a.m. This appears to be an extraordinarily busy life, but most people mentioned in the diary apparently followed more or less the same schedule. No wonder people occasionally missed appointments – though not Thurston – on account of having fallen asleep.

As late as 1855, Portland seems to have been a city whose rhythm was metered in commercial but not industrial terms. The time-work schedules of farmers and craftsmen seemed still to dominate. Monday, for instance, was a light day at work; the pace increased on Tuesday, but this was still somewhat leisurely. Wednesday was a full day at work, and Thursday, the heaviest day of the week. Thurston sometimes worked until 8 P.M. or even later, and this does not seem to relate to particular deadlines such as getting out a special Friday publication. Friday was a full work day, sometimes heavy, but more often like Tuesday. Saturday was a day of rest and the principal day for family recreation.

According to the newspapers, there were lectures, plays, and concerts scheduled every weekday and sometimes on weekends. Traveling exhibitions were usually open during midweek from 9:00 a.m. to 9:00 P.M., apparently to accommodate people in the city on business during the day, and city workers during the evening. On Saturdays there were often special programs in the afternoon that seem to have been more family oriented. Week-day evening activities included theatre and dances as well as meetings and lectures, and the traveling exhibits ranged from panoramas and dioramas – such as the one depicting “The Trial

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of our Saviour'...featuring twenty-three authentically costumed pieces of statuary of full life size" to the exhibition of a 160.5-pound lump of gold, said to be the largest ever discovered.

Thurston often attended lectures or political meetings on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Wednesday evenings and occasionally on Thursday or Friday. He reserved Saturday evenings for the weekly prayer meeting of Sabbath School teachers. He was perhaps the most regular member in attendance, and in December 1855 he became superintendent of the Sabbath School, a position he held for twelve years. He did find time to heft the giant lump of gold and noted that its worth was estimated "between 30 and \$40,000."

Thurston always referred to Sunday as the Sabbath, and for him it was a day apart. He occasionally lamented that Christianity was in decline, that not enough people attended services, so his *Sunday* schedule was probably not at all typical: there were Sabbath School and church services in the morning, with a "luncheon" break – they took no dinner on Sunday, but they did often have guests to lunch between services – then back to church for another full service in the afternoon, then supper and a Sabbath concert in the evening. The concerts seem to have been a combination of musical service and regular service; there were testimonials and preaching, and sometimes a lecture on far-away places by a recently returned missionary.

Thurston often attended evening services or "concerts" at another church. There was apparently a great deal of inter-church visiting on Sunday evenings. However he seldom mentioned being accompanied by the rest of the family and when he does mention his family, he presents it as of special note, so I suppose his attendance at Sunday evening services generally to have been by himself. This seems to have been a world in which regular church attendance and other church meetings and programs were predominantly the business of men.

CULTURAL LIFE: EVENTS & ACTIVITIES

Apart from church concerts, Thurston doesn't seem to have attended concerts or plays offered in the city. He did visit

some exhibitions (the lump of gold, for example), and he was so favorably impressed with the Panorama of "The Pilgrims Progress" (September 26) that two days later, he took his wife and young son to see it. He attended the children's floral procession on the 4th of July and, on Thanksgiving day, an evening concert by his brother Samuel's school of vocal music. In 1855, apart from lectures, these are the only "non-church" entertainments he mentions attending. He apparently passed up the chance to see the recreation of "The Trial of our Saviour," with its twenty-three life-size statues in authentic costumes, which was open to "receive visitors" daily from 9 a.m. to 9 P.M. during the first week of July. Nor does he mention any of his family attending either of the two circuses in Portland that week.

He did attend a lot of lectures. Beside two or three church services on Sunday, with their assorted preachers, and the speeches at political meetings, Thurston attended one or two lyceum or library lectures almost every week. He was on the lecture committees of the Mercantile Library Association and of the YMCA – both of which sponsored a regular series of lectures on a wide range of topics. Thurston attended many of those and other lectures, held in Lancaster Hall, Deering Hall, the City Hall, or at churches. Below is a sampling from January and February:

January 4th: Cassius Marcellus Clay of Kentucky, the great southern abolitionist and journalist.

January 10th: Thomas Starr-King, the Boston minister who later, in San Francisco, was important in keeping California in the Union during the Civil War.

January 23rd: Frederick Douglass, the outstanding African-American reformer of the nineteenth-century. (Thurston later bought and read a copy of Douglass' autobiography.)

February 1st: (in Lewiston) George Shepard, professor of Homiletics at the Bangor theological

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Seminary, who spoke on Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*.
(Thurston bought and read *Gulliver's Travels*.)

February 6th: Henry Ward Beecher, who spoke on Patriotism.

February 10th: A Mr. Lincoln of the Kansas Territory, promoting emigration to save Kansas from slavery.

February 14th: A Dr. Solger of Germany, who spoke on the European War.

Thurston was responsible for arranging a course of lectures on religion, featuring prominent representatives of different Christian denominations. These were sponsored by the YMCA and held in various churches from April through June. In the Fall, the YMCA sponsored two courses of lectures on geology: the first a series of six lectures by Professor A. Guyot of Harvard; the second, six lectures by Professor O.P. Hubbard of Dartmouth, the last of which was on Christmas Eve.

Portland audiences liked to get their money's worth. When Thurston returned from Hubbard's lecture on December 7, he wrote: "My wife & Charles & myself attended the first lecture on geology by Professor Hubbard of Dartmouth College. The lecture was rather a failure, as he talked less than an hour and seemed troubled what to say even for that time." Professor Hubbard's lectures did get better; he noted that the second, "upon metamorphic rocks, the crust of the earth, & c. was much better than the last." Thurston attended the whole series.

These lectures, presented four years before the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species*, were respectful of religion, but they challenged Biblical literalism, as evident from notes on another series Thurston was attending at the same time. A Dr. Boynton presented a self-sponsored series of eight lectures on geology, scheduled not to conflict with Professor Hubbard's lectures. According to Boynton's advertisement, the lectures were illustrated by stunning paintings, "alone worth the price of admis-

Tainois weather THURSDAY, March 22d, 1854

Bought Rev. Dr. Adams's
South Side View of Slavery
and began to read in the eve.
Wrote to Eliza, Rev. Dr.
Haines of Hartford, Ct. & also
to Dr. Adams.

sion." Thurston attended all three series – twenty lectures in all – and he found them all “very interesting.” He didn’t mention Dr. Boynton’s “stunning paintings,” but he did report the following on December 11th:

Dr. Boynton lectured this evening on the Reptilian Period. He related an anecdote that occurred while he was lecturing in Connecticut last year on the subject. A deacon, after hearing him lecture when he said that some tracks which he exhibited in a rock he had with him, were made by mammoth [sic] reptiles that lived thousands of ages before man was created, called a prayer meeting, to pray for those who attended his lectures, that they might not become infidels, from hearing such heresy.

Thurston’s religion apparently caused no problem for him; after the last lecture on December 15, he wrote, “his lectures are exceedingly interesting and instructive.”

Thurston’s father, the Reverend David Thurston, was one of the leading antislavery activists in Maine.³ But Brown did more than just give moral support to his father. He was active politically and personally in the anti-slavery movement and his

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involvement with the underground railway is evident in these two entries in march 1855:

March 6th. – Had a call from Mr. Potter this evening concerning a poor fugitive from the state of Georgia, who is at his house sick. I promised to take a physician with me and go to see him to-morrow.

March 23rd. – Wife & I went over to the poor house to see a fugitive that I have been instrumental in getting into the institution – having spent most of the time for three months in the open air, in getting away from slavery, is now entirely helpless by rheumatism. He's getting better.

These were not isolated acts. At one time, Thurston and his friends had thirty fugitive slaves under their care.

If slavery was the primary national issue, and it seems to have been, temperance seems to have been the major local issue in 1855. Thurston actively supported both Neal Dow and temperance; he cheered the April victory when Dow was elected Mayor and a majority of aldermen were Temperance men:

April 3rd. – The long agony is past – the battle between truth & error has been fought – & victory for truth has been won – the battle was a bloodless one – but it was all powerful and the news cheered the hearts of thousands in this and very distant places. Neal Dow is elected Mayor by about fifty majority.

Thurston defended Dow after the "Rum Riot" of June in which one man was killed and seven wounded:

June 4th. – There is quite an excitement here concerning the riot, and any amount of false-

hoods are set afloat by The State of Maine & Argus, and rummies generally. The rummies have adv'd [advertised] a meeting of the citizens this P.M. to *allay* excitement – rather to increase it if rightly interpreted. I went to Bath this P.M. and took down a power press I have just purchased. I learn the “*citizens*” had their meeting & got F.O.J. Smith from Westbrook to come in and make a speech full of riot & revolution. Mr. J.B. Brown was astonished to hear such a speech fr'm any one. He was glad to say it was not made by a citizen of P.⁴

On June 5, he wrote: “Mayor Dow was acquitted to-day, his persecutors not having made a single point against him. They are rather crestfallen.”

The biggest political meetings of the year in Portland were both in August. The first was a massive rally and anti-slavery meeting to commemorate the twenty-first anniversary of the end of slavery in the British West Indies. It was held at a park in Buxton on August 1, with special trains from Portland. The second was the first big convention of the Republican party in Maine between August 13 and August 16. The Republicans combined temperance and anti-slavery forces, but were chiefly identified as *the* anti-slavery party. Thurston attended both events and became an active member of the Republican party in Portland. On September 7th he served as chairman of the Portland caucus to nominate Republican candidates for the legislature.

Locally, however, temperance was the burning issue. When the new Republicans were defeated in the city elections in September, Thurston, a leader in the local party, wrote: “We have got pretty handsomely whipped in the city.” And on September 19, reflecting on the election, he wrote:

Had a spirited discussion this eve. on the Maine Law, Neal Dow, the election, & c. in which it was pretty much decided that the principles of the

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Maine Law were good, Neal Dow a pretty well meaning man & the election lost because we had not votes enough.

Considering Thurston's ardent anti-slavery activity, one of the most interesting entries in his diary was an account of the visit of an old acquaintance.

September 18th. – Charles L. Thomas, an old school mate of my boyish days, now of Mobile, and a slaveholder, called upon me this P.M. I had not seen him for more than 20 years. I was rejoiced to see him and took him home with me to supper. He spent the evening with us, and we had a sociable time, talking over the scenes of our youthful days. I found him to be possessor of more than southern principles upon the subject of slavery, sustaining it from the Bible & Constitution. I called upon Mrs. Day with him during the evening.

Thurston's reform energies extended beyond political questions. In December, Thurston, along with others, began a ministry to boys at the Reform School.

December 2nd. – “At 2 o'clock I started with 20 others, for the Reform School, to assist in the Sabbath School there. There were 200 boys in the school, and it was an affecting sight to see so many little boys, who need a mother's care and watchfulness, shut up there for crime. These children are many of them between the ages of 7 & 12, and no doubt would not have been there if they had good parents. No doubt they are taken care of better – better instructed & in every way it is probable their condition is better than when at home.



Temperance was a consuming political and moral issue in Brown Thurston's Portland. The June 1855 Rum Riot brought matters to a head in what Thurston called the "battle between truth & error."

MHS Collections.

December 23rd. – Sabbath School this P.M. at the Reform School. I took Francis out with me. [his 8 year old son George Francis] My class recited their lessons well & paid very close attention to the explanations I made them. I pray God that it may lead them to Christ.

WHAT'S MISSING FROM THE DIARY?

While Brown Thurston's diary is crowded with miscellaneous details of his public and private life, it is essentially a kind of personal daybook, and there is much we would like to know that is not included. For example, family relationships seem to be very important and there are many references to family visits and travel, but there are very few details of Thurston's family life.

Thurston traveled widely by steam packet and rail, but except for one trip with an invalid sister from Gorham, New Hampshire, to the railway at Concord, there are few insights into what travel was like. There are cryptic references to his business,

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but no details. – (They would have been part of his business records.) Likewise, although several prominent Portland businessmen appear in the diary as church members or in connection with politics, there are no references to commerce and industry in Portland.

Holidays are conspicuous by their absence. One of the biggest surprises was how little seems to have been made of the Fourth of July as a “patriotic holiday.” And, for all of Thurston’s involvement with his church, even Christmas and Easter are given little note and no mention of special religious celebrations⁵”

Only one holiday day is specially noted in his diary with a handwritten heading: Thanksgiving day. But the entire entry for the day – from this man who often gave thanks for special blessings – is as follows: Spent most of the day at home – heard Mr. Chickering preach in the forenoon & attended a concert by Thurston & Shaws this evening.” Thurston & Shaw, a school of vocal music run by brother Samuel and John Shaw, regularly presented concerts and recitals, but this is the only one that Thurston notes having attended. We may guess that he had turkey or chicken for Thanksgiving dinner, for the day before he noted: “Fowls are less plenty and higher in price than I ever knew before: Turkeys 20 cents & chicken, 18 cents.”

Though he often notes special services and sermon topics, there is no mention of Easter, or of any special holiday services for Christmas. Thurston spent Christmas Eve attending a geology lecture sponsored by the YMCA. His entry for Christmas day:

Christmas Day has been a busy day – a cloudy dark & stormy day. Had a 2 [a couple] turkeys for dinner to keep up appearances – but thought all the time that the day had ought to be honored by the direct and personal thanksgiving to God for the inestimable gift of his Son to be born into the world for redemption from the effects of sin.
Received a letter from mother C.

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The statement suggests that the post office was operating, and that, unlike Thanksgiving, Christmas day was not yet a holiday in Portland. Thurston was probably busy at the office, and except for the turkeys for dinner, he made no mention of any family celebration, gift-giving, or religious observance.

It was New Year's day that seems to have been the most important religious day of the year. Through the bustle of December, Thurston made several entries reflecting on the year past, on personal blessings, and on personal failings. Apart from the summary text of the speech he made accepting appointment as superintendent of the Sabbath School, the longest single entry in the Diary is the first one, for New Year's Day 1855. It carries over two and a half pages:

January 1st, 1855 – The salutations of the new year were profusely given and received this morning – but how heartless for the most part do they appear upon reflection. God looks on the heart – and it would be well for me if I should examine more closely the secret motives of my actions, and gauge them by the lights of the Eternal.

Ch meeting this eve, well attended. Voted with perfect unanimity \$100 to help a young man prepare for the ministry. Also \$30 to another. The ch. seemed to think there was Providence in these opportunities for benevolence, and embraced them with a heart and will that was truly encouraging.

The meeting this eve was full and very interesting. Remarks were spontaneous and abundant, and in a spirit that seemed to be striving for greater efficiency in the individual and collective influence of the ch.

I remarked that we should draw a lesson of importance from the course of men in the natural world. How do men conquer obstacles that are in the way of their obtaining their temporal desires?

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Do they do it by resolving – and because they fail of their design give it up? Not at all! But by resolving over and over again, and doing their best to keep their resolves. Let us instead of giving up in despair because the resolves of the last new year have not been kept, resolve anew to-day that with the assistance from on high, we will endeavor to be more faithful to ourselves and those around us – speak oftener to one another of the great interests of religion, and in public and in private seek to fulfill our covenant obligations.

Brown Thurston, Portland, Maine 1855

NOTES

¹Special thanks to Nicholas Holt of Ellsworth for making the unpublished diary of his great grandfather, Brown Thurston, available to me. The diary was kept in a leather-bound blank diary published as *Clayton's Octave Diary*. It measures 4.5 X 6.75 inches and is bound in a limp, black leather cover with a fold-over flap and a pocket for blotting paper. There is one blank, light blue page for each day of the year. Longer entries are carried over additional pages, usually on the bottom half of the page with a line separating them from the space reserved for the later daily entry.

²The principal source for Brown Thurston's biography is Theodore K. Thurston's "The Posterity of Daniel Thurston, 1635-1965" (mimeographed, Portland, 1965), pp. 13-15. For identification of Thurston family members, *Thurston Genealogies, 1635-1892*, 2nd ed., compiled by Brown Thurston (Portland: Brown Thurston Company, 1892). The principal sources for events mentioned in the diary are *Portland Advertiser* and *Eastern Argus*.

³For identification of antislavery activists in Maine, Calvin Montague Clark's *American Slavery and Maine Congregationalists* (Bangor, 1940); and Edward O. Schriver's *Go Free: The Antislavery Impulse in Maine, 1833-1855* (Orono, 1970).

⁴For the Rum Riot of June 1855, besides the newspaper accounts through the summer, see *The Report of the Committee Appointed by the Board of Aldermen of the City of Portland to Investigate the Causes and Consequences of the Riot on the Evening of June 2, 1855* (Portland, 1855).

⁵On the 4th of July, Portland witnessed a floral procession through the streets to Deering Oaks and a float parade involving 2,500 school children, said to be the grandest 4th of July celebration the city had seen.

C.A.A Storer received his B.A. from the University of Maine and his M.A. from Northwestern University in Interpretation of Literature. He completed an interdisciplinary Ph.D. (history, philosophy, and rhetoric) at Michigan State University. Dr. Storer's dissertation, "Elijah Kellogg, 19th Century New England Orthodox Preacher" (1969), is a study of the lines of thought in the sermons of the popular Maine preacher and writer. Dr. Storer is an independent scholar and teacher and an advocate of multiculturalism and people's history. His interests include the use of personal documents as openings for the teaching of history.