

Our Penobscot River Heritage



\$2.50

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by

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As early as 900 A.D. Vikings came to Penobscot Bay, perhaps to settle, perhaps to hunt and fish and leave again. Although they left no written records, Norse coins and artifacts testify to their presence here. Sebastian Cabot, son of John Cabot, arrived in 1498 and was the first European to come to Penobscot Bay and leave a written record. He was soon followed by others, all drawn into the search for the fabled Indian City of "Norumbega" that was supposed to lie on the River Penobscot, "place of rocks." None found the promised streets of gold overflowing with untold wealth and precious gems. Instead they found "one of the finest rivers in the whole world" as Andre Thevet, French traveller and Franciscan monk wrote in 1555, and "a high country full of great woods" according to English explorer Martin Pring in 1603. Samuel De Champlain dispelled the illusion of Norumbega in 1604 when he sailed up the Penobscot to the head of the tide at the present site of Bangor. He found there an Indian settlement called Kadesquit made up of huts and populated with very friendly, courteous Tarrantine Indians dressed in skins. He met with their chiefs, Bessabez and Cohabis, in an oak grove at the present site of Grove Street, and learned that Norumbega was no more than another village located between the Kennebec and the Penobscot Rivers. Champlain published this evidence once back in Europe, but it did not stop explorers and adventurers from coming to Penobscot Bay. In 1605 Captain

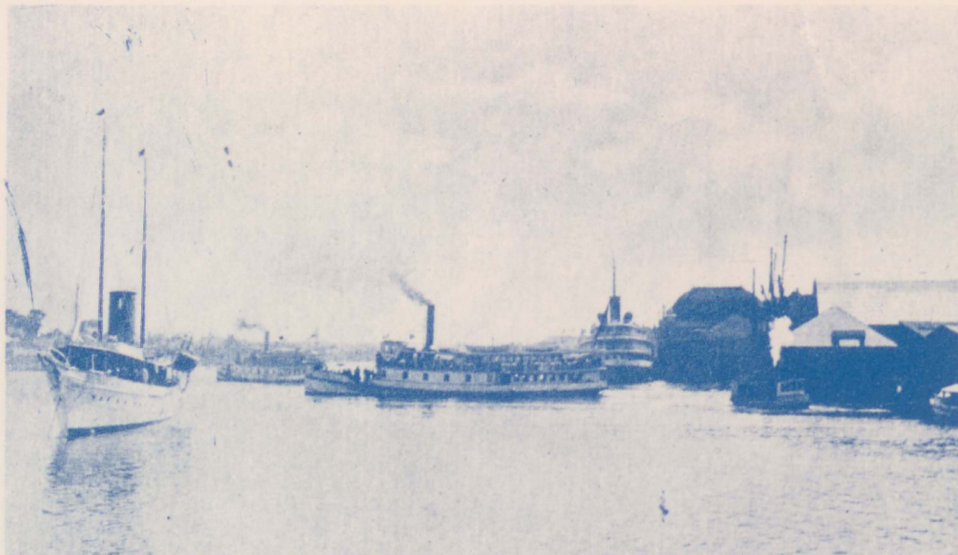
George Weymouth and his crew explored a large river that Weymouth called "Penobscot Harbour." He described it as "the most beautiful, rich, large, secure harbouring that the world affordeth." In 1614 the famous Captain John Smith highly recommended the Maine coast, and particularly Penobscot Bay, to the English court as a superior location for colonization.

Over two centuries later Henry David Thoreau called the Penobscot "an inclined mirror between two evergreen forests," and Bangor was "a star on the edge of the night." When Thoreau wrote those words in 1838 the Penobscot River was just entering the era of its greatest exploitation. Thoreau and the European explorers before him were privileged to see the Penobscot in the wild, natural glory that had always been its past. Even though native Americans peopled its banks and utilized its resources as far back as 7000 B.C., their culture was oriented towards flowing with their natural surroundings, disturbing and exploiting as little of their environment as possible. Consequently, the Penobscot River entered the 18th Century in as pure and unreviled state as the day it was made millions of years ago. Perhaps the early explorers really had discovered Norumbega, only instead of a city it is the Penobscot Valley and Bay — the river itself is the street of gold, the islands in its waters are the precious gems and the abundant resources on its banks are its untold wealth.



The Eastern Steamship Company depot stood at City Dock. One of the most architecturally unusual buildings in Bangor, it served as the terminus for all Penobscot River and Bay steamers, and for the Boston to Bangor steamships, a service that began in the 1840's and continued for nearly a century. For \$3.50, a person could take the sixteen-hour, overnight trip to Boston

aboard the plush "City of Bangor," "Katahdin" or "Penobscot," and arrive in time to connect with trains going south and west. The depot was built around 1900 when the Eastern line absorbed the much older Boston to Bangor Steamship Company, and burned in the great fire of 1911.

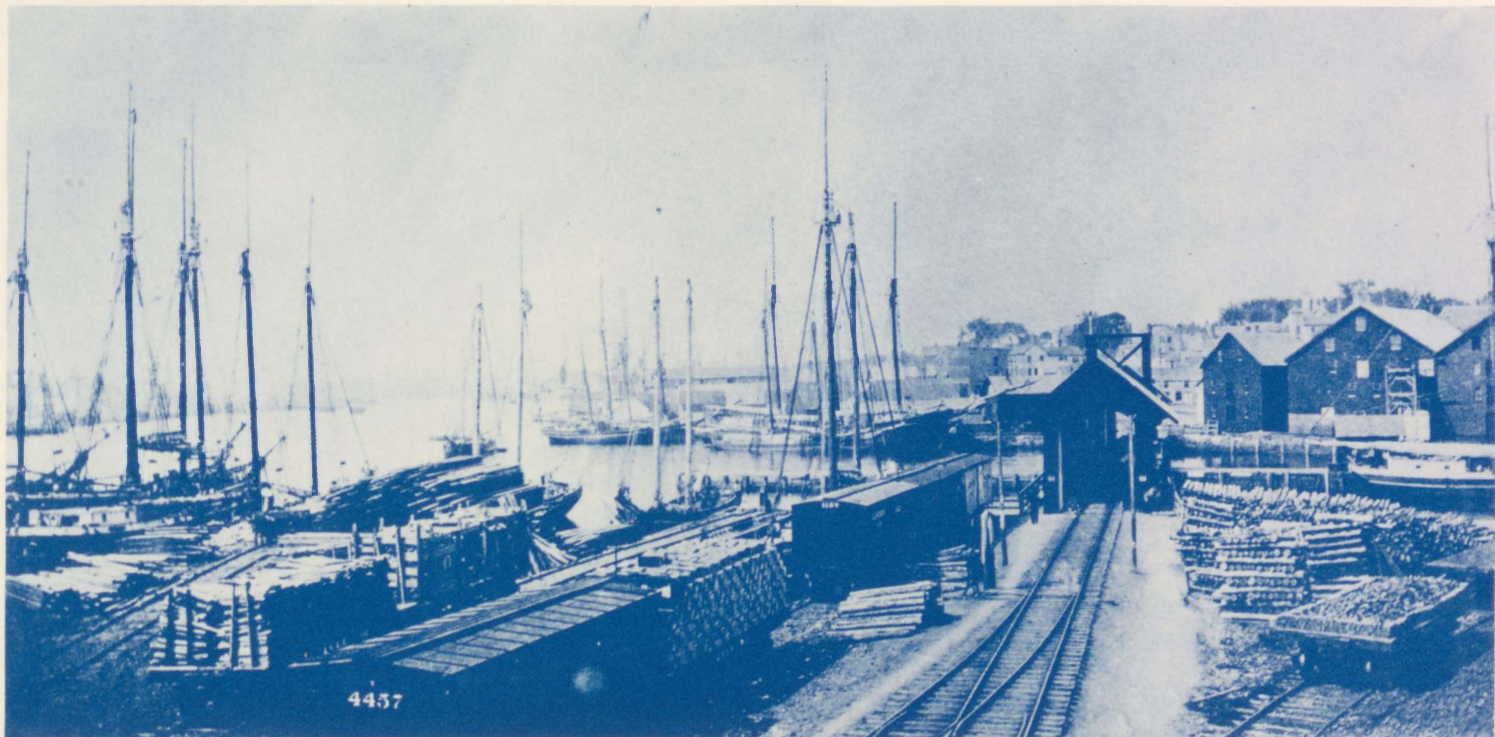


This old postcard gives us a good idea as to how much steamer activity went on in Bangor's harbor. The ship on the left is millionaire Edward Blake's steam yacht "Aria"; the two in the center are thought to be the Penobscot Bay steamers "Sedgewick" and "Queen City," both built in the Barbour Yards in Brewer, the Boston to Bangor steamer, probably the "Belfast" or "Camden," is alongside the Eastern Steamship Wharf in the background, and the little steamer puffing smoke on the right is the "Bon Ton III," the Barbour-built ferry that ran between Bangor and Brewer from 1922-1939 for a penny a trip.

We will have to use our imaginations to recall what the river looked like before the advent of the camera, but the entrance of the Penobscot into modern times has been wonderfully chronicled for us by 19th Century photographers. What you see here is a sampling of how the coming of "civilization" in the 18th Century developed the river into a literal "street of gold" in the 19th. In one century the Penobscot River opened central Maine into its "Golden Era." More hustle and bustle, more money, more "firsts," more relics and more history mark this single century on the river than all of the others before or since. It's hard to believe that the quiet waterfront we see today is the same as the one portrayed in these pictures. If we look closely, we can still see vestiges along the riverbanks of the great hey-day, but even though the Golden Era ended less than a

century ago, much of what was obvious, everyday, taken-for-granted then, has now either been 20th "Centuried," or gone back to nature. Through these photos we will try to recall an era on the Penobscot that has almost vanished. As you witness the natural beauty that early explorers marvelled at, recall Maine historian William D. Williamson's words from 1830:

"The banks of the river are generally high, some projections are rocky and rugged, and others afford a picturesque appearance. An enchanting expanse of river spreads itself before Bucksport Village, and another before Frankfort, and a beautiful country on either side, extending to the head of the tide, fills the passenger's eye from the river with captivating views of nature and culture."



Bangor's waterfront around 1870, at the pinnacle of her "Golden Era," was jammed with lumber and ships. Bangor also exported ice, bricks and leather, as well as her major cargo of lumber. Import cargos of cement, iron, salt, fish, hay, grain and rum unloaded on the Kenduskeag Stream ("The Stream") leaving the deeper water in the harbor for lumber

"coasters." The railroad "twins" at the confluence of the Kenduskeag with the Penobscot, rotated to let ships into "The Stream." On any given day during the season (May - October), well over 200 lumber coasters clogged the harbor making it possible to walk from Bangor to Brewer on the decks of ships.



Shipyards abounded on the Penobscot in the 19th Century. Every town from Veazie to the mouth of the Bay had at least one shipyard and a fleet of ships. Brewer boasted four shipyards and ranked third in the State in ship building. Pictured

here is the McGilvery/Stetson Shipyard below Oak Hill Cemetery on South Main Street in Brewer. The "Thomas J. Stewart," built in 1880, is "on the ways" in the background. The unidentified ship in the foreground is in for repairs.



By 1840 there were more than 250 sawmills on the Penobscot. The Stern's mill in East Hampden used the river to transport its raw material and its finished product, and as its energy source to transform one to the other. Notice the log "boom" sur-

rounding the logs in the water, and also notice how the square, wooden piers that still dot the river today were used to manipulate the flow of logs.



Steamtugs came into use on the river in the 1840's. The river was so treacherous and crowded that sailing ships paid to be towed to or from Fort Point, Stockton Springs rather than risk going under sail. This tug is towing at least six deep-loaded

lumber coasters through Hampden Narrows around 1900. The real risk going through the Narrows under tow was running into a steamer coming the other way. There was no stopping, only skilled maneuvering, or a wreck.



It was the lumberjack who started the whole process of cutting the trees, and getting them into the river where they would float to sawmills downstream, and eventually be loaded aboard ships and be carried around the world. These lumberjacks were no Paul Bunyans. They were skilled, but ordinary men,

mostly from Canada, Ireland, Russia and China. They were noted for their outlandish, tattered garb, their peavey-hooks, and their devil-may-care bravado. In this picture they are forming a log raft.



Here tattered lumberjacks are "Sacking the Rear" circa 1860





This fine view (seen below) of the steamboat wharf and Zion's Hill in Bucksport was taken around 1900. The East Maine Conference Seminary dominates the hill, surrounded by noble homes that testify to the affluence brought to river communities through shipping and fishing. Bucksport and Verona Island were major shipbuilding towns. The first ship built on the River was the "Hannah," a 60 ton schooner that went down the ways in Buckstown in 1771. Unlike Bangor and Brewer, whose fleet was mainly involved with the lumber trade, Bucksport's fleet was famous for fishing the Grand Banks. The masts of the ships in the winter scene at left are "Bankers" instead of "Coasters." Capt. Nicholson's banker fleet was fourth largest in the United States, and Nicholson's Wharf was constantly covered with fish set out to dry after successful fishing runs. This photo was taken from Zion's Hill in the 1890's. Bucksport's first Catholic Church appears forlorn on a hill that is now covered with churches. The Boston to Bangor steamer can be seen gliding past Fort Knox, maybe out on its last run of the season before the river freezes.

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It should not be forgotten that much of the granite used to build Washington D.C. was quarried at Mt. Waldo in Frankfort. This rare postcard is an unusual photo of the quarry itself. Huge blocks of granite were dug out of the mountain, carefully brought down by yokes of oxen, and loaded into four-masted schooners at the "Mink Hole" in Marsh Bay. Today, as you drive through Frankfort on Route 1A, you can see huge blocks of granite waiting for ships, and you can still see the remains of one of those ships, a "granite scow" rotting in the marsh.





Cutting ice on the Penobscot was a major industry during winter months when the river was closed to shipping. The ice was stored in huge ice houses that descended to the water line as far down river as the water was fresh. Bangor had two ice houses, Brewer three. The ice was cut and stored 'til spring, when it was loaded on large schooners and shipped either to the Tudor Ice Company in Boston, or directly from Bangor/

Brewer to the West Indies, China and South America. It has been boasted that Penobscot ice kept the British Army alive as they conquered India. In this rare picture, men are scoring the ice blocks for cutting on the Brewer side of the river. The Smith Planing Mill in the center stored ice, and just to the right off picture stood the huge E.&I.K. Stetson Ice House.

Joanne Monaghan graduated from the University of Maine at Orono with a degree in history. Although she now does interior/exterior landscaping, and formerly owned and operated a downtown Bangor plant shop, she pursues local history as an interesting hobby and sometime vocation. She has recently organized the restoration of the colonial garden at the Skinner Settlement in East Corinth, and served as research historian for the Bangor Historical Society. She also gives lectures on local history, plants and gardening, and garden history to local groups.

Our gratitude to the following agencies for the loan of their photographs:

Bangor Public Library

Bangor Historical Society
159 Union Street, Bangor
Open 10-2, Tues.-Fri.

Bucksport Historical Society
Located in the Old Railroad Station
Main Street, Bucksport
Open July 1-Labor Day, Wed.-Fri., 1-4 P.M.