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Elizabeth Ring

REVIEW ESSAY

The Journals of John Edwards Godfrey: Bangor, Maine, 1863-1884. 3 vols. Edited by James B. Vickery. (Rockland, Me.: Courier-Gazette, 1979-1985. Pp. 1,204. Paper. \$31.25.)

This review is written in praise of diaries, the most common source of primary material used by local historians to tell the story of the past. They can be of endless variety. The intrinsic value for the town and region represented depends on the character and motive of the diarist. Equally important is the substance included in time and place, for ideas as well as events offer insight and invite — and often compel — new interpretations as the field of investigation expands.

Now appears another answer to the local historian's dream: three hefty volumes offered by the Bangor Historical Society entitled *The Journals of John Edwards Godfrey: Bangor, Maine, 1863-1884*. As long as they last, the Society offers them together to non-members for a modest \$31.25 or separately for \$12.50, including postage. Separately they cover the periods 1863-1869 (vol. I), 1870-1877 (vol. II), and 1878-1884 (vol. III), respectively.

A well-written diary tells as much about the writer as about the times in which he lived. Godfrey's lifespan was the span of a century. Implanted in his memory as a boy of five was the ruthless destruction of his father's house and library by the British in 1814 in the second war with Great Britain, when the Redcoats in Castine sailed up the river and occupied Hampden and Bangor. From then to his death in 1884, he was a keen observer of his environment, recounting, explaining, and analyzing the reaction of his fellow townsmen to national as well as state and local affairs.

What qualified Godfrey beyond anything was his sense of history, not by chance but by instinct. The first journal was



Judge John Edwards Godfrey
Photo courtesy of
Bangor Historical Society.

begun at Washington Academy in East Machias in 1827. Encouraged to study law by a somewhat stern father, he practiced briefly in Calais and in 1834 returned to Bangor, a city then suffering from growing pains and soon to be the scene of a crazy speculation in wildland. In two decades the city would double its population.

In 1848 Godfrey with his wife and sons, Frank and Fred, moved to outer Kenduskeag Avenue where he had built "Cliff Cottage," a gothic-style house. Surrounded by a vista of rolling hills, it was, he thought, the most beautiful location in Bangor. Over to the east and south, eight miles away, were the Holden Hills and Black Cap. In the West, hills rose misty blue from the bank of the Penobscot. The Kenduskeag River lay below as it cut through the center of the city, and on the opposite bank a new road criss-crossed the top of Thomas Hill. Few residences could be seen. He wondered why "the wealthy and aspiring" had not seized upon this beautiful locale to build. It was too soon, he supposed, for the suddenly rich to have taste equal to their means. When they did build, the scenery would change, but the hills and valley would remain.

No Maine town at this time was free from shanties and unsightly streets. A few fine houses had been built. The Bangor

House, just completed, was more than respectable and remains today a landmark. But for many years there would still be the bawdy houses, the dives, and the saloons of the "Devil's Half Acre," which flourished as each spring the woods emptied of river drivers and woodsmen starved for sin in the wild wide reaches of the north. The diaries are rich in such detail; more will follow.

The challenge to the reviewer of this extraordinary diary is the part Bangor played historically in the concept of the "two Maines." This today, in the popular mind, is an intangible line implied by Maine's two-fold economy by reason of the forest and the sea. More seriously, as seen by Maine historians, it is the state's geopolitical relation to the Maritime provinces before and after the Webster-Ashburton Treaty of 1842. Less obviously, it is the pattern of demographic expansion during and after the Revolutionary War. In spite of Maine's size and shape, the idea of region is purely speculative. The *Journals* offer a potential source of regional history, however, for an inquiring mind. In this, there is found a paradox, too, as thousands of Maine natives were drawn to the antebellum South and to the West to help build the nation. As a consequence, nineteenth-century Maine looked like a dead-end frontier. Actually, in the census of 1850 it was mid-way in population of the thirty-six states that comprised the Union. Could it be, then, that Maine had moved ideologically beyond New England, only geographically attached to New Hampshire by a mere 166 miles as a crow flies from Kittery to Twin Peaks in Quebec?

Far more compelling for the historian in search of substance is the remarkable index to all three volumes, a veritable laundry-list of subjects, a gold mine for the specifics of social behavior, economic growth, and political affairs in eastern Maine. Rarely have we seen journals of this magnitude indexed so adequately; twelve-hundred pages of continuous narrative, with a subject index of sixty-seven pages including scores of leading men in regional and national public life, and over one



Gothic-style Cliff Cottage, located in a quiet residential section of Bangor overlooking the Kenduskeag Stream, was built by Godfrey in the 1840s. Godfrey thought this "the most beautiful location in Bangor." George T. Godfrey Collection, courtesy Dr. and Mrs. Robert Kellogg.

hundred full pages of illustrative material by way of fine-looking photographs and memorabilia.

Authenticity and balance are added to each entry as Godfrey compared events in Bangor to other events from his long residence in eastern Maine. A member of that exclusive gentleman's club, the Maine Historical Society, dominated by James Phinney Baxter, Henry S. Burrage, and Charles E. Banks, Godfrey by 1864 had founded the Bangor Historical Society and had become an authority in local history, as acknowledged by his later work, "The Annals of Bangor," published in the *History of Penobscot County* (1882). His legal talents nurtured his historical perceptions and his long tenure in the county as Probate Judge gave him access to the personal history that is the charm of the book. To this should be added the comment of retired Maine justice David A. Nichols that the *Journals* give "a glimpse of the young state's emerging legal system unmatched in Maine literature."

Much in the *Journals* reveals this historical interest. He sought the acquaintance of people who knew local and state history and traveled the state to find them. In Calais, it was James S. Pike, U. S. Minister to the Netherlands during the

Civil War, and his brother Frederick A. Pike, a Maine congressman. In Castine it was the Talbots, and in Belfast, Joseph Williamson, the nephew of William D. Williamson, a fellow townsman, who followed William King as acting Governor in 1821. In spite of his love of environment and, paradoxically, for the enormous need to knit the town and state together by steam transportation, it was his association with railroad promoter John Alfred Poor that was his most historically significant relationship. Not until 1893 was there a direct rail connection between Houlton and Bangor and from there to Northern Maine Junction if going to Boston.

Never a candidate for state political office, Godfrey literally fleshed out the bones of town ordinance and state law, interlaced with humor that was rarely unkind. As a judge of probate for Penobscot County from 1856 to 1881, he was worthy of the confidence placed in him. His Aunt Mary reported that the wealthy thought he favored the widows. It could have been so. If there were Victorian women there were Victorian men, and all the niceties were observed. A pretty face was always an asset, as was a fine soprano voice. Norumbega Hall, constructed by 1834, was to be the center of the culture promoted by Godfrey and his newly rich friends. Mentioned countless times in the index are musical programs, with an ample platform for a choral group of more than a hundred voices when every town in Maine was to have a singing master. Thus was Norumbega Hall to foreshadow the famous Eastern Maine Musical Festival of the twentieth century.

The motive for writing the diaries was family. Godfrey, as a diarist, was a layman addressing "My Dear Sons," telling them what was happening at home and reminding the reader that while they were away, as they usually were, they still belonged to a family. From the first entry of June 16, 1863, to September 24, 1876, the two sons addressed were Fred (George Frederick, 1840-1897), a young man of twenty-three engaged in sheep-raising in Buenos Aires, boasting the high quality of his wool, and Frank (John Franklin, 1839-1884), an officer in the Union Army, serving with the mounted artillery in the bloody

action near Port Hudson, Louisiana, as the Union sought to cut the Confederacy in two by taking the Mississippi River. After the war, twenty-seven-year-old Frank went west for three years to fight the Indians and rough it in Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Utah, and California. Always accepting his sons as they were, Godfrey thought Frank's last three years had not been a benefit to him.

In 1876, after eight lonely years following the death of his beloved Angela, it was with his new wife Laura Schwartz (1851-1934), younger than his two middle-aged sons, that Godfrey shared his *Journals*. Two years later, to their infant daughter Ethel (1878-1957) they were addressed. A new dimension had been added to his life. But no noticeable difference was there in the type of entry made. If he wrote the kindergarten she attended was "in the Veazie house, corner of Stetson Square and York Street," it was for future historians to know as well as a baby girl. "Little Ethel" could have been told of any event, for such was the purpose of the *Journals*.

The *Journals* and their readers benefit by Godfrey's being just what he was: a man who wanted society free to be itself. Religion had thrown off conformity. Congregationalism had been challenged by evangelical faiths. The improvements he sought, he had seen first as a student in Machias and later in Calais, where he went to practice law for two years before settling in Bangor in 1834. Temperance was ever in the wings. Riotous living was out, but tolerance is suggested by Godfrey when he divided the reformers into two groups: the Rationalists, the followers of Jesus and St. Paul; and the Radicals, the followers of Neal Dow. But, as he wrote, his remarks were honest and without affectation. The depth of his historical monographs as well as his role as a catalyst in working with friends in comparable fields of history make him the personification of "historicity." He lived his profession. No proof is needed by reason of his monumental *Journals*.

Finally, the *Journals* are a remarkable inheritance which the donors, Laura Loud Orcutt and Candace Loud Sawyer,



Cliff Cottage, looking through the dining room toward the front of the house, 1880s. Godfrey Collection.

now share with others. Laura, the more bookish, discovered the *Journals* hidden in the inner recesses of the family library at Fern Ledge. It was the same library where her father admitted he had been all worn out by chasing her around the room three times on the day he retired from the Probate Court.

In everyone's life the sequence of time is there, but rarely can it be felt without interruption. "Living history" is seen through the eyes of the beholder. Bones are interred, but not the mind. It took only three generations in the case of these granddaughters of John Godfrey to bridge two centuries of time. More often for a reader of any generation it takes five.

In the quest for sharing, the Bangor Historical Society had its own distinctive part, and notable indeed was that played by the editor, James B. Vickery. His careful and far-reaching observations of regional society are strengthened by copious footnotes and helpful introductions for each of the three volumes. The granddaughters followed through admirably both in the publication and the subsequent presentation to the Bangor Historical Society.

The latch is out for other young women and their male counterparts to demonstrate a professional interest in the past, that they too, in their time, may be the last to remember.

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