

Preface

Peppermint Kings explores often-hidden aspects of rural American history by looking at the stories of the people most responsible for the growing, distilling, and selling of peppermint oil in the long nineteenth century. Although only some of these people self-consciously described themselves as peppermint kings, the group includes Samuel H. Ranney, who introduced peppermint to Ashfield, Massachusetts, the first major center of domestic peppermint oil production; Henry Ranney, who continued working as a merchant and supplier of peppermint oil to essence peddlers in Ashfield when his uncle Samuel and his own immediate family moved to Phelps, New York; Hiram and Leman Hotchkiss, brothers who operated sometimes cooperative but mostly competing peppermint oil businesses in Phelps and Lyons in western New York; and Albert M. Todd, who built a business in Kalamazoo, Michigan, that dominated the world peppermint oil market into the twenty-first century. These peppermint kings all knew or knew of each other, and some even occasionally communicated, since the peppermint oil business in the nineteenth century existed simultaneously in Massachusetts, western New York, and southwestern Michigan. Each region, however, took its turn as the center of the peppermint oil business. Although each region and each peppermint king are considered separately, the ongoing interaction between these regions is an essential element of

the story that is readily apparent. The influence of each of the kings on his home region is also apparent, as are those regions' influences on them.

Perhaps the first thing that needs to be said about this book is that it is not about peppermint oil. Although I consider peppermint oil a very interesting commodity, which I enjoy using in its raw form and as an element of many products, this is not a study of ways that peppermint oil has influenced events or changed history. Many historians have focused on the changes produced by commodities, such as the influence on a region like the Caribbean of a commodity like sugar. Others have examined the commodity as a cultural object and explored its symbolic nature and its potential role in art, literature, and public imagination. A recent cultural history of the pumpkin argued that examining Americans' interest in the rarely eaten vegetable informs our understanding of American attitudes toward art, nature, and cultural traditions. There may be a valuable book detailing an interesting story of peppermint oil as a commodity or as a cultural artifact. This is not it.

Nor do I think the peppermint plant or the oil distilled from it has agency. Peppermint oil afforded people an opportunity to accumulate power in their rural settings, but had they not found peppermint I believe they would have kept looking. The people who grew, distilled, sold, marketed, experimented on, and consumed peppermint oil all had agency. This book focuses particularly on the people who, for better or worse, became peppermint kings. The Ranneys and their friends, for example, wanted to change America by eliminating slavery. Ashfield-based peddlers carried abolitionist tracts, despite the distrust and resentment this caused in some communities. Peppermint oil producers who supplied the peddlers took time away from business to organize political action, speak at political rallies, and represent their region in the legislature as "Liberty Men." The Hotchkisses of western New York pioneered modern branding, including the counterintuitive reality that their brands were not that objectively different from other peppermint oils, except that they said so. And they responded to changes in the American financial system and to changing mores in business in ways that illustrate the agency of rural entrepreneurs. Albert M. Todd in Michigan prized education. He sought to educate himself and then his customers on the properties of peppermint oils and objective measures

of purity and quality. And as a politician and social activist, he attempted to educate his fellow congressmen on the corruption of plutocracy, established a national Public Ownership League to advocate for change, and supported schools of social science that would teach young people about social justice. I think the stories of the peppermint kings this book uncovers each illustrate elements of rural life in nineteenth-century America that should be more present in our understanding of American history. Taken together, these stories suggest that nineteenth-century rural America was a much more interesting place than it is generally understood to be.

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