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Cities on the Saco

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REVIEWS IN MAINE HISTORY

The authors are to be commended for their reliance on primary sources for the historic data in *Tides of Change*. The 1860 Census, contemporary maps and deeds, and journals and diaries replaced the undocumented lore of antiquarian local history. Used as a teaching tool, *Tides of Change* offers educators a rare opportunity to combine history and science in an enriching on-site educational feast. As each section ends, the authors have provided readers with a tour of the settlement areas that lives up to their promise of an in-hand guide. For historians the conclusion provides the historical framework that was missing at the beginning. A bibliography and repositories of research materials collected and cited are given. Jon Luoma drew the delightful illustrations.

Marilyn Zoidis
Freeport, Maine

Cities on the Saco: A Pictorial History. By Jacques M. Downs. Photo reproductions by Taylor H. Conrad. (Norfolk, Va.: Downing Company, with financial underwriting by the Garland Manufacturing Company, 1985. Pp. 203. \$26.50.)

Cities on the Saco: A Pictorial History is an excellent example of a "new" type of local history publication, which is in reality the revival of the late-nineteenth-century county histories. The Downing Company is a commercial publisher that specializes in producing picture histories of cities and states. A contract is made with a local historical society or library, and then in consultation with the society the company hires a local historian to research and write a text and to select photographs to illustrate the book from the collections of the society and other local institutions. Downing then solicits underwriting of the book from local businesses, and takes charge of the editing, layout, and publishing of the history. Obviously, a community could undertake such a project on its own, but a local historical

society rarely has the resources in finances and personnel to do so. Thus, the services provided by companies like Downing meet a real need.

The picture histories produced by such arrangements can also be excellent, and of real value to the community. The key to the success of the project is finding the appropriate person to author the text, and in this the local organization plays a key role. The local organization also provides a key resource in its collection of photographs, which are priceless and essential to the success of the project. The value of this type of book is first, that it is printed at all. Local histories are published only on rare occasions and at great intervals, and so any responsibly done work is welcomed. Second, since the historical society is part of the author selection process, it can insure that a qualified person is given the assignment. Third, the histories cover the entire history of a community, up to the present, and therefore become the most up-to-date source. Finally, these histories tend to be widely circulated and to be widely read. Thus, they do have influence and become community resources.

The pictorial history books are written and can be read in two ways — through the text and through the photograph captions. In fact, it is perhaps best to go through the book first by examining the photos and reading the captions, which do provide an overview of the history of the area and an introduction to some persons, institutions and events not mentioned in the text. Next, read the text, ignoring the photos, which can interrupt the flow of the narrative. It is the text which is ultimately the most important part of the book, since it provides a chronological and interpretive framework of the history of the community. Obviously, one cannot expect the text to be a definitive interpretive history, but what is presented can be of immense value to citizens in putting present history into a broad perspective.

Cities on the Saco is an excellent example of a well-done pictorial history. The Dyer Library Association, consisting of Saco's Dyer Library and the York Institute, a major historical

library and museum in the area, was the logical institution to sponsor such a project in cooperation with Biddeford's MacArthur Library. The photographic collections of these institutions provided the bulk of the photographs used in the book. Dyer Library then selected an excellent author, Dr. Jacques M. Downs, a historian who teaches at the University of New England in Biddeford. The history of either city could have been the sole subject of such a picture history, but the decision was made to do a combined history. Even then, Downs could have treated each community separately, as has been done in the past, but he chose to integrate the two into one history. This approach provided a built-in comparative framework which Downs used to advantage. In fact, the area eventually turned into three municipalities when Old Orchard broke away from Saco. Thus the book offers the additional perspective of a summer resort community. The text is informally written, and Downs makes references and connections between the past and the present, including critical conclusions about past actions.

The lower Saco River valley, which evolved into Biddeford and Saco, was explored by Martin Pring in 1603, Samuel De Champlain in 1604, and John Smith in 1614. Sir Ferdinando Gorges sent Richard Vines and thirty-two men to winter at what is now called Biddeford Pool in 1616, but the era of permanent settlement did not begin until Vines and John Oldham returned in 1630 with a grant to the west side of the river (Biddeford) and Richard Bonython and Thomas Lewis arrived in 1631 with a grant to the east side (Saco). These proprietors brought settlers, and a lumbering, fishing, and farming community developed which was called Saco. In 1718, the town was named after Biddeford, England. By 1762, the population had reached 1,000, and the citizens on the east bank split off to found a separate town which was named Pepperillborough after a major landowner — the name was changed back to Saco in 1805.

Logs were floated down the Saco River to saw mills established at the falls between the towns, and that industry provided the first foundation of the local economy. In 1800, there

were seventeen mills turning out 50,000 board feet each day, some of which was used by local shipbuilders. But the falls were turned early to powering textile mills. In 1826, the Saco Manufacturing Company built the largest cotton textile mill in the United States. The mill burned, but others were built by firms like the Pepperill Manufacturing Company, and textile production dominated the economy for 100 years. By 1850, the Biddeford and Saco community was the most populous and prosperous area in southern Maine. The prosperity was not evenly distributed. Workers organized a union in 1867 and struck the mills in 1881, 1893 and 1898. Despite threats by the mills to move south, wages did increase, tripling during the World War.

The coming of the textile industry differentiated the two towns, which became cities in 1855 (Biddeford) and 1867 (Saco). Worker housing tended to be built in Biddeford, so that city grew faster and included the bulk of the newer Americans who came to build and then work in the mills — first the Irish and later the French-Canadians. Downs characterizes Biddeford as more liberal and progressive than Saco (the former became Democrat in 1864), and more willing to take risks to build up its industry. Saco grew more slowly, became the residence of the mill management, and was thus more conservative and traditional. The French arrived in Biddeford from Quebec after 1870. The first French parish was established in that year, and the first French newspaper in 1896. The Quebecquois clashed with the Irish in the workplace, the church, and in politics. A member of the French community won the mayor's office in 1910, and Francos have dominated Biddeford politics ever since. When the Saco Ku Klux Klan attempted to march into Biddeford in 1924, the city's police blocked the bridge.

Interestingly, Downs sees the last quarter century as the most remarkable period in the history of the cities on the Saco. Shock waves were felt in both communities when Bates Manufacturing closed its operation in Biddeford in 1956, throwing 1,400 out of work, and the Saco-Lowell Company, the leading American manufacturer of textile machinery, determined to

move South in 1959. Pepperill Manufacturing also considered moving South, but its research and development personnel convinced management to stay. Then labor, business, and elected officials came together to meet the crisis, with Biddeford leading the way. The city established an Industrial Development Corporation and used the old Saco-Lowell buildings as an “incubator” for new businesses, which then moved into one of a series of industrial parks developed by the city. In the 1970s, half of all businesses that moved to Maine settled in Biddeford, a total of sixty firms, which provided a dispersed and diversified economic base. Saco moved more slowly, hiring Biddeford’s professional industrial developer in 1984 to run its program. Both cities not only survived, but are healthier than before the crisis.

In his epilogue written in 1985, Downs pointed to future challenges and to the paradox of building a trash-to-energy plant and an upscale retail-office-condominium complex next to each other on Factory Island between the two cities. But he was optimistic about the future, if Biddeford and Saco could continue to work together, for he concluded, “Each brings valuable qualities that the other needs to a partnership which could make the future of the lower Saco Valley something neither city can achieve alone.” (199) *Cities on the Saco* is an example of the pictorial history in its most attractive, appealing and useful form. Other communities — especially sister cities — would do well to look at it as representative of a project they might well undertake themselves.

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