

# “Is It Good for the Jews? Maine Jewry between Civic Idealism and the Politics of Reality

Abraham J. Peck

If you're like me and you've taken a car trip outside of the State, you find a certain comfort halfway over the bridge from New Hampshire or from Canada and seeing the word “Maine” as you enter the State *that* fancies itself as the way life ought to be.

Yes, Maine is a state of mind even if it is many states in regard to the idea of the way life should be. The North, South, East and West parts of Maine that each have a different idea of the way life should be.

But was Maine always the way life should be and for which groups in this State? In New England, smallest of America's regional centers, early nineteenth century life was dominated by a powerful Puritan religious movement, “deformed” through two centuries of separation from old world influences which helped to maintain its conscious militant purity at the same time as it insinuated into it a kind of cultural grace to which the conscious Puritan spirit was naturally repugnant.

It was the Yankeeified Puritan, an invention of New England's imagined past,” who constituted, “as one historian wrote, “the warp in the loom of destiny on which a new social pattern for the American North was to be woven.” The Yankee, was, as Timothy Dwight declared, “impatient of the restraints of law, religion, and morality, grumbles about the taxes by which rulers, ministers and school masters are supported.” And yet, the Yankee was also possessed of an “uncommon wisdom” and understood, as Dwight observed, “medical science, politics, and religion better than those who have studied them through life.”

Known more widely through Mark Twain's representation of his Connecticut cousin, the Maine Yankee was nevertheless recognized as the most authentic.

Joseph Conforti has shown in his acclaimed study “Imagining New England: Explorations of Regional Identity from Pilgrims to the Mid-Twentieth Century,” that imagined pasts, including the Puritan/Yankee spirit.” Helped New Englanders negotiate, traditionalize, and resist change.”

It is the Maine Yankee spirit that has left the most enduring image we have of the interior New Englander, the “hard, stubborn and indomitably intractable” representative of the free, continental pioneer.

The “Yankee” spirit of Portland’s Anglo-Saxon, Protestant history has played a decisive factor in shaping the image that the community and the State of Maine has sought to project to the outside world and to itself. It is an image that, as Joe Conforti has concluded, sought to confront, overwhelm and neutralize the “religious dissenters, ‘profane’ economic opportunists, and non-English immigrants [who] disrupted the regions’ Puritan, and, later, Yankee culture and identity.”

As a 1930’s chapter in Portland’s *City Guide* pointed out, Portland was a city that since 1633 “has ever since been composed predominantly of descendents of former British subjects.” This was written despite the fact that by the beginning of the twentieth century Portland was already a multi-ethnic society, constantly absorbing new groups of immigrants. This was written despite the fact that a sizeable French Catholic community, in nearby Westbrook had established a presence in the 1850s.

Again, according to the *Guide*,” although intermarriage and assimilation of Portland’s more recent immigrants have brought them closer to descendents of old Yankee stock, traditions and customs of ‘the old country’ are preserved in some quarters of the city.”

By the beginning of the 1990s, the book on Portland's immigrant ethnic communities had almost entirely been closed. A study entitled "Portland, Maine Upbeat Downeast: A Community Social Profile," completely dismissed the history and influence of Portland's immigrant communities:

"In Portland the role of ethnic groups was seen as minimal or virtually non-existent in influencing community affairs....the most distinguishing factor about ethnic groups in Portland is their lack of visibility."

I would like to focus on the experience of Maine's Jewish community and try to sketch its struggle for civil and human rights and for a place in the way life should be.

I do so in full recognition of the new American Jewish history and especially the way that American Jewish historians are beginning to approach the writing of that history at the state and local levels.

What forms this new direction, as I understand it, with regard to the writing of local American Jewish history ?:

1.Immigrant religious life- Historians are beginning to realize that East European Jewish immigrants to America often subordinated religious commitments to ethnic ones, stressed secular forces, and moved in various directions as they sought to retain their traditional religious ways and organizations, and were forced to move toward a more "Americanized" form of traditional Jewish religious observance and beyond to more radical innovations. The immigrants sought feverishly to re-interpret Jewish ethnic and religious life in full awareness of American conditions,and the American influences were much more important than European models.

2.Social Class, Mobility, and Ethnicity: Few aspects of Jewish life in America are as important as the class structure,and none has received so little serious attention. Particularly needed are careful reflections on class as it shapes the life cycle of individual Jews and their children and on the interplay of ethnic and class factors.

This provides an opportunity for exploring the Jewish experience in America in a comparative ethnic context. For Jewish mobility in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century America, comparisons with other immigrants that arrived in America in the same immigration waves would enrich our understanding of the Jewish experience. In Portland and other Maine communities, the Jewish experience in the latter part of the nineteenth and early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is a vital area of needed research.

3. Historical Sociology. The so-called new urban history, already a part of historical writing for the better part of three decades, often blurs the traditional distinctions between sociologist and historian by a judicious use of quantitative materials, and by a wish to make the scope of urban ethnic history so large that it embraces the ordinary and obscure individuals of the group under study. We want to know why immigrants chose one city over another, one religious movement over another, relationships with one ethnic group over another, and the institutional environment within those ethnic communities that aided or hindered their economic, religious and political evolution.

### Maine's Jewish Community

Although never more than 10,000 strong, Maine's Jewish community has always reflected a number of themes that also identified with the aims of American Jewry in general. The most important, I believe, is that Maine Jewry has sought to balance its American social contract, the notion of being a "good American," with the understanding that they were part of a "holy community," whose essential purpose was to "be a light unto the nations," and that those nations would understand that redemption could only be achieved through the moral and ethical life, individually and collectively.

Beginning in the 1840's, a small number of Jewish peddlers, tailors and dry good merchants from German-speaking lands came to Bangor, Maine, "the Queen City. BY 1849 they had established a synagogue and a cemetery. Neither the peddlers nor the synagogue remained very long and both were gone by the late 1850s.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Goldstein, *Crossing Lines. Histories of Jews and Gentiles in Three Communities* (New York, 1992) 44

For those few German Jewish immigrants, and those who began to Maine from Eastern Europe in the 1860s, many of them to escape from the oppression of Czarist Russia, the State seemed a reassuring haven. When Portland celebrated its centenary on July 4, 1886, Barnard Aaronson, designated to speak for the small Jewish community of the time observed: “We number sixty families, and over the majority portion being of the middle or poorer class, yet content with their lot. . . . The form of religion is Orthodox, and yet [we] are thoroughly liberal in thought and action.” In looking back at the twenty years since the Great Portland Fire of 1866 had attracted a group of Jewish merchants and peddlers to help the city’s efforts in rebuilding, Aaronson could only find a positive relationship to his Christian neighbors: “. . .our city fathers have in the past fully merited the good will and affectionate esteem in which they are held by us.”

Yet, Aaronson was more cautious about the future: “We sincerely hope nothing will occur in the future to mar the harmonious feeling now existing between the denominations. . . .”<sup>2</sup>

He had every reason for such caution. As two of the other speakers during the program recounted, the religious past had been, at best, a difficult one.

The Reverend J. G. Wilson, representing the Abyssinian Church, one of the first Black churches in America, spoke of a Portland past that included slavery, physical violence, and religious and racial exclusion.<sup>3</sup>

No less appalling was the history of the Roman Catholic presence recounted by Bishop James Augustine Healy (1830-1900), of Portland: “In those days [1830s and 1840s] it was difficult, almost dangerous, to show a kind face or fair dealing to Catholics.” Healy concluded his frank historical assessment, “Let us remember. . . when the name Catholic was like a badge of ignominy in our town.” He was less frank, and with good reason, about his racial background, which was one-half black, the result of his mother’s status as a slave in Georgia.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> John T. Hill (ed.), *1766-1886. An Account of the Municipal Celebration of the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Incorporation of the Town of Portland* (Portland, 1886) 145

<sup>3</sup> Reverend J.G. Wilson, in Hill (ed.) *An Account of the Municipal Celebration*, 84-85. Wilson mentioned African Americans held as slaves in Gorham and Windham, the punishment in a pillory another African American, George Peters, and the dismissal of twenty two Black members of the Second Parish Church in the late 1820s. See also H. H. Price and Gerald E. Talbot (eds.), *Maine’s Visible Black History: The First Chronicle of Its People* (contribution by Valerie Cunningham) (Gardiner, Maine, 2006)144-145

<sup>4</sup> The Right Reverend James Augustine Healy, Bishop of Portland, in Hill (ed.) *An Account of the Municipal Celebration*, 131-138. See also Price and Talbot (eds.), *Maine’s Visible Black History* (contribution by Patricia J. Thompson) 161-163

But Aaronson's optimism was not an illusion. Unlike Jewish life in Europe, where Jews were by far the most visible and persecuted minority over a two thousand year period, Jews in Maine could be comforted in the knowledge that other groups, especially Roman Catholics, often stood ahead of them as victims of religious and sometimes racial intolerance.

The decades of the 1920s through the 1940s were tumultuous ones in American and in Maine Jewish history. The 1920s marked the resurgence of the national Ku Klux Klan and Maine, too, suffered through a decade of Klan activities. Because there were so few African Americans in the State, Klan activities focused on threats and cross burnings against Roman Catholics, but at least one case of intimidation against a Portland Jewish shop owner.<sup>5</sup>

By 1923, Portland's established Protestant communities, centered in the city's Woodfords and Deering neighborhoods,<sup>6</sup> had had enough of a sizeable Catholic and Jewish representation on the City Council, especially from the heavily Jewish Ward 3.<sup>7</sup>

A "Committee of 100," made up of Protestants, one Catholic, and no members from the city's ethnic neighborhoods in the East End, and , sought to change Portland's elected mayor, the 18 member common council, and the nine-member board of alderman, with a form of government administered by a business manager and a five-person City Council.

The announced aim of the Committee was to end partisan politics, the ward system and political cronyism. But those communities who saw the end of their political representation at hand felt otherwise. "If this plan goes through, every man of Irish descent may as well pack up his trunk and leave the city as far as representation on the city government is concerned, stated one of Portland's most prominent Jews, attorney Israel Bernstein, at an anti-Committee of 100 rally a few days before the election.<sup>8</sup> He did not have to state the obvious: that such a change would essentially deny Portland's Jewish community a similar representation.

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with Dr. Benjamin Zolov, "Portraits of the Past," Jewish Centennial Project, directed by Dr. Konnilyn Feig, 1976-1977. Interviews located in the Portland Room, Portland Public Library. For more on Klan activities in Maine, see Mark Paul Richard, "This is not a Catholic Nation": The Ku Klux Klan Confronts Franco-Americans in Maine, " *The New England Quarterly* (Volume 82, Issue 2, June 2009) 285-303.

<sup>6</sup> *Band, Portland Jewry* 43.

<sup>7</sup> Albert F. Barnes, compiler and editor, *Greater Portland Celebration 350* (Portland: Guy Gannett Publishing Co., 1984) 146.

<sup>8</sup> Barnes, 146.

Another organized community seeking to guarantee Protestant control of politics in Portland also made its presence felt. The Maine Ku Klux Klan, led by the flamboyant F. Eugene Farnsworth, sought to ally itself with the “Committee of 100.”

Founded in the early 1920’s, the Maine Klan created chapters in several cities, including Gardiner, Lewiston-Auburn, Bath, Baxter and Bangor-Brewer, and claimed 150,000 members in the State. Farnsworth and the Klan had already sent threatening notes to various Portland residents, including African Americans, Jews, and even to Cumberland County Sheriff King P. Graham, who was threatened with a “damn good flogging,” for opposing the organization’s activities.<sup>9</sup>

The influx of Jewish immigrants to Portland was especially on Farnsworth’s mind because ships carrying Jewish and other immigrants that were diverted from New York landed in Portland in 1923 and again in 1924 and the passengers maintained on House Island in Casco Bay.<sup>10</sup>

At a rally several weeks before the election, the Klan head threw out a challenge to the opposition: “Gather together all the anti-Klan voices you can—Catholic, Negro, Jew, and Italian votes—all the gang, and I wouldn’t give you ten cents for the whole bunch...”<sup>11</sup>

In September 1923 Portland voters threw out the old form of government and voted in the new council-manager government by several thousand votes. In December, when elections were held for the new City Council race, Klan and Committee-endorsed members swept to victory and defeated the one Jewish candidate for the Portland school board, the Polish-born wife of Dr. Elias Kaplan, a leading member of the Jewish community.<sup>12</sup> The new City Council was made up entirely of Protestants.

### *Seeking to Break the Barriers*

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<sup>9</sup> Robert H. Boone, “A KLeagle and His Klan. F. Eugene Farnsworth and the Ku Klux Klan in Maine,” np, *History* 301-302, May 24, 1965, 18.

<sup>10</sup> Band, *Portland Jewry*, 52.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Boone, “A KLeagle and His Klan,” 49.

<sup>12</sup> Boone, “A KLeagle and His Klan,” 50-51.

For the next several decades, Jews in Maine's largest cities, Portland and Bangor, had little input into the struggles that defined the politics of political power in either city. As Judith Goldstein as written about Bangor's Jewish community during this period, "The Protestants ran the city and the Jews ran their businesses."<sup>13</sup>

In Portland, too, the Jewish focus was on the development of economic status and the building of communal organizations that would better serve the young. Both Portland and Bangor created Jewish Community Centers in the 1930s, institutions that were essentially designed to increase social activities for Jewish adults and young people.

That did not mean a total cessation of Jewish political activities. If Jews could not break the Protestant grasp on city politics, they were able to contribute at the State level. Benjamin Stern, born in Lithuania in 1885, was a New Deal Roosevelt Democratic legislator in the Maine House of Representatives in the 1930s. Representing the heavily French Catholic community of Biddeford, Stern was a long-time champion for social justice. He helped to create laws for child labor, workers' rights and safety initiatives, and old-age pensions.<sup>14</sup>

The noxious presence of the KKK in Maine for nearly a decade may have been the driving force behind the creation of Portland's Interracial Fellowship of America. The group was founded in 1930 by Max Pinansky, who by the Fellowship's founding had become only the second Jew in history appointed to the Maine bench.<sup>15</sup>

The Interracial Fellowship of America was devoted to the "need of some organization of or at least the recognition of the different nationalities represented in this city." Especially important in the existence of the group was the participation of numerous Protestants and Catholics, including both the Roman Catholic and Episcopal Bishops of Portland and Maine. Here, at least, some of the tensions created by the election of 1923 could be discussed if not diffused.

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<sup>13</sup> Judith Goldstein, *Crossing Lines: Histories of Jews and Gentiles in Three Communities* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1992) 124.

<sup>14</sup> See the materials on Stern in the Maine Jewish collection at the Maine Historical Society, Portland.

<sup>15</sup> See the Max Pinansky Papers located at the Maine Historical Society, Portland



But most important for Maine's Jews were two events that defined the experience of Jews everywhere. The destruction of six million Jewish lives during the Holocaust and the creation of a 2000-year old Jewish dream, the State of Israel, all occurred within less than two decades.

Traumatized by one event and electrified by the other, Jews in Maine put little effort into an organized drive to combat prejudice and discrimination against their community and other minority groups. Julia Lipez has offered one interpretation of this phenomenon in her Amherst College senior thesis:

Because Portland Jews successfully created internal institutions, they did not feel deprived socially or culturally. They had succeeded in providing themselves with everything their non-Jewish neighbors had, and were thus content to remain in a comfortable and safe, yet segregated environment.<sup>16</sup>

This unnatural sense of security and satisfaction did not mean that well-intentioned non-Jews could ignore the social barriers that kept Catholics, Jews and African Americans from attaining full social and political equality.

Bangor's Rev. Arlan Andrew Baillie of All Souls Congregational Church stood out as one of the most important voices in the struggle for social and religious equality during the years after 1945. In February 1946 he told his congregants that "Our task right now is to consider the sore problems of the social prejudices that we display against Negroes, for instance, or against our Jewish neighbors, for another instance."<sup>17</sup>

But Bangor, like Portland, was still "divided firmly into a tripartite network of Protestants, Catholics and Jews. The groups **qua** groups did not socialize with ease, although a few individuals mixed socially."<sup>18</sup>

It took the long memory of Dr. Benjamin Zolov, whose father had been threatened by the Klan in the 1920s,<sup>19</sup> for the first cracks in the wall of social discrimination to appear. Zolov, who

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<sup>16</sup> Julia M. Lipez, "A Time to Build Up and a Time to Break Down: The Jewish Secular Institutions of Portland, Maine," senior thesis, Amherst College, 2002, 52.

<sup>17</sup> <sup>17</sup> Goldstein, *Crossing Lines*, 122.

<sup>18</sup> Goldstein, *Crossing Lines*, 122.

represented the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith in Portland, began both a radio series to educate the Portland community about the ongoing prejudice against minorities, and an even larger campaign to outlaw a long-standing policy of discrimination by many of Maine's finest hotels and resorts.

For six years from 1954 to 1960 Dr. Zolov, with the aid of Maine Supreme Court Justice Sidney Wernick, one of the most brilliant Jewish legal minds to serve the State, as well as non-Jewish state legislator, William Earles, and Maine Governor Clinton Clauson, struggled to pass a discrimination bill against numerous summer resorts in the State of Maine.<sup>20</sup>

By the time the legislation was passed in the Maine Legislature, other cracks were also beginning to appear. Two organizations, the Masons and the Portland Rotary Club lifted restrictions on their membership, all the while denying that they had knowledge of such a ban.<sup>21</sup>

Portland Jews began, at the same time to appear again as members of the Portland City Council. Sumner Bernstein, a member of one of Portland's most prominent Jewish families was elected to the Portland City Council in 1955 along with Mitchell Cope who was first elected in 1957.

Jews also began to break the hold of the Protestant community on Portland's cultural organizations. Leonard Nelson was the first Jewish president of the Portland Symphony Orchestra (1963-1966) and his wife, Merle, joined the exclusive Junior League as its first Jewish member. She used the opportunity to point out the continuing presence of anti-Semitism in Portland by insisting that the League stop meeting at the exclusive Cumberland Club, a known bastion of White Anglo-Saxon Protestantism and an institution to which no Jew had ever been invited. Out of shame, the Junior League did not meet at the Club, but resumed gathering there as soon as Nelson left the organization.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Interview with Dr. Benjamin Zolov, "Portraits of the Past," Jewish Bicentennial Project, 1976-1977. Interviews located in the Portland Room, Portland Public Library

<sup>20</sup> Lipez, "A Time to Build Up," 68.

<sup>21</sup> Lipez, "A Time to Build Up," 64-65

<sup>22</sup> Lipez, "A Time to Build Up," 72 ff.

## Good for the Jews, Good for Everyone

By the late 1960s, Portland's Jewish community had achieved a position of recognition, both in terms of its involvement in social welfare and the prominence of its business and professional communities. But the opportunity for Jewish business people to socialize with their Christian counterparts beyond the 9 to 5 work day was a rare or even non-existent occurrence.

This was especially true of two institutions where business and professional groups met on the golf course or over the two martini lunch or dinner—the Portland Country Club (actually located in Falmouth) and the Cumberland Club.

During the 1950s and 1960s, both, but especially the Cumberland Club, became targets of Jewish opposition to their discriminatory membership policies. Catholics had actually been the first minority community to gain membership to both clubs, but African Americans and Jews were still excluded.

Sumner Bernstein and his wife Rosalyn had circulated a "Cumberland Club Letter," that demanded any organization to which they or Bernstein's father Israel, belonged, hold no meetings at the Cumberland Club as long as it did not admit Jews.<sup>23</sup> The same demand was made by Barnett Shur, Portland's corporation counsel since 1946, when he assumed the presidency of the United Fund Campaign.<sup>24</sup>

But it took the anger and persistence of a non-Jewish Republican legislator, Senator S. Peter Mills of Franklin County, to finally breach the almost unbreakable barriers that had been erected by Portland's exclusive social clubs.

The road to a major victory for Portland's Jewish and African American communities began in 1969, when Kermit Lipez, a legal advisor to Governor Kenneth Curtis and later a federal judge on the United State Court of Appeals for the First Circuit asked if the governor wanted to "have some fun." But his question was a deadly serious one. Lipez had researched the

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<sup>23</sup> Interview with Sumner Bernstein, *Maine Bar Journal*, Volume 17, Number 4, Summer 2002, 148.

<sup>24</sup> Lipez, "A Time to Build Up," 75.

record and discovered that many of the clubs that were practicing social and religious exclusion had liquor licenses issued by the State of Maine.

The progressive Curtis, when informed of this fact, decided to propose a bill denying a liquor license to any private club that practiced discrimination.

But who to employ as a sponsor for Legislative Document (LD) 1349, a bill entitled “An act relating to discrimination on account of race and religion,” outlawing “once and for all that the policy of this State that those who hold out their services generally... shall not covertly and under cover quietly practice any type of discrimination against people because of their religion, their race, or ethnic origin?” If they did, they would be denied a state liquor license.<sup>25</sup>

Governor Curtis found a rather unusual ally, Peter Mills, a Republican legislator but a civil libertarian. Mills was an angry man in 1969, because a year earlier he had attended a panel in Portland where he had stated that it was a good thing that Maine was free of intolerance toward Jews or any other groups. He was told by a friend, a Jewish lawyer from Portland, that this was not the case, that the new director of the Portland Symphony Orchestra had just been turned down by Cumberland Club simply because he was a Jew.

“When I was driving home to Farmington, that night,” Mills remembered, “this information bothered me terribly. I couldn’t stop thinking about it. I thought it was a disgrace that the State of Maine could tolerate such a situation where a person could be barred because of race, religion or color.”<sup>26</sup>

Claiming that “southwestern Maine is rife with the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant concept of supremacy,” Mills went after both the Portland Country Club and the Cumberland Club.<sup>27</sup>

With little opposition, the Maine House passed the Bill at the end of May 1969 and it was soon signed into legislation by Governor Curtis. Although the bill was a major victory for the

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<sup>25</sup> Lipez, “A Time To Build Up,” 82

<sup>26</sup> “Maine’s Maverick: Peter Mills,” *Maine Times*, July 23, 1993

<sup>27</sup> “Check Indicates Eastern Maine Clubs Open To All,” *Bangor Daily News*, December 18, 1968. According to a survey done by Senator Mills and confirmed by Judith Goldsein in *Crossing Lines*, 151, private clubs in northern and eastern Maine were far less restrictive than those in the southwestern part of the State. I am grateful to Paul Mills, Esq., a well-known historian of Maine politics and the son of Peter Mills, for making available to me copies of the extensive materials on his father’s involvement in the legislation.

African American and Jewish communities, it was still necessary to apply the law specifically to Portland. Charles Allen, a non-Jewish member of the Portland City Council and a prominent attorney, led the Council in denying liquor licenses to both clubs.<sup>28</sup>

With the denial of the liquor licenses to these two notorious private clubs and another liquor license denial to the local Portland Elks Club for similar discriminatory policies in 1970, an era that defined the ugly side of an otherwise beautiful state came to an inglorious end.

When the walls finally came tumbling down, Portland could ultimately count five Jewish mayors among its civic leaders, including two women. Calais could boast of a Jewish mayor as well, and the Maine legislature was strengthened by the service of pioneers for social justice such as Merle Nelson, Norman Minsky, Michael Saxl, and the extraordinary and unforgettable Republican fiscal conservative and social humanitarian, I. Joel Abromson.<sup>29</sup> Like the broader American Jewish community, Maine Jewry had found not just a haven but a home.

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<sup>28</sup> Lipez, "A Time to Build Up," 85

<sup>29</sup> The five Jewish mayors were William Trobe, Esther Clenott, Linda Abromson, David Brenneman and James Cohen. The Calais mayor was Charles Unobskey.