

The Wrights of Jackson, Maine
By Robert Lindsey

Jonathan Wright was a man who understood very well the necessity underlying a day's accomplishments. The concept had been demonstrated and validated for as long as he could remember. By contributing all one could each day to the household productivity, one helped secure not only one's own subsistence, but that of the rest of the family as well. Any surplus of a commodity, after the portion needed by the family was set aside, could be sold or bartered for those items not produced at home. The final phase of the system—converting the surpluses to cash—would determine the family's standard of living beyond subsistence. It is not surprising therefore, that when Jonathan kept a diary his main focus was to list each individual's daily accomplishments.

This essay is largely based on the 1888 diary entries of Jonathan Henry Wright, a farmer from Jackson, Maine. Unless otherwise noted, all information pertaining specifically to the Wright household's activities was derived from the contents of the diary. Jonathan's personal writings of 1888 allow us to understand the mechanics of the Wright's self-sufficient lifestyle, while at the same time they also allow insights into the other things in life that were important to them. This study of a single family is significant because their lifestyle was representative of members of late nineteenth century rural New England farming communities who chose to remain on the land in a period of great outmigration. Many of the motivating factors that contributed to the Wright's decision to continue to work the family farm were also common to many of their neighbors and to rural many Maine farmers of that period. These commonalities are at the core of the ethnic heritage of many "native Mainers," whose ancestries trace back to frontier settlers who migrated to Maine from more southerly regions of New England.

This paper is an intimate study of the world of a farming family who realized enough satisfaction from their traditional lifestyle to adjust to changing conditions and persist—even thrive—at a time when many of their peers decided to move away.

Some of the people who migrated to the frontier hinterlands during the last quarter of the eighteenth century did so to make an affordable start into the then lucrative occupation of farming. At that time there was no reason to doubt that New England would continue to be a major contributor to the total of the nation's agricultural production—as it had for generations. But by the middle of the nineteenth century, the coming of the Market Revolution and the shift of most agricultural production to the Midwest meant that Maine, like many of the other early leaders in agriculture, began a long and steady period of out-migration.¹

Jackson is about fifteen miles west of Belfast, in Waldo County, Maine. It was primarily an agricultural town throughout the nineteenth century. The town's population figures, while they have always been, and continue to be, relatively small, also reflect the trend of out-migration. Some former residents of Jackson were attracted to the huge areas opening for settlement in the western territories. Some moved to nearby cities, like Bangor, Brewer, and Belfast, to take advantage of employment opportunities caused by the growing demand for export commodities such as lumber, shingles, clapboards, lime, slate, granite, brick, ice, and seafood. Though many of these industries, such as lime production, appeared to offer greater occupational stability than backcountry farming,

¹ J. W. Lang, *A Survey of Waldo County, Maine: Historical, Physical, Agricultural* (Augusta: Sprague, Owen & Nash 1873), 117; David C. Smith and Edward O. Schriver, *Maine: A History Through Selected Readings* (Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1985), 302.

rapid changes in New England's increasingly industrialized economy caused many workers to continue to change occupations.

By the early twentieth century, the burgeoning Maine paper industry, as well as textile mills and shoe factories, absorbed many of the newly displaced workers. Still others relocated to bigger mill and factory cities further south like Biddeford, Lowell, Boston, Providence, and Hartford. Because of a combination of pull factors including the aforementioned, after a steady increase in population, lasting from its first settlement in the late 1790s until the 1850s, Jackson's population figures began to plummet.²

The first log cabin built in the area that is now Jackson was raised in 1798, approximately eleven years before Jonathan's parents arrived. Thirty-five year old Captain Jonathan Wright, his wife twenty-nine year old Wealthy Wright and their three children, having recently come to the area from Northhampton, Massachusetts, were among those counted in the town's first census in 1810. They fit the settlement pattern described by a local, early twentieth-century historian of those settlers who, "came from New Hampshire and Massachusetts, and took up lots of wild land from which to make farms, working on what was referred to as the "Great Farm" to pay installments."³

² Elizabeth M. Mosher, *Vital Records of Jackson Maine Prior To 1892* (Camden: Picton Press, 1989), 3; Richard W. Judd et al., *Maine: The Pine Tree State from Prehistory to the Present* (Orono: University of Maine Press, 1995), 265-286, 302-303; W. H. Bunting, *A Day's Work: A Sampler of Historic Maine Photographs 1860-1920, Part I* (Gardner: Tilbury House, 1997), 116-120, 146, 148, 178-184, 232-240, 300-308, 336; Lang, *A Survey of Waldo County*, 117,124; Madeline Dodge and Theo Stacy, *History of Jackson* (Jackson: Jackson Extension Program, 1977), [no Pagination, entries listed by section headings and sub-titles only], Family History-"Pageville."

³ Wright Family *Bible*, [included in an extensive hand-written family-tree/family history section in the front of the *Bible*, and collected during an April 10th 1998 personal interview with Wright descendants Clifford and Marlene Thompson, conducted by Robert Lindsey]; Dodge, *History of Jackson*, Chronology-1798~1909; Judd, *Maine*, 247; Frank E. Claes, *Waldo County The Way It Was* (Camden: Down East Books, 1985), ix; Lang, *A Survey of Waldo County*, 100-101.

The “Great Farm” was built to be a grand scale model of what a resourceful, dedicated, and industrious pioneer family could, through slow, steady gains, one day achieve. The wealthy trio who had it built and their endeavor is explained particularly well in an excerpt from Theo Stacey and Madeline Dodge’s *History of Jackson*, as follows:

The “Proprietors”, who bought up a large part of the Waldo Patent, 1805 Messers. Sears, Prescott & Thorndike, established a farm of over a thousand acres near the center of the town of Jackson, which was intended as a summer resort for themselves, and to aid in colonizing their lands. Here they conducted farming on a large scale, built a large, fine house, and large barns. They employed a large force of hands, and introduced blood stock, and new varieties of seeds.⁴

The three land-speculators agreed with former Revolutionary War general and first Secretary of War, Henry Knox, that Maine land sales offered the greatest prospective fortunes of any area of the country. Knox had controlled hundreds of thousands of acres in central Maine, the so-called Muscongus, or Waldo Patent, and the area that later became the town of Jackson was one parcel of it. In the early years of the nineteenth century, many settlers, with less than clear titles to their homesteads, ended up at odds with the proprietors over the three to five dollars per acre fees that those without clear title had to pay. In 1804, about half of the heads-of-household in the area asked for a “new agreement” over terms of payment. The impressive farm the Boston investors envisioned was undoubtedly intended to recruit some people with a little more capital than the average pioneer settler.⁵

⁴ Dodge, *History of Jackson*, Miscellaneous-“The Great Farm.”

⁵ Allan Taylor, *Liberty Men and Great Proprietors: The Revolutionary Settlement on the Maine Frontier, 1760-1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 11, 13, 19, 37-39; Judd, *Maine*, 246-251; Dodge, *History of Jackson*, Chronology-1798~1909.

The “Great Farm” was the original center of the village, with the only store located in one of the attached buildings. Though it was supposed to be a model farm, it was certainly grander than most of the hopeful, young settlers moving into the area could realistically ever hope to achieve. They built an extremely large two-story house with a long, connected kitchen ell and attached out-buildings. For the area and the time period, this house was palatial. The farm also had two very large barns, including one so large that it inspired the nickname, “Egypt”, and several smaller barns as well. In addition to the vastness of the grounds and buildings, the “Great Farm”, as it understandably came to be known, also had the remarkable novelty of running water, in an age when such modern innovations were rare in most cities, and virtually unknown in the country. The wealthy investors brought water into the buildings through a system of lead piping, from over three-quarters of a mile away. They then brought their families up from Boston to spend the summer season in the wholesome country air.⁶ It is not surprising that later in the century, when agriculture was in decline in most backcountry towns, and after local, Jackson farmers owned the massive, sprawling estate, that they could not maintain it to the same standards as the wealthy Bostonians could.

In 1873, when Maine Board of Agriculture member J. W. Lang completed a survey of farming in Waldo County, he reported that the “Great Farm,” then owned by long-time Jackson resident N. E. Carpenter, was overgrown, reducing it to only four hundred of its original one thousand acres. He stated that, “the buildings are but wrecks of what they were once”, and that all of their “ancient glory” was gone.⁷ Mr. Lang

⁶ Lang, *A Survey of Waldo County*, 100-101.

⁷ Lang, *A Survey of Waldo County*, 100-101.

perhaps failed to appreciate that Mr. Carpenter's means probably dictated the level of maintenance he could afford to put into the buildings and also how many acres he could profitably continue to farm. Unlike most of his neighbors, Mr. Carpenter was faced with downsizing and working only the best plots of ground, when most families, like the Wrights, were still expanding their family homesteads.

Captain Jonathan, the father of the diary's author, was one of the twelve people who organized the first church in Jackson in 1812. Jonathan and Wealthy Wright raised seven children at the family homestead. Young Jonathan, the diary's author, and the third youngest child lived his entire life on the plot of land his parents began clearing when they emigrated. All of his siblings except the youngest, John Ebenezer, who eventually moved to Massachusetts to preach, raised their families within a few miles of the farm they grew up on. After Jonathan and Dorothy wed, in 1838, they remained at the family homestead to raise their own family. By the time the diary was written, Jonathan was himself a grandfather who had witnessed Jackson's growth first-hand.⁸

In 1812 Jackson was organized as a plantation. In 1814—when Jonathan was born—it had yet to reach three hundred residents. In 1818 Jackson was incorporated as the 229th town of the commonwealth of Massachusetts. The quaint and primitive way the town appeared in 1820, when Maine became a state, must have framed the images in Jonathan's earliest memories. At that time, when he was six years old, Jonathan's hometown had 120 acres of tilled ground, 642 acres of pastureland, and 736 acres of upland mowing. The approximately seventy local households had, between them, forty-eight barns, thirty horses, sixty-eight oxen, one hundred eighty-eight cows, and one

⁸ Dodge, *History of Jackson*, Chronology-1798~1909; Wright Family *Bible*; Mosher, *Vital Records of Jackson*, 67, 168.

hundred eighty-nine swine. When Jonathan was thirty-five, the census taker recorded eight hundred thirty-three residents—the town’s height of population for its entire existence, and over four times the 1970 population figure. By the time Jonathan wrote his 1888 diary, Jackson’s population had already dropped by over thirty-seven percent—a trend that continued until the last quarter of the twentieth century. This was a typical trend throughout Waldo County, which, due to its relative poverty, experienced the greatest population decline in the state during the period, 1870-1890, and continued to lead the state into the 1930s.⁹

The Wright family contributed greatly to the development and prosperity of Jackson. Like many of the first settlers in the area, they had a tremendous investment of toil in working the land and personal commitments to social improvements. For them, working the family homestead was more than an occupation—it was a way of life passed on through the generations. During his lifetime, Jonathan helped carve farmland out of the forest, helped improve the original rudely built structures into a productive, working farm, and eventually inherited the family homestead—which, at his passing, went to his son, Fred. Fred’s older brother, Edwin, would likely have been the heir to the homestead had he not been killed in the Civil War.¹⁰ Three generations of the Wright family, Captain Jonathan, Jonathan, and Fred, worked the family homestead from about 1809

⁹ Dodge, *History of Jackson*, Chronology-1798~1909; Mosher, *Vital Records of Jackson*, 3; Judd, *Maine*, 453.

¹⁰ Dodge, *History of Jackson*, Service Men-Names of Men Who Enlisted in the Civil War from Jackson, Maine; Mosher, *Vital Records of Jackson*, 94.

until Fred's death in 1930. Many Wright descendents still live in Jackson. Some are still on land that has been in the family since the town's founding.¹¹

When first reading Jonathan's diary, one is immediately impressed with the many goods generated by the Wrights and the huge amount of work they did. What is even more amazing is the fact that the man who nonchalantly put in twelve-hour days hoeing, planting, cutting wood, and harvesting, was in fact seventy-four years old. The primary individuals appearing in the diary consist of Jonathan, his wife Dorothy, then sixty-eight, their eldest living son Fred, then thirty-four, and Fred's wife Ruth, then thirty-two.¹² Fred, like his father before him, chose to remain at the family farm after marriage. Fred's three sisters and their families also lived within a few miles of their parent's household. They make up the remainder of the core of the family mentioned in the diary, though many other in-laws and more distant relatives abound as well.

The entry for any given day is typically a paragraph long, sometimes less. The content was invariably fact oriented. There is a seemingly intentional lack of emotion or opinion in any of the entries. On the surface it would seem that there would not be any way to discern such things as the closeness of personal relationships, values, traditions, or strategies for success. When the statistical information contained in the diary is developed and analyzed, and various trends become recognizable, that type of unstated personal information is revealed. This method is often employed in works that rely heavily on diaries, such as *A Midwife's Tale*, by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich.¹³ Diaries are a

¹¹ Wright Family Bible; Dodge, *History of Jackson*, Cemetery-Chase yard.

¹² Wright Family Bible; Mosher, *Vital Records of Jackson*, 67.

¹³ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

rich source for social historians, as they illuminate aspects of life that are not likely to be found elsewhere. Jonathan's diary entries show that for the Wright family of rural Jackson, Maine in 1888, family, friends, neighbors, and fellow church members embodied the good things in life. Hard work and home industry were rewarded with self-sufficiency.

The Wright household was a very busy place in 1888, even though only four people lived there. The family's combined annual total of social visits paid to others numbered about fifty, approximately ninety percent of which were to see family members. Nearly twice that many parties stopped to see the Wrights. Sometimes a lone guest would visit in the evening and stay the night. At other times a whole family might stop in when they passed by. There is even an entry in which "Two men took dinner at our house." At the end of the next day's entry, "Two strangers staid all night," the day after "The strangers went away in the morning." The three daily entries were each about a paragraph long, but only contained those brief references to the "strangers."¹⁴ Due to the unpredictability of Maine weather and road conditions, it was a common practice, and often a reciprocal one, for residents of houses along rural main roads to shelter travelers upon request. There are also numerous other diary entries that indicate the Wrights offered kindness and generosity even to those they hardly knew.

Visitors were clearly very important to each of the family members. There were only two events that seemed to have the ability to stop work—severely inclement weather or a guest coming up the driveway. In all, around seventy different individuals paid visits over the course of the year. On twenty-one occasions callers asked favors of the Wrights.

¹⁴ Jonathan Henry Wright, *His Personal Diary for the Year 1888* (Transcribed and Edited by Robert Lindsey, 1998), May 4-May 6.

Lending and mending were the popular favorites. Jonathan was frequently stitching and patching leather goods, as well as repairing household goods and tools for family, friends, and neighbors. On seven occasions visitors returned favors to Wright family members. Sixteen visits were of a business nature. Thirty-one visits were made to help out with various big projects. The majority of visits however, numbering a total of forty-nine, were purely social calls. The Wrights, their relatives, and their friends obviously felt that their social interactions were very important.

Other, more subtle community connections confirm the importance of neighborly social interaction. When one looks through Elizabeth M. Mosher's compilation, *Vital Statistics of Jackson Maine Prior to 1892*, an interesting trend emerges. Friends and neighbors throughout Jackson, especially from about 1810 to 1830, named their children after one another. Not long after the Wrights settled in the area, for example, several of their immediate neighbors apparently named children after them. Henry and Sally Chase named their son Jonathan; while John and Mary Rich named their daughter Louisa soon after Captain Jonathan and Wealthy lost a daughter by the same name to the fever. William and Sally Harris named their daughter Louisa Wright Harris a few years later. Similarly, within twenty years of Captain Jonathan and Wealthy Wright's arrival in Jackson, there were no fewer than four girls and young ladies named Wealthy in the area. It is a trend that becomes more obvious the more one studies the record. Whether or not a young, new mother named her child after the kindly neighbor who helped her through her first delivery, we will never know. Certainly those types of scenarios could explain the trend, though it is unlikely that much of that type of information would have been

recorded for posterity. What is clear is that numerous community members found sufficient cause to bestow such an honor on their friends.¹⁵

The closeness of the relationships between family and friends is also revealed in less pleasant ways, although Jonathan's terse and factual voice never changes. On the third day of the year Jonathan noted that after stopping at the mill and the blacksmith's shop "Aunt Lucy came home with me." Jonathan offered no explanation for her stay, but on the twelfth they sent Fred for the Doctor. The evidence suggests that Aunt Lucy probably came to spend her last days being cared for by the family. For the next six days Jonathan's diary entries end with either "The Doctor came to see Aunt Lucy," or "Aunt Lucy very sick". Jonathan's entire diary entry for January seventeenth reads: "We finished hauling wood, got up about 20 cords, Aunt Lucy died about noon." It is noteworthy that even concerning something as personal and significant as a death in the family, Jonathan still felt compelled to list the day's accomplishments first. Aunt Lucy was Dorothy's sister, and had lived to be eighty years old.¹⁶ Later in the year Fred showed similar commitment to his friends. By the favors he did for them, it appeared that Fred was extremely fond of his neighbors Lucius and Althea. They were in their sixties and perhaps a little feeble, so Fred helped them with their wood and heavy chores. In August Jonathan noted that Fred sat up all night with Lucius. Before Lucius's death on October 5th, Fred sat up all night with him five more times.¹⁷ There are only three days in the year when Jonathan's diary makes no mention of Fred. Two of those days were the

¹⁵ Mosher, *Vital Records of Jackson*, 5-189.

¹⁶ Wright, (1888 Diary), January 3, January 12-January 17.

Wright Family *Bible*.

¹⁷ Wright, (1888 Diary), August 19, August 26, September 2, September 16, September 30, October 5.

following days after the deaths of Aunt Lucy and Lucius, although Jonathan's work totals are listed each day. Perhaps Fred needed time to himself on such occasions.

In addition to documenting the importance of daily productivity and close relationships with friends and relatives, Jonathan's entries also record his business transactions, revealing much about how they achieved their high degree of self-sufficiency. The things the family needed to buy were few. They purchased hard goods, services, staples, farming needs, sundries, and cooking goods in modest amounts. Machine oil, powder, fuse, nails, a whetstone, shingle nails, sheathing paper, glass, putty, and six barrels were the only household goods listed as purchased for the year, and only once each. Services included two trips to the sawmill, seven trips to the blacksmith, five trips to the gristmill, and two barrels of cider pressed at a neighbor's cider mill. The cooking goods purchased were as follows: eight barrels of flour, three bags of corn, two bags of coffee, and one purchase each of salt, tuna, oil, sugar, molasses, lard, and fresh fish. The farming supplies that they purchased that year amounted to the following: tomato plants, midlings—a generic term referring to crop-plants that were partially grown indoor to protect against late-spring frosts, sprouts—for planting later in the year when frost was no longer a concern, grain seed, bean seed, hen feed, seventy-five bushels of non-specified meal also used for feed, lime, one half ton of phosphate, four bags of cottonseed meal—a byproduct of cotton production used as fertilizer, a plow slip, and one pair of oxen. The only other expenses for the year were taxes, insurance, newspapers, contributions to the church, doctor's bills, visits to the dentist, an expenditure to purchase the neighbors' icehouse, and Aunt Lucy's burial cap and casket.

Over the course of the entire year there were only two instances of bartering between individuals mentioned in the diary. Jonathan traded a buck lamb for fifty cedar rails. Dorothy swapped twenty-three pounds of maple sugar for forty-six pounds of granulated sugar. All indications suggest that everything else they needed for the year they made themselves. Keeping the amounts of goods purchased low and the level of household industry high was a common strategy in backcountry towns in Maine, and throughout New England, at that time.¹⁸ It was also common to take pride in the security and self-sufficiency that rewarded the industrious—as a popular Grange poem attests.

*Let the wealthy and great roll in splendor and state;
I envy them not, I declare it.
I eat my own lamb, my own chickens and ham,
I shear my own fleece, and I wear it.
I have lawns. I have bowers. I have fruits. I have flowers.
The lark is my morning alarmer. So jolly boys now,
Here's God speed the plough, Long life and success to the farmer.*

That particular selection is stenciled on a ceramic two-handled “Friendship” cup, from the last quarter of the nineteenth century and owned by a local Grange member. On either side of the poem is a large bundle of wheat with a sickle. Below the poem is a banner that reads; “Industry Produceth Wealth.” The opposite side of the cup is stenciled with a full barnyard scene and dozens of tools and implements from the period, as well as, a woman churning butter and a man planting seeds. Such cups were often exchanged as gifts, between fraternal lodge members at Grange halls and Farmer’s clubs. Both of those organizations were common throughout Waldo County. In Jackson, the Star of Progress Grange, with twenty-five members, was granted a charter on May 12th, 1874. The twenty-five charter members built the first Grange Hall about 1876, and it included a Grange

¹⁸ Judd, *Maine*, 251; Dodge, *History of Jackson*, Chronology-1798~1909; Mosher, *Vital Records of Jackson*, 90-91.

Store between 1882 and 1892. The Grange extolled the virtues of “mixed husbandry,” a strategy that included an intentionally varied mix of crops, home-made commodities for resale, and other types of supplemental cottage industry. The Wrights obviously had been developing a system based on the same principals for years before the Grange was built.¹⁹

Examining the Wrights’ types of home industry and amounts of farm produce sold as surplus shows how their “subsistence-plus” lifestyle slowly but surely improved their buildings and the size and diversity of their farm. At the same time, their lifestyle also offered them security from unexpected hardships due to bad weather or market fluctuations. This was because if some crop or activity failed to give a sufficient yield, they could simply shift their attention to other things that looked more promising. In addition to the many crops already mentioned, the Wright farm was teeming with a great variety of other foods for their own use. The diversity of their foodstuffs helps show how self-reliant they really were. Jonathan and Fred spent many days tending fires in the sap house, the smokehouse, and the apple dryer. The list of farm-produced food items are as follows: bacon, dried apples, sausage, crab apples, currant berries, strawberries, plums, sage, beets, carrots, asparagus, corn, tomatoes, beans, peas, and barley. Also noteworthy are the total yields of crops grown in surplus which include: 160 bushels of oats, 84 bushels of mixed grain, 162 bushels of turnips, 267 bushels of potatoes, hundreds of pounds of dried apples, and dozens of barrels of whole apples. In this system, if the sap failed to run long enough in the spring, causing a bad year for syrup, for example, they could make more applesauce, or butter, or one of their other products, instead of relying

¹⁹ Judd, *Maine*, 251; Lang, *A Survey of Waldo County*, 90-91; Dodge, *History of Jackson*, Grange-Star of Progress Grange.

as heavily on the syrup as they normally did. Not only did they have a bountiful variety of foodstuffs available for their own consumption, but they also had a variety of options, should the unexpected happen. It was a system they had been developing for almost eighty years.²⁰

Presuming that the diary did not fail to list some purchases, between the four of them, the Wrights spent approximately \$300 for the year. Of that amount \$110 was for a pair of oxen. Between the surplus commodities that they sold, their cottage industries, and outside labor performed for cash, they took in about \$350 for the year. The outside labor was a combination of woodcutting and farm work, all performed locally by Fred. Some of the surplus items that they routinely sold included maple syrup, maple sugar, butter, eggs, potatoes, lambs, steers, apples, oats, and apple-sauce. Dorothy and Ruth did many of the chores, and also ran the kitchen “factory” that made several of the profitable surplus commodities.

Jonathan made use of his time in bad weather by finishing pairs of pants “put-out” to him by the pants factory in Brooks, a few miles from Jackson. He stitched the two halves together and sewed the buttons on. Over the course of the year he assembled over one hundred pair of pants. The Reverend David Brackett, originally from Jackson, opened a pant and vest factory in Brooks, in 1880. He was a long-time friend of Jonathan, who had also preached at both the Congregational and Baptist churches in Jackson. He did a booming business, and his factory proved to be a vital source of supplemental income for local area families. His most industrious workers could earn as much as \$600 per year. During the same period, the best paid lime production workers made about \$700

²⁰ Dodge, *History of Jackson*, Chronology-1798~1909; Mosher, *Vital Records of Jackson*, 11, 67; Wright Family *Bible*.

per year, with the lower paid members—the rock-breakers—making about \$550 annually. Immigrant laborers typically made about \$300 per annum. When we consider that production workers had to pay all of their living expenses out of their wages, it is easy to understand how the Wrights' lifestyle offered comfort and security.

The system of “mixed husbandry” that the Wrights practiced paid for all of their bills in 1888. It provided them with a wide variety of fresh, wholesome foods, as well as, allowing for the purchase of a new team of oxen, and many useful and needed supplies for the farm. In addition to those expenditures, they still had at least another fifty dollars, cash, left over.²¹ They put many of the goods that they did purchase directly into the buildings. Fred was the carpenter of the group. Over the course of the year he built a pump shed, improved his workshop, put in seven windows, spent ten days building a new fence with Jonathan, ten days shingling with Jonathan, and over two weeks of additional miscellaneous repairs and general upkeep. Fred also made utilitarian items in his shop. On thirty-seven occasions—usually in bad weather—Fred turned out such things as apple crates, buckets, a gate, a door, a sheep crib for the Great Farm, a medicine cupboard, a water tub, and a special sled body for hauling barrels of sap.

There was an apparent generational difference between Jonathan and Fred. They both made wooden items for the home and farm, but while Fred most always started his projects with milled lumber, Jonathan usually went into the woods for “a stick.” A series of diary entries describe Jonathan's process of building an ox cart.²² He hewed and shaped the various woods from “down back” to fabricate each piece. Even the wheels and

²¹ Bunting, *A Day's Work*, 186, 336-340; Dodge, *History of Jackson*, Chronology-1798~1909.

²² Wright, (1888 Diary), September 13, September 17-September 20.

axle were hand made entirely of locally collected woods. They were very capable people with a heritage of self-sufficiency. Fred and Jonathan's labor combined with a few materials bought locally certainly made great improvements to the homestead.

Improvements like these were a traditional means of family betterment that dated to the earliest days of the settlement and continued throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century. In addition to profiting from the physical improvements to the structures, as well as the home-made farm implements and household goods, as mentioned earlier, they also recovered some of the money they spent on farming, in marketable surplus crops and excess livestock, while also increasing the farm's total numbers of resident pigs, sheep, cattle, and chickens. Most of their annual expenses went to improving the homestead both directly and indirectly. In this way they maintained a safe supply of most necessities, a network of sources of cash for the things they could not produce, and a continuously improved and updated farm.

Jonathan rarely noted daily chores in the diary. Entries regarding work always focused on productivity, while most other entries tell of weather conditions and the coming and going of people. The women's work was mostly chores so Jonathan's entries regarding them usually told only of their having gone out or of someone having come to visit them. As Ulrich points out in *A Midwife's Tale*, because men kept most of the records and because most of the goods and services women contributed were recorded in the male head-of-household's name, women's contributions are typically underrepresented in diaries.²³ While Jonathan's diary also underrepresents the women's contributions to his household, they were, however, credited with making some of the

²³ Ulrich, *Midwife's Tale*, 5-9.

surplus commodities. These commodities were valuable contributions to the family income. Aside from a few trips to Belfast, all business was conducted close to home in Jackson, Brooks, or Dixmont. With the exception of Ruth taking one trip to Boston, by rail, the Wrights never ventured far from home in 1888.²⁴ Fred never went further than Belfast. Jonathan and Ruth made their furthest trip to Freedom, about a twenty-mile buggy ride away, to attend what Jonathan recorded as a “County Conference.”²⁵

The family participated in local politics and had at least a casual interest in national politics as well. Nine entries tell of conferences, political meetings, and voting in town, state, and county elections. The entry of June 25th reads: “Benjamin Harrison of Indiana and Levi Morton of New York nominated for President and Vice-President on the eighth ballot.” On September tenth Jonathan recorded the election of the Republican, Burleigh by a 20,000 plurality for Governor of Maine. Edwin C. Burleigh was a politician from Augusta, who was both a business executive and a timberland speculator. Jonathan never mentioned his political affiliation in the diary, but as a long-time subscriber to the *Republican Journal*, the democratic favorite of the three Belfast newspapers, one would expect that he was a Democrat.²⁸ Jonathan attended meetings accompanied either by his wife—Dorothy—or Fred. Although political functions seemed to play a very minor role in their lives, they no doubt provided the enjoyment of socializing while they did their civic duty.²⁹

²⁴ Wright, (1888 Diary).

²⁵ Wright, (1888 Diary), June 12.

²⁸ Judd, *Maine*, 375-376; Lang, *A Survey of Waldo County*, 95-96.

²⁹ Wright, (1888 Diary), November 6.

By far, the Wrights used most of their free time to attend church. The church served as a social hub as well as a place to worship. In the nineteenth century, religion was the central focus of village life. Jonathan's father was a founding member of the Congregational church, the first church in Jackson. In 1888, there was also a Baptist church in town, though the two were so homogeneous that they both used the same minister when it was expedient to do so. Jonathan's brother, John Ebenezer, was a lifelong Congregational minister, who also served as a chaplain in the civil war. In 1912, when the Congregationalist church in Jackson celebrated its centennial, Fred was a third-generation lifelong member of the congregation. By his own records, Jonathan left the farm on 134 occasions, including seventy trips to church. On most Sundays he attended services morning, noon, and night. Beginning with Sabbath school in the morning he usually then returned after lunch for the social meeting and again in the evening for five o'clock prayer meeting. Community closeness and religious faith were clearly deep convictions of his. Several documents have survived among the town records that refer to Jonathan as Deacon Jonathan—attesting to his service within the congregation.³⁰

In addition to noting his family's church attendance, Jonathan kept close track of family members' trips away from the house for other matters as well. While it cannot be known for certain whether or not Jonathan's records include each and every trip away from the farm, it is a good representation of their travel patterns. Dorothy had by far the fewest trips from home with a total of twenty-seven—fourteen of which were to church. Fred's and Ruth's trips from home were comparable, with Fred credited with ninety-seven and Ruth credited with eighty-one. They each made just over twenty trips to

³⁰Wright Family Bible; Dodge, *History of Jackson*, Cemetery Records-Chase Yard; Judd, *Maine*, 238-239.

church, with more time devoted to visiting friends and relatives. By all accounts the Christmas concert and community fair were the highlights of the social calendar for the residents of Jackson.³¹

Several entries tell of community cooperation for harvesting and building construction. The exchange of favors was universal and obviously was one of the traditions that the town was built on. Fred's wife, Ruth, grew up on the "Great Farm." She was the daughter of N. E. Carpenter. Her brother's family, including her mother, ran the "Great Farm" during the year that Jonathan wrote the diary. Jonathan noted many exchanges of favors between family members at each of the two farms. Because two of Fred's sisters—Clara and Vesta—married two brothers—Jud and Henry Fletcher. Jonathan had several grandchildren with the surname Fletcher. In 1888, the Fletcher children helped out at both the Wrights' and the Carpenters' farms, where they learned about subsistence agriculture, and their family traditions. They were among the next generation which continued to adapt and work the land, as technological developments like refrigeration and improvements in canning caused new trends in the marketplace, and in turn presented new challenges to those practicing subsistence agriculture.³²

"Little Henry Fletcher," who was mentioned in the diary when Jonathan mended his boot, later married and raised twelve children in Jackson. His brother Eugene, who helped out at the Wright farm when he was fourteen years old, bought the "Great Farm" for "\$3000.00 and zero down" in 1896. Though he was "just past his majority" when he

³¹ Dodge, *History of Jackson*, Chronology-1798~1909.

³² Mosher, *Vital Records of Jackson*, 100; Wright Family Bible; Dodge, *History of Jackson*, Chronology-1798~1909, News Items-1899~1909; Bunting, *A Day's Work*, 240.

bought the farm, records for 1899 credit him with a very respectable harvest of 193 tons of hay. He eventually paid off the farm and sold it in 1909. Also in 1909, the *Republican Journal* published a small article announcing that Fred Wright had decided not to produce the Wrights' renowned maple syrup, which "had been a standard for years." During the first quarter of the twentieth century, for reasons previously mentioned, and a multitude of other developments that are beyond the scope of this paper, the Wrights' system of subsistence agriculture became less and less prominent, until the vast majority of rural, central-Maine households turned to other occupations.³³

Both Fred and Jonathan are credited with over two hundred days of hard, physical labor in Jonathan's diary. They provided themselves with great bounties in all aspects of life and demonstrated a strict personal work ethic. Their social and religious interactions seemed equally fulfilling to them, as those activities occupied most of their free time. Despite the toil and hardships they no doubt endured, their full, rich lives indicate that to many of their peers, and probably in their own minds as well, they lived the good life on the farm in Jackson, in 1888. Many of their neighbors decided to forgo the rugged, rocky hills and long, harsh winters in favor of other ventures. The Wrights, and many other families with values and lifestyles similar to theirs, chose to adapt, diversify and be as productive as possible each day, confident that their total annual production would sustain and improve them. Families like the Wrights, and communities like nineteenth-century Jackson, embodied the traditional values and work ethic that are the ethnic heritage of the tough, reliable, hard-working Maine farmer. They appreciated the type of

³³ Mosher, *Vital Records of Jackson*, 168; Dodge, *History of Jackson*, Chronology-1798~1909, News Items-1899~1909; Bunting, *A Day's Work*, 128-132.

life they had enough to persist in a time of massive out-migration, content with their self-reliance, their spirituality, and their close-knit community.

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