

CREATING PORTLAND: HISTORY AND PLACE

In Northern New England

Joseph A. Conforti, ed.
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Creating Portland represents a highly successful blending of the distant past and more recent historical geography of this most fascinating of Maine cities. The subtitle is *History and Place in Northern New England*, but the emphasis is primarily and unapologetically on concepts of “space.” Massey and Meegan’s (1985) phrase “The particularities of place” is especially apt here. The commission by the chief editor at Northeastern University Press was for this book to be about Portland as a “new England place,” and not as a traditional history text. While broadly following an historical outline, the collection emphasizes the spatial reconfiguration and cultural geographical redefinition of space in the city. And it works very well indeed. Throughout the carefully drawn chapters, geography is not treated as a mere backdrop to events, but rather as a constellation of locational, physical and human cultural forces that propel the march of history in the city’s shifting pattern of redevelopment.

Of Portland, *New England Monthly* raved in 1985, “Imagine a City too Good to be True.” In general, Conforti’s contributors suggest matters have improved still further. Acknowledging the explanatory power played by place, in a section of his introduction entitled, “Place: From Geography to Public Memory”, Conforti writes, “Nature sets ‘boundaries’ to and creates ‘possibilities’ for human activity,” and “Geography created the possibilities for a successful maritime economy.” (p. xiii).

Superimposed on the physical geography, of course, is human activity, “a layered record of a people’s history that is revealed in the built environment.” The editor’s hand is always present in the blending of the geographical and historical, marked perhaps by his ten-year stint as interdisciplinary program director of American and New England Studies at the University of Southern Maine. His is a solid and well-grounded take on the power of place-making in the promotion of livable cities.

Examples of this “blending” of the geographical and historical abound. After an abbreviated account of the city’s morphological spread and growing cultural diversity, we read of Portland’s role as a “contested frontier” (in Emerson Baker’s chapter) in which John Smith, the founder of Jamestown, returned to England from his coastal mapping expedition so enamored of Maine that he wrote a book to promote its settlement. After the establishment of the royal grant establishing the Province of Maine in 1639, various colonists sparred for dominance over the

land on and around what would become Portland. And as the English settlements grew, the native populations faltered. In many parts of coastal Maine all that survived were the Indian place names.

Within Maine, of course, Portland is central to commercial life and has been since the 18th century. Charles Outwin's chapter entitled "Thriving and Elegant Town: Eighteenth-century Portland as Commercial Center" is particularly successful in laying the foundation for much of what follows in the book: sketching how the port of "Falmouth in Casco Bay," later Portland, rose to prominence because of its location and emergent seaport. Deep shipping channels, favorable alignment to prevailing winds, a convenient and safe harbor, and its role as a gateway to the northern frontier meant Boston merchants and traders took a growing interest. Because of Maine's harsh winter climate, the city became a valuable transshipment point: imported wheat was stored in the massive granaries and ground flour was sent down the coast and into the hinterland. As the 18th century slipped into the 19th, new, larger industries emerged. Shipbuilding, all forms of seaborne trade, a blossoming civic culture conferred what Outwin describes as Portland's "unique status as a boomtown." Despite the ebb and flow of fortunes so common in New England cities' mercantile and industrial evolution, Portland today ranks among America's top 25 ports, outstripping even Boston.

After James Leamon's insights into Portland's fortunes during the revolutionary war (Britain came down hard on its independent minded population) and Charles Calhoun's lyrical musings on the life of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (a pleasant diversion from the book's major themes: "Is it changed or am I changed?/Ah! The oaks are fresh and green..."), we are exposed to broader discussions of the city's shifting cultural geography and its implications for successful place-making. A series of chapters deal with Latin American influences on Portland; the visual arts; literature; women, class and ethnicity; African-Americans; and the gay community. Some unique insights emerge from these chapters. In his discussion of Latin American influences in the 19th and 20th centuries, David Carey, Jr. reveals that Portland became one of the largest sugar and molasses ports in America because of its merchants' near monopoly of these commodities in Cuba in the 1850s and 1860s. Indeed, Carey cites the *Portland Board of Trade Journal* of this period as follows, "Portland had the largest trade with the West Indies of any port on the Atlantic coast."

But a century and a half later, Portland was no exception to the incipient racism that took hold after 9/11, with Hispanics feeling disproportionately impacted by the imposition of stricter Homeland Security regulations. Even Latino U.S. citizens and permanent residents were more prone to 'stop and search' actions by law enforcement officials. An especially delicious quote comes from a Puerto Rican woman who, when asked if she were an illegal alien, replied, "Honey, I've been American since the late nineteenth century."

In "Picturing Place: Portland and the Visual Arts" (Donna M. Cassidy) and "Writing Portland: Literature and the Production of Place" (Kent C. Ryden), we find chapters that, as well as any I have read on the topic of arts and urban place-making, articulate the role of artistic life in shaping a livable city. Cassidy painstakingly explains how the images conveyed by two-dimensional art shaped perceptions of the city and, as a consequence, its morphology: "Portland and its environs were mapped out according to... landscape categories" (p.132). Famous for its

landscape painting throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, Portland's artists created a tourism industry where visitors were invited to "consume the scenery" as the art works were "advertisements of a sort for the islands and coast in and around the city." The power of art in shaping the public's engagement in preserving the value of green space and unbroken vistas persists into the 21st century. In 2001, the 'Black Cove/Heart of Portland' project combined an examination of the aesthetic, historic and ecological factors that made the city "work" as a livable place. Cassidy also notes the dramatic influence of centuries' worth of public art in defining spaces throughout Portland.

We learn from Eileen Eagan, in "Women, Class and Ethnicity", about the strong influence western Irish immigrants, particularly the women, had on the city through the cultural capital they brought with them: traditions of sewing and dressmaking, high rates of literacy, the ability to speak English, a culture of "optimism and faith in their capacity to improve their lives" and the fostering of strong family bonds that enabled generational immigration from their home regions in Ireland. Their journey across the years was from "peasant maids to city women."

In "What They lack in Numbers: Locating Black Portland, 1870-1930," Maureen Elgersman Lee provides examples of the lives of several prominent black families in Portland and uses previously un-mined US Census and related data to analyze the decline and then growth of a highly heterogeneous black community in the post-bellum decades. Unlike the black settlement experience in most American cities during the first third of the 20th century, Portland's black population was drawn from all parts of the South, the Midwest, other New England cities, and the Caribbean colonies of Britain, France and Spain. However, like so many other New England cities, Portland has experienced entrenched, persistent patterns of spatial segregation by race.

In "Creating a 'Gay Mecca'", Howard M. Solomon explains that Portland is not typical of the broader 'gay revolution' that started in America in the 1970s, but is different because its story is one of "changing conceptions of how a community imagines itself, and the myths it chooses to believe in." Long before other coastal states in the eastern U.S., Maine had been discovered by writers, artists and the Bohemian classes, and had, since the late 19th century, been marketed as the 'Playground of the Nation.' But true acceptance did not come easily. Pivotal in its success relative to many other cities, however, was the creation and sustenance of the Maine Gay and Lesbian Symposium ("The Symposium"), which attracted advocates from all over northern New England and nearby Canadian provinces for two decades. The early, post-Stonewall success of local openly gay artists, writers and other change agents is, in large measure, the result of an enduringly tolerant culture, the effectiveness and political savvy of advocacy organizations, and a generally open-minded political class. Today, according to Solomon, Portland, Maine is among the most gay-friendly cities in the US: "In creating an authentic community, lesbians and gay men have helped shape a new Portland" (p. 311).

So in its late-20th century revival, Portland played to its physical and human geographical assets. Natural deep water harbors, a port that had declined and whose warehouses and townhouses were ripe for the arrival of the creative class, a setting that had long been admired by artists and tourists alike, and the single largest agglomeration of commercial activity within the state. The city also benefits from a sterling history of entrepreneurship, an emphasis on sustainability and preservation of the built environment, a business climate that nurtures cultural capital, and

a sphere of commercial and cultural influence that ranges across a substantial territory, delimited only by the reach of Boston. In his epilogue, Conforti calls Portland's a "creative economy." It remains the destination of choice within its region for "lifestyle refugees."

Unlike so many books on New England cities (and there are many), this exceptionally well edited collection goes beyond the stereotypical potted history. As Conforti is at pains to point out in his introduction, "This volume is designed as a crossdisciplinary study of place rather than as a comprehensive local history" (p.xxviii). As such, its first-rate scholarship will be of interest to urban geographers, city planners, urban scholars in general and, perhaps of greater importance, those passionate about Portland. In particular, *Creating Portland* is highly recommended for those educators in New England studies who seek a deftly assembled collection of case studies for their teaching of the human and cultural geography of Maine's largest city.

References Cited

Massey, D. and R. Meegan, eds., 1985. *Politics and Method: Contrasting Studies in Industrial Geography*. London: Methuen.