

A History of Maine Audubon

by Herb Adams

*This first appeared in **Habitat** as a series of articles in 1986 and then was reprinted in 1993. Herb Adams frequently writes and speaks on Maine's history.*

For Objects So Excellent

“The citizens of Portland are a queer race of men” declared the *Portland Daily Advertiser* in 1837: “Full of notions, full of projects, and naturally too, full of enterprise, bustle and excitement. From some mysterious cause, however, like the fabled knights of old, nearly all of us have either slept away or dreamt away the best part of our existence.”

Nearly, but not all. For on a February evening that year several inquisitive young Portland men had gathered in a Free Street schoolhouse to pry into the affairs of the world -- and to found the Maine Institute of Natural Science to do it. “From the character of the gentlemen who have taken the first steps” added the *Advertiser*, “we have reason to hope that their good object will be successfully prosecuted. The present is an auspicious time.”

As indeed it was. What woke Maine up that year woke America up too -- the arrival, by steam, rail, and sail, of the Jacksonian Era, that uncommon “Age of The Common Man.” For a young state in the young Republic, all the world's doors seemed open,

and what could withstand the assault of a curious Yankee with a big idea and a dollar-or no dollar at all, if the idea were big enough?

And the institute's idea was as big as all outdoors: "To promote the General Good" it declared, to which end it hoped "aid will be offered by individuals in all parts of the state, by contributions in specimens of Metals, Minerals, Birds, rare Animals, Reptiles, Fishes, Insects, Shells, Plants & Co. & Co." With Yankee alacrity, the institute was incorporated on March 20, 1837 and doing business before the ink was dry.

On April 10, 1837, the institute welcomed its first speaker, Dr. Charles T. Jackson, friend of Thoreau, brother-in-law of Emerson, and Maine's first State Geologist. As author of the upcoming and vast Geological Survey of the State of Maine and as a full-fledged scientist, Jackson was the rare bird in the room. These were the grand days of scientific innocence, when nature's new discoveries could be made by anyone with a notebook and a notion to keep his or her eyes open, and a "naturalist" was a questing Yankee first and a scientist second-if ever at all. The group Jackson addressed, officers and all, was a decidedly eager and gloriously amateur gathering.

Shopkeepers, artisans, mechanics, and craftsmen crowded the benches before him. In the president's chair sat Judge Ashur Ware, former Harvard professor of Greek and Maine's first Secretary of State. Free Street neighbor Dr. William Wood was keeper of the "cabinet," or specimen collections. The dour William Willis-diarist, lawyer, future major, and historian hard at work on his pioneering History of Portland-rounded out the "Board of Managers," joined by feisty John Neal, editor, gymnast, fencing master, and Portland's foremost slapdash novelist and one-man bonfire.

No sooner was Dr. Jackson off to scale Katahdin for science (he made the top in a furious snowstorm that September 23) than the institute set out to storm the world with lectures. Neal, known for his hot combinations with everything and everyone, called it "Chemistry." The papers called it puzzling and hinted darkly that Neal was drunk.

Neal spoke without notes and "had evidently chalked out a path, which might have

been interesting,” grumbled the Portland Transcript, “but unfortunately his way marks, by some means or other, had got partly erased.” Nevertheless, “we were pleased to see so large an audience. It spoke well for the character of our citizens, manifesting a healthy spirit of inquiry.”

For a year the institute fed that healthy spirit a diet of lectures as bright as a dollar (the price of admission) and as broad as the beckoning globe. There was Catherwood’s series on “The Holy Land,” Rev. Dwight’s discourse “On Volcanoes,” and Dr. Clarke’s “Evidence of Noah’s Flood.” Even the cranky Transcript once confessed: “Indeed, we got so interested in the subject, we neglected to take notes.”

But by 1839, for reasons unknown, the institute’s colorful career came to an end. Perhaps, like a poor patchwork quilt, it had tried to cover too much territory with too few pieces. By 1840 its small cabinet was auctioned off, Dr. William Wood buying much of it to carry sadly home, and the institute went the quiet way of so many good intentions.

Blue Bloods, Hot Bloods, and Other Notables

The institute’s spirit, however, was still abroad on Friday, November 24, 1843, when twenty Portland men of property gathered again at Stearn’s school house on Free Street. All had contributed toward the purchase of one of Dr. A. Mitchell’s collection of mounted birds, and they now came together to ponder the formation of an association dedicated to “the promotion of knowledge in the various branches of Natural History.” There proved little to ponder. “Voted” scribbled their clerk, Sylvester B. Beckett, “That the gentlemen present consider themselves organized into a Society.”

With that the Portland Natural History Society had a name and a collection, and within a month it had a home. Portland donated a dusty third-floor room in the Merchant’s Exchange, the city’s noblest building, and here the society elected its first officers in December 1843. Dues were set at two dollars a year.

As in the old institute, the society’s first president was not a scientist but a jurist-

Judge Ether Shepley, former U.S. Senator, former U.S. Attorney for the District of Maine, and future Chief Justice of the Maine Supreme Court. “The laws of Nature are but the laws of God,” he intoned, “and the laws of Man are but a reflection of both.” And like the old institute, the society’s membership mingled the best of Portland’s blue bloods and hot bloods. Dr. William Wood was back, as was John Neal, now joined by the likes of temperance crusader Neal Dow (John Neal’s cordially disliked cousin); Alexander Dallas Bache, director of the U.S. Geodetic Survey and great-grandson of Ben Franklin; and George Henry Preble, a future admiral and son of Portland’s famous Commodore Edward Preble.

Other notables in 1851 included Major Robert Anderson, commander of nearby Fort Preble, who soon would witness the start of the Civil War as commander of Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor; and Portland’s only resident snake charmer, F. Nicholls Crouch. “A burly English songster and teacher of music, always poor, generous, kindhearted and thoughtful,” Crouch had sung at the coronation of Queen Victoria and now met members on the street “with one or two snake’s heads peeping out under the side of his hat,” one witness remembered. “When he could not be with them in the fields, he would have them with him in his house.”

The Phoenix and the Passenger Pigeon

In 1852 the society elected Dr. William Wood as their president. Wood held the post for forty-seven years, embracing the days of the society’s greatest growth and prosperity. Himself symbolizing the era of the

“gentleman scholar” of science, Wood made the society “the chief employment of his life, outside his profession, and the chief enjoyment, outside his family,” according to a contemporary. There was much to enjoy. Wood presided over rooms bursting with stuffed birds, mounted fish, Rocky Mountain elk horns, and a first edition of Audubon’s Birds of America, amid much more arriving daily from the harbor and the hills. From beneath the great iron dome of the Merchant’s Exchange Building, which Portland had built in hopes of luring the Legislature back from the wilderness town of Augusta, the society looked down upon the busiest city in the state. Behind the Exchange’s granite columns beat Portland’s business heart, with its post office, book stores, banks, courtrooms. When the U.S. government bought the building in 1849 for a customs house, the growing society readily moved into the old city council chambers above the court. It proved to be a costly mistake.

On the frigid Sunday morning of January 8, 1854, diarist William Willis was on his way to church when stopped by word that the Exchange was ablaze. “A grand and terrible sight!” cried the Transcript. “A great Disaster has fallen upon our city! That beautiful and stately pile, the Old Exchange, is but a heap of ruins!” In three short hours, the building “had vanished into thin air” lamented the paper. By nightfall nothing remained but a “black and yawning gulf.” Lost completely was everything owned by the society. “It had been many years in the collection,” the paper noted, “and its departments of birds, minerals, shells, books, and curiosities were filled with rare and valuable specimens which money can scarcely replace. This is, in some respects, the severest loss of all.” Arson was suspected but never proved, and none of the Society’s \$25,000 loss was insured.

William Willis rode on to church and grimly noted in his diary that the first sermon was on Faith, and the second was on Resurrection.

For the society, the only phoenix left to rise from its ashes was a stuffed passenger pigeon. Sylvester Beckett, the organization’s secretary, had loaned the shopworn bird, after much entreaty, to his friend John Cloudman, the painter, who posed it on a branch before a portrait of the Exchange as a still life for his students. The building

was gone, but the bird lived on, peeking awkwardly out from a dozen amateur oils, “much to Dr. Wood’s disgust” says one account, “as it seemed the very irony of fate that so worthless a thing should be preserved, while everything of the least value belonging to the Society had been destroyed.”

The pigeon was soon the sole tenant of the society’s new room in the old City Hall on Market (now Monument) Square, its home until 1857. It was here that the society weathered another near disaster when, on the night of the great “Rum Riot” of June 2, 1855, a roaring mob broke down the doors to loot the medicinal liquors that Mayor (and society member) Neal Dow had locked in the basement. Dow ordered the militia to fire on the crowd, and one man was killed. A furious trial ensued, and though Dow and the city’s liquor escaped unscathed, the weary society soon decamped for quieter quarters above the Merchant’s Bank at 34 Exchange Street, sustained now only by pride and public spirit.

Still, the spirit prevailed. “Our citizens can contribute their dollars,” volunteered the loyal Transcript. “Our sportsmen can contribute specimens of the various birds of Maine; our young people can gather our native shells; our fishermen can contribute of the wonders of the deep, while even children can gather the curious forms of life which find existence along the margins of the sea.” Many seashells rolled in-but little hard cash. In 1857 the Maine Legislature granted the society “one-half township of land of average quality... provided that the Society shall be open to the public free of charge”-a pledge the organization kept until the last.

Amid the gifts of shells and birds came a painting from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in Cambridge, Massachusetts. A society member since his boyhood, Longfellow had commissioned a copy of a portrait of Baron Alexander Von Humboldt and now sent it northward to his old home with compliments. “My best wishes for the Prosperity of the Society,” Longfellow wrote. “May the wise old man find a place on the wall of your room, and in a certain sense, preside over your meetings.”

It was an auspicious gift at a symbolic moment. Prussian-born Von Humboldt was the scientific celebrity of the age, a questing traveler, friend of Jefferson, author of the five-volume encyclopedia *Cosmos*, and possibly the last man to know practically everything in an age of ever-expanding things to know. The society promptly hired Portland sculptor Paul Akers to cast the image as a seal, where it remained the organization’s official symbol for more than a century.

To Ashes Again

A new beginning meant a new home, and the society turned to the old Portland Academy building at the corner of Congress and Temple Streets. Nestled beneath gracious elms, it was a near neighbor to City Hall, Portland’s historic First Parish Church, and several fine mansions. It was also supposedly fireproof. In January 1859 the society voted to buy the building and in June commenced alterations. By January

1860 the building was “finely furnished...commodious and comfortable”-and the society was broke. In March the cash-strapped organization was forced to sell off its half-township of wildlands for a mere fifty cents an acre.

But the Portland Society of Natural History’s real wealth, of course, lay in its collections and its loyal members, among whom were many of the city’s most distinguished citizens. Despite the Civil War that raged in the ensuing years, the new glass cabinets were soon filled with specimens from every corner of the world: Singapore corals; mounted birds from the Himalayas, Madagascar, and Japan; fossil “bird tracks” (dinosaur footprints) from out West; and bric-a-brac from the city’s attics, such as Tahitian war clubs and British cannonballs from Capt. Mowatt’s bombardment of Falmouth in 1775. Indeed, the society’s future looked promising-at least until Portland’s “Great Fire” of July 4, 1866.

Legend says that the Great Fire was started by a careless firecracker tossed into a waterfront boatyard. “When the morning papers announced that the pyrotechnic display of that evening would be of unusual magnificence,” Harper’s Weekly wrote later, “they did not foresee in what direful sense their prediction would be fulfilled.” For twenty-four hours the blaze roared unchecked, whipped by gale winds, sweeping away 1800 buildings, 8 churches, and every bank in the city; 10,000 people were left homeless.

Watching from the western edge of the fire’s path, society members had held out hope that their building was safe. Firemen mined nearby buildings with gunpowder for a last-ditch firebreak, and curator Edward Morse opened the glass cabinets, banked up empty boxes, and stacked the society library onto its high-backed settees for a hasty rescue.

“The roar of the flames was like the deep-toned voice of many Niagaras,” wrote Dr. Wood in a vivid account. “The lamentations of the multitudes driven from their burning homes, the shouts of the firemen, the rattling of engines, the uproar of falling walls and the explosion of mines, the clamor of bells ringing out anew, all overhung with a

dark and wired canopy of smoke lurid with the baleful glare of this great conflagration—all united in creating a night of terror and dismay appalling to the stoutest of hearts.”

Wood and a handful of members held a “gloomy meeting” in the sweltering hall and hauled the loaded settees across Congress Street to the portico of the Chadwick Mansion. As they passed, a wooden tenement beside the society’s building exploded, “piling up from six to ten feet against it a splintered mass of kindling already on fire. Every window in the hall was blown to atoms, every moveable thing had been dislodged, and a very chaos of fire was rolling before a furious gale into the devoted building.” Huge slabs of fossil rock now blocked the entryway, and over these they grimly went for a second dash with more settees, “staggering along under the great and inconvenient burdens.” The roof then fell in behind them, “a pillar of fire, a conspicuous object even upon that night of conflagrations.” Across the street the weary rescuers watched their building shower cinders atop the new City Hall, which “before long, in its turn, flaunted the red banner of fire from its lofty dome.”

By morning’s light the building was one more roofless hull in a city of smoldering walls. Nothing salvageable whatever remained within, “even the much-painted passenger pigeon,” says one account, “having here met its long-delayed fate.” All that survived of the society’s collections were the loaded settees and the portrait of Humboldt carried from the doomed building.

A Museum Worthy of a World Port

Five days after the Great Fire, on July 9, the society’s weary members gathered at the home of the Rev. E. C. Bolles, the society’s secretary. “Be it resolved,” they grimly declared, “that the Portland Society of Natural History still lives.... Notwithstanding the fearful calamity of fire that has again swept away its all, it will, under the blessing of Providence, still pursue its way, undismayed and earnest...”

But reality, like the cold rain that soon fell for days on the devastated city, offered little comfort. Twice in twelve years the society had lost everything it owned. In a single night it suffered the loss of \$50,000 in property, leaving a mere \$1,809 in assets,

mostly in burned-out banks. “A misfortune the more severe,” wrote Dr. Wood,” because the terrible and widespread conflagration so crippled the life of the community that the recovery of a scientific institution in the midst of so much destruction could only be difficult and slow.”

For two years the society led a vagabond life, meeting in Wood’s Free Street home, its library stacked on makeshift shelves in the vestry of the First Parish Church. In February 1868 the city fathers granted the organization “exhibition and library rooms” on the third floor of the rebuilt City Hall-an irony, since the City Hall had been set ablaze by cinders from the society’s building itself.

Out of the ashes of the Great Fire, the Portland Society of Natural History issued “An Appeal To The Friends of Science” that pleaded: Brethren-Whom God has spared the double affliction with which he has afflicted us.... Will you give us the hand of sympathy that we may again have a habitation and a name, and go on in the joyful work of interpreting the Book of Nature?” As expected, “the pecuniary returns from this publication were small,” noted Wood, yet the return of specimens “from various quarters, was most valuable and large” -little less, in fact, than a torrent from all corners of the country. The famous Essex Institute of Salem, Massachusetts, sent crates of coral. The Boston Society of Natural History sent a boxcar of books, and the Smithsonian sent shells and weapons from the Fiji Islands, relics of Capt. Charles Wilkes’s “U.S. Exploring Expedition” of 1846. From Pike’s Peak came sample ores, from Texas came a live horned toad, and from one Major H. Inman at Fort Harker, Arizona, came one “Skull of Deceased Indian.” All this and more, from alligator teeth to Cuban cockroaches, were dutifully logged in the society’s Proceedings and proudly piled high in its rooms.

By the 1870s, the cramped third-floor quarters were less than ideal for an active and growing organization. The society’s meeting of June 19, 1876, was scrubbed because a concert was being held downstairs in City Hall and the ticket-taker mistook the membership for gate crashers. With a new home in mind, the society purchased the Day Mansion and 125 feet of frontage on Elm Street, off Market (Monument) Square in

January 1876. Ultimately the dwelling proved too small for the society's dreams and was demolished in April 1879 to make way for a new structure.

Portland's foremost architect, Francis H. Fassett, rebuilders of City Hall, creator of the Maine Medical Center and the Baxter Public Library, was called upon to design a museum similar to the one that had been destroyed in the fire. What Fassett produced, however, was a veritable temple to science in the grandest Gothic style of the day: a multistory brick-and-freestone library, lecture hall, and museum, complete with observatory tower (never finished), embraced by iron balustrades, and illuminated from floor to cathedral ceiling by a lofty (and fireproof) skylight. The new museum was meant to last forever, and the debt to build it nearly did. The society borrowed \$10,000 from the Portland Academy on a ten-year note and made the first payment fifty years late-under threat of foreclosure-in 1941. (The Academy forgave the sixty-two years worth of interest.) After thirty-seven years and a half-dozen homes, the society seemed secure at last.

It was from Elm Street that the society issued its most famous appeal for donations, the blue-covered "Circular To Sea Captains and Other Seafaring Men" (1881). Distributed free on Portland's waterfront (soon to be the third busiest customs port in the country), the appeal for natural history specimens brought home a harvest of exotic relics from the farthest corners of the globe. All this and more were lovingly gathered in glass cases, and for two decades at century's end Portland rivaled Washington, Boston, and New York as a center of collections for all the natural sciences, anthropology to zoology.

Yet in the society's very wealth lay its fatal weakness. The aging gentlemen naturalists had labored lifetimes in "the Joyful Work of interpreting the Book of Nature" to glimpse the grand design of God, but the last days of their kind of science were at hand. Like a schooner tossed in the wake of a steamship, they were unprepared for the speed and specialization of the new century. Poignant departures marked the end of their era. C. B. Fuller died in 1893 after thirty-seven years as cabinet keeper; Dr. William Wood, the last founder of the Portland Society of Natural History, died in 1899

after forty-seven years as its president. “He leaves an unfading picture of his simple, gentle, dignified presence,” lamented the papers. “It will be difficult for us to think of him and this Society as separate and apart.” Slowly, like an old man nodding off on a summer evening, the society was falling asleep.

A Wake-up Call

For a while, one man kept the society wonderfully alive. Arthur H. Norton, “one of the foremost Maine ornithologists and a man of considerable scientific attainments,” noted the Portland Argus, assumed the position as curator in 1905. “After a period of slumber lasting several years, the Society has waked up,” the paper commented. A man of the new century, Arthur Norton would bridge the society’s transition from solely nature observation to activism in the name of conservation.

Norton was a stocky man with bright eyes, a bushy mustache, and boundless energy. One report likened him to a ship sweeping through the dusty halls, “busy and preoccupied, with his sails set, so to speak, for the haven of the library, bearing with him a heavy cargo of books.” To visiting boys he was a hearty companion who kept his bird shot in a glass inkwell and loaded his brass shells by hand and a leader of exhausting tramps in search of new birds to collect, which he rarely missed. Few knew that Norton’s wife was confined to the state asylum in Augusta, making his marriage to the great outdoors all the more poignant.

Born in 1871, the son of the captain of the St. George, Maine, Lifesaving Station, Norton had a passion for bird study that dated from boyhood. He was elected president of the new Maine Ornithological Society, the first statewide league of people interested in birds, at its first annual meeting in 1897. The Ornithological Society’s first foray into activism was crowned with success: in 1901, at the urging of the young National Audubon Society, it successfully lobbied the Maine Legislature to pass the American Ornithologists’ Union’s “Model Law,” protecting all nongame birds, nests, and eggs.

The success was a major step for conservationists and came none too soon given

that Maine's colonies of gulls, terns, and other seabirds had nearly been wiped out by plume hunters for the millinery trade. Encouraged, Dr. A. L. Lane and the Rev. G. W. Hinckley, both of Fairfield, issued a call in 1902 to create the first statewide "Maine Audubon Society." The founders made it clear in the constitution they drew up that the society was to be more than a birdwatching group. In stating that the goals of the organization were both to discourage the destruction of birds and to encourage an interest in birds and the study of natural history, the founders set forth a dual emphasis on advocacy and education that still characterizes Maine Audubon to this day.

The time was right, and Maine was ready. In 1904 Arthur Norton, now Field Agent for the National Audubon Society, proudly noted that Maine Audubon had 10 local secretaries, 265 regular members, and 758 associate members scattered across the state. At the organization's annual meeting that year, one North Berwick member captured the growing confidence of the budding conservation movement with the following anecdote: "A small [child] discovered some New Hampshire boys climbing to one of the robin's nests near his home and endeavored to drive them away. Not successful in this, the plucky little one went promptly for a policeman, who gave the intruders convincing proof that it is not safe to violate our Maine laws for the protection of birds!"

In 1906 curator Norton of the Portland Society of Natural History was elected secretary-treasurer of the Maine Audubon Society, cementing an alliance of the two organizations that lasted well beyond his lifetime. Although the records are very sketchy from this period, it is clear that under Norton's tenure the Portland Society became the center of the Audubon movement in Maine, and the distinction between the two societies blurs. When the Cumberland County Audubon Society was founded in 1922, presumably as a chapter of Maine Audubon, it often held meetings in conjunction with the Portland Society under the approving eyes of Arthur Norton, a member of both societies.

At the Portland Society, Norton threw open the museum doors to flocks of

schoolchildren and organized lectures on topics from “medical radium” to bird lore. And the public loved it. In 1921 the society counted 6000 visitors, a proud vote of approval from a city whose population was barely 30,000. Never at rest, Norton authored scores of articles for National Audubon’s Bird-Lore magazine and published the Portland Society’s biennial Proceedings, packed with detail on flora and fauna the length and breadth of Maine.

The Twilight Years

Yet despite Norton’s vigorous leadership, the society continued to contract as older members passed away and a younger world passed by its doors. In 1931 only seventy-five members remained, paying a total of just \$149 in dues; in later years no dues were paid at all. In 1937-a good year-Norton noted “twelve had been elected to membership, three had died, and one resigned.” The pace took its toll, and when Arthur Norton died in January 1942 at age seventy-two after almost forty years as curator, the society closed its doors for the duration of World War II.

The society’s doors reopened on a different world in 1945 with Walter Rich as curator. In 1947, after a seventeen-year hiatus, the society published one more Proceedings-Rich’s own paper, “The Swordfishery of New England”-and ceased publication forever. That same year the diminished organization voted to close the museum’s doors to the public. Several vital trustees then resigned in disgust, and schoolchildren no longer filled the echoing hall of dusty glass cases.

Further sorrows followed in 1951, when it was discovered that the society’s treasurer had been embezzling funds. “He said he needed the money to live on,” the minutes grimly note. “It was found he lived in one of the most expensive apartments in the city, and that it was lavishly furnished with Persian rugs and mahogany furniture. Over \$7000 was reported missing.” Despite this, the scandal served to infuse some life back into the society. Some funds were recovered, and several key trustees returned to charter a new course as Norton had, emphasizing education and outreach.

In 1953 Christopher M. Packard of Brunswick, fresh out of Bowdoin where he had

studied under ornithologist Alfred O. Gross, was hired as curator at \$25 a week. Within the next two years he launched the Maine Field Observer, a quarterly natural history journal laboriously hand-typed on mimeo stencil by editors Gross and Packard. Electric lights and indoor bathrooms arrived in 1954, but the society's beloved museum hall, unheated for much of the season and suffering from decades of deferred repairs, remained as much of a relic as the contents of its glass cases. "You knew the place was ancient just by its smell," recalls Edward F. Dana, a student of Gross's and a society trustee who had been a member since his boyhood. "Its fate was inevitable. It was just a matter of time before it had to close."

Mummies and Moon Rock

For a time, however, new developments and new energy delayed the inevitable. In January 1961 the aging Portland Society of Natural History and the struggling Maine Audubon Society voted to merge, sharing memberships, funding, and the same officers and trustees, though keeping separate corporate identities. Among the accomplishments of the union was the first lease (for \$1 a year) of Mast Landing Sanctuary in Freeport from Lawrence and Eleanor Smith of Philadelphia. In 1966 Mast Landing Nature Day Camp opened its first season. Outreach continued, with the energetic Packard reviving sleeping former Audubon chapters in western Maine, the Mid-coast region, York County, and Bangor. During the evenings, eager Boy Scout troops filled the lecture hall, beneath the portrait of Von Humboldt that had hung there for a hundred years.

In step with the growing national awareness and concern about the environment, the societies also once again began taking an assertive stance on conservation issues. Richard Anderson, then a biologist with the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, headed up a conservation committee in 1967 that worked to ban the use of the pesticide DDT and publicly opposed construction of an oil refinery in Machiasport. In 1969 the societies made a commitment to environmental advocacy by hiring Anderson as the associate director for conservation.

Public outreach received a boost, too, when the societies hired William A. Bechtel, former curator for the Philadelphia Natural Science Academy, as joint education director in 1968. The resourceful Bechtel scored two swift coups for the organization by bringing in a mummified Egyptian and an Apollo moon rock. The ancient Egyptian arrived first, to the glee of Portland's papers, in November 1969. "From Egypt to Elm Street," grinned the Press Herald when the society threw a cocktail party in the mummy's honor. "The No. 1 guest just lay around embalmed." The noble Sakhpimau, "probably known as Saki to his intimates," said the paper, "could have been eating his heart out for a drink (his long-defunct pumper and lungs are all that's left inside) but the guests didn't seem to notice."

The mummy's departure overlapped the arrival of a stunning symbol of the modern age. Bechtel, a former NASA employee, outbid larger museums to bring one of only eight moon rocks traveling the world to Maine, less than six months after Apollo 11 brought it to Earth. In January 1970 the moon rock arrived at Portland Jetport to a reception worthy of a political candidate. More than 11,000 people braved the subzero cold (the crush of people kept the museum's door constantly open) to view the piece of another world, glittering in a nitrogen-filled glass case atop a velvet stand. Many, the paper noted, cried.

Cleaning Out the Attic

Despite the recent gains, reality now dealt the societies a double blow against their future and their focus. Finances played a large role in both. With a total combined membership of just 1200, the cash-strapped groups had been running deep yearly deficits (a 1962 dues increase from \$2 to \$5 a year-the first dues increase for the Portland Society in 119 years-was hardly enough). Director Packard argued that limited finances meant limiting the focus and that the societies should be redivided for separate purposes. When the trustees disagreed, Packard resigned in 1969. With him went five of Maine Audubon's chapters (York, Merrymeeting, Mid Coast, Western Maine, and Presque Isle) which became-and remain-part of the National Audubon Society.

At the same time Portland's city fathers declared the widening of Elm Street, thus dooming the old Portland Society building. Dismayed, education director William Bechtel resigned in protest. On November 9, 1970, the museum locked its doors for the last time, and the society left its home of ninety-two years for rented quarters in a former carpet store at 57 Baxter Boulevard in Portland.

Moving the Portland Society of Natural History, like leaving a beloved family homestead, proved as emotional as emptying an ancestral attic of a hundred ancient trunks. To newly appointed executive director Richard Anderson and crew fell the Herculean task of unearthing, sorting, and dispensing 120 years of trash and treasure: 5000 stuffed birds, 100,000 seashells, tons of minerals, Aztec pottery, Fiji war clubs, pressed plants, and countless eggs, insects, bottles, cans, and containers. The end brought back memories of the beginning: in a dark corner they uncovered a crate of rocks collected in 1837 by Dr. Charles Jackson, who had made the inaugural address to the Maine Institute of Natural Science so long ago.

Rare shells were sent to the University of Hawaii, birds and minerals to the University of Maine, and paleontological relics to the University of Maine at Presque Isle. Homes were found for much more, but as in all families, much was swept away, "borrowed," forgotten, and lost. On the last day passing boys were offered mounted moose heads from the trash piles on the sidewalk.

It took exactly three days in November 1971 to level the home of the Portland Society of Natural History for a 33-space parking lot. Three months later on February 14, 1972, the Portland Society formally merged with and took the name of the Maine Audubon Society.

At last, as Dr. William Wood had written a hundred years before, the Portland Society of Natural History had "neither a habitation nor a name."

From Naturalists to Environmentalists

The organization that Anderson took over in the early 1970s was a shadow of its

former self: its long-time leaders departed, its collections depleted, its old home destroyed. A deficit of almost \$40,000 loomed over a membership of less than 1000. It was perhaps the gravest moment for the organization since the Great Fire of 1866. A lesser organization might well have given up the ghost, but such a clean break with the past opened new opportunities, and once again timing and the determination of personalities combined to bring a final phoenix out of the ashes.

The early 1970s marked the blossoming of the environmental movement, one of the most powerful social themes of the decade. At the same time, Maine Audubon's trustees issued a new statement of purpose matching the day and house: "To promote and encourage understanding and appreciation of the natural environment, and to foster through education... an awareness of the relationship between Man and his environment, and the environmental problems caused by man."

Maine Audubon's new focus matched the new director's enthusiasm and energy. Anderson hit the ground running. He established a recycling program with the Salvation Army, argued for mandatory beverage-container deposits, presented a ten-week course on sewer overflow problems in Portland's Back Cove, and spoke out against state pheasant raise-and-release programs as a waste of money (most died of exposure). In December 1971 Maine Audubon was selling Christmas cards made from sludge skimmed from the Presumpscot River below S. D. Warren's Westbrook paper plant. In 1972 Maine Audubon conducted the first statewide bald eagle survey, fought the use of DDT and herbicide 245-T in Baxter State Park, and helped create the State Board of Pesticide Control. That same year Anderson convinced the state to rent Maine Audubon a run-down hot dog stand at the edge of Scarborough Marsh, which he soon converted into the nature center that is still one of the organization's busiest facilities.

In his spare time Anderson chaired the Maine Mining Commission and hosted the popular public TV program "Upcountry," celebrating the great Maine outdoors. Anderson also extended Maine Audubon's hand of cooperation to old adversaries by working with S. D. Warren Company to improve the environmental conditions in the

Presumpscot River estuary. One of the methods the paper company used to cut the odor of plant effluents was to bombard the estuary's mud flats with lime at low tide. For loading and liftoff the helicopters used a Falmouth property owned by Maurice and Ruth Moulton Freeman. That property, known as Gilsland Farm, was soon to figure prominently in the Maine Audubon story.

By 1974 Maine Audubon operated the most complete environmental information center in Maine, emphasizing alternative energy sources, a phrase that took on new meaning to Mainers suffering sticker shock from the OPEC oil embargo. In the face of this, Maine Audubon ushered in 1975 by opposing any oil refinery along the Maine coast. The Maine Times concluded that the society's transformation from old to new was complete, if controversial: "Maine Audubon has evolved from a society of naturalists to one of environmentalists." The difference seemed small, but it was significant. The old Portland Society of Natural History built success upon a steady growth of collections; the modern Maine Audubon would build success upon a growing list of achievements.

Certainly one of the most notable of those achievements was passage of the "Bottle Bill," Maine's returnable beverage container law. Rejected by the Legislature after heavy industry lobbying and sent by petition to the public for referendum that fall, the bill gave Maine Audubon an opportunity to significantly expand its influence. Championing the law's merits against a well-funded opposition, assistant director William Ginn traveled more than 7000 miles around Maine during the autumn of 1976, speaking to as many as five audiences a day. The Bottle Bill's passage by an overwhelming margin marked Maine Audubon as a force to be reckoned with in Maine politics. That position was further bolstered by the organization's active opposition to the proposed Dickey-Lincoln Dam in 1977 and by its establishment of the Maine Conservation Lobby in 1978 to fund raise and coordinate environmental advocacy efforts in Augusta.

Firmly On the Map

Coinciding with Maine Audubon's growing political influence was the organization's move out of its obscure Baxter Boulevard office to an exceptional piece of property just across the Presumpscot estuary in Falmouth. In December 1974 Maurice and Ruth Moulton Freeman gave Maine Audubon Gilsland Farm, sixty acres of fields, woods, and tidal marsh that once belonged to Mrs. Freeman's father, David Moulton, a founder of the Portland Water District and avid amateur horticulturist. The extraordinary gift opened up numerous new possibilities for the organization, literally and figuratively putting it on the map.

Here Maine Audubon undertook an ambitious project to build a new headquarters building that would also showcase state-of-the-art energy generation and conservation measures. Led by Maine Audubon board president Sherry Huber, the organization successfully mounted the largest fund-raising effort in its history. Ground-breaking ceremonies for the visually striking 6000-square-foot saltbox-style building were held October 4, 1975, and in August 1976 the rooftop solar collectors were first turned on. Incorporating passive and active solar heating, a wood-fired furnace, heat storage, and both solar and wind energy generation, the building and the surrounding property also generated considerable public attention, further solidifying the organization's stature in the community and around the state. Although new developments in energy-efficient construction eventually rendered many of the building's prototype technologies obsolete, the building was a striking success, both as a symbol and a system.

After overseeing the transition to Gilsland Farm and spearheading passage of Maine's ban on billboards, Anderson passed the reins of executive director to William Ginn in 1977. Over the next six years, Ginn guided Maine Audubon through a period of heady growth as the environmental movement came into its own both in Maine and nationally. Membership grew to over 5000 households as the scope of the organization expanded with programs in natural history education, environmental policy, forestry, wildlife protection, energy information, field trips, sanctuaries, and a retail store. From a staff of four in 1971, Maine Audubon had grown to staff of more than twenty by 1981, all "unusually young and energetic," noted a visiting reporter,

“only two or three of whom are even over the age of thirty.”

Overflowing the headquarters building-“it was like trying to conduct business from bunk desks,” remembers Ginn-Maine Audubon purchased the original 200-year-old farmhouse on the property in 1981. Renovations created not only more office space but also an Energy Education Center, a working example of the possibilities for retrofitting an old house to conserve energy.

In It for the Long Term

Maine Audubon’s continuing dual commitment to education and advocacy stretched the organization both professionally and financially. The challenge that emerged now for Maine Audubon was how to sustain the momentum of the recent past in the face of increasingly complex and costly conservation initiatives. Reflecting the emergence of environmental protection as a major social priority for the state, Maine Audubon hired Charles E. Hewett, the director of Dartmouth College’s Resource Policy Center, to succeed Bill Ginn as executive director in 1983. Hewett brought a commitment to developing the organization’s capabilities to analyze environmental issues and initiate dialogue as the basis for seeking solutions to problems. To some extent that approach foreshadowed changes in the environmental movement nationwide and is what characterizes the new emphasis of activists today.

An important part of Hewett’s vision for Maine Audubon was to stabilize staff turnover by providing incentives for employees to make a longer-term commitment to the organization. “In the 1970s people went [to Maine Audubon] fresh out of college and worked there for next-to-nothing,” remembers one former staff member from that time. “You couldn’t help but burn out after about two years. Sooner or later you find that you can’t live too well on just idealism.”

Among the most far reaching of Maine Audubon’s new initiatives was the establishment of a “Forest Forum” in which representatives of the forest industry and the environmental community met regularly to discuss issues of concern and to develop a dialogue based on trust. That step eventually led to the drawing up and

passage of the Maine Forest Practices Act in 1989, the first state law to mandate records of timber harvesting and to regulate the size of clearcuts.

Cooperation did not completely supersede contention on the environmental front, of course. Maine Audubon's aggressive advocacy efforts to block Great Northern Paper Company from building the "Big A" Dam on the West Branch of the Penobscot in 1984 and its support of closing the Maine Yankee Atomic Power Plant in 1987 were as controversial as any positions the organization had taken in the past. Balancing this was a solidly successful education program that among many other projects was embarked on an ambitious plan to integrate environmental studies into Maine's elementary and secondary school curricula. And Habitat, a new magazine-style journal started in 1983, kept members informed about the Maine environment and the issues facing it. The public was supportive, with membership and donations reaching an all-time high.

Riding the boom of the 1980s, Maine Audubon achieved its greatest breadth of activity to date. But like the national economy, it was not a sustainable situation. When Thomas A. Urquhart took over as the new executive director in 1988, his first task was to try and bring more focus to the organization. Designating 1988 as "Year of the Forest" to highlight the forest's critical importance to the state's ecology as well as the organization's long-standing involvement in forestry issues, he positioned Maine Audubon to take advantage of its strengths. Passage of the Maine Forest Practices Act the following year and the organization's new Northern Forest Project were natural outcomes.

Year of the Forest was a milestone for changing times. The perpetual and often painful need to balance needs with costs-always so much a part of an active nonprofit organization-forced Maine Audubon to abandon productive marine and energy-conservation programs to give the forest, wildlife, and education programs their best chance of success. For Maine Audubon, like Maine itself, the 1990s would be times for refocus and renewal. Along that line a new strategic plan completed in 1993 charts a course for the organization into the next century. Emphasizing advocacy for habitat

protection, innovative education strategies, and expanded outreach through the development of environmental centers, the new plan positions Maine Audubon well to meet the needs of the future.

“Maine Audubon Society is dedicated to the protection, conservation, and enhancement of Maine’s ecosystems through the promotion of individual understanding and actions,” reads the organization’s new mission statement. The founders of the Portland Society of Natural History, dedicated to the “contemplation of the Book of Nature,” would have understood. “The study of Natural Science will be continued for love of itself,” wrote the Transcript when the Portland Natural History Society was young, “and will repay us for all labors with ever-increasing delight, for the study of such wonderful works.” Today, 150 years later, relics of those days still remain at Gilsland Farm—a stuffed passenger pigeon and other taxidermy mounts, egg and nest collections, a whale jawbone, the mounted buffalo head that once hung above the moon rock, and the original portrait of Baron Von Humboldt. Each is a reminder of the past and a path to the future.

Embracing the heritage of the Portland Society of Natural History, the Maine Audubon Society is very likely the oldest citizen’s organization dedicated to the natural sciences in the United States. Its roots reach back before the beginning of even the Smithsonian Institution, spanning the youth and middle age of America. Its founders and fathers, those grave faces looking out at us from pictures a century old, represent the same spirit of curiosity and caring about nature that motivates environmentalists today. They should be familiar; they are our own.