

A Short History of Mid-Coast Maine

Colin Woodward's *The Lobster Coast* was the source of much of this information, but town records, *The Eastern Frontier*, and other sources were used. With few exceptions, all of the information below is historically accurate.



You wouldn't know it sitting on Knubble Bay Camp's deck on a sunny afternoon, but this area has a rich history that has shaped what we know as Mid-Coast Maine, the coast from the Kennebec to the Penobscot.

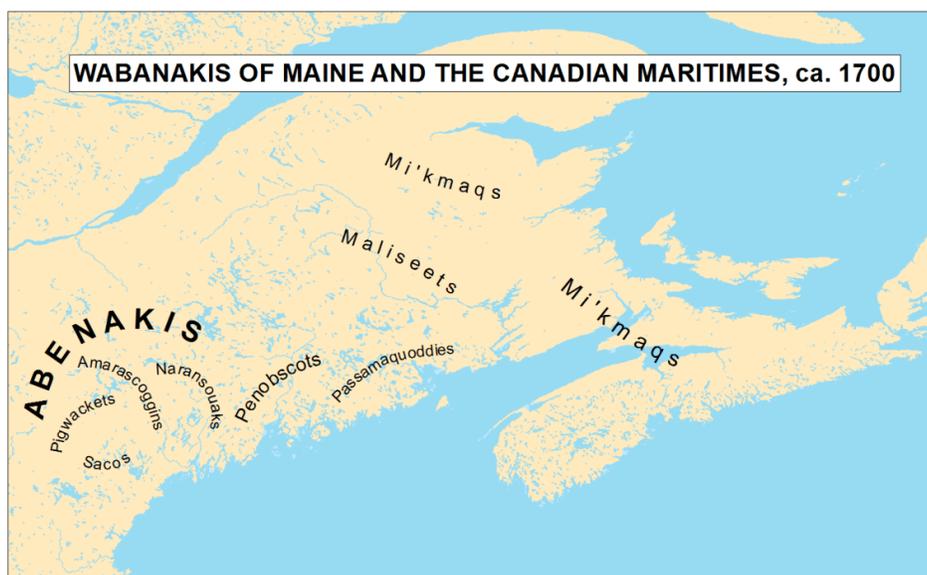
History is the story of many lives. You will hear from some of them below:

- A Wabanaki woman
- A fish station worker
- A British nobleman
- An early Georgetown settler
- A Scotch-Irish girl who settled on the Knubble

Fun Idea: Turn this into a play.

The People of the Dawn

Sixteen hundred years ago, Knubble Bay and all that surrounded it was a mile-thick glacier. It began to recede about 12,000 years ago, leaving behind the rocky shores we see today and a great depression (eventually covered by the ocean) we now call the Gulf of Maine. After eons, enough land was exposed to create a sedge-dotted tundra. As bleak as it was, huge mastadons and a few caribou began to roam here, followed by the humans who hunted them. Ten thousand years before the Europeans came to America, these hunters formed groups. Today, we classify them as the Wabanaki, made up of the Sheepscot, Penobscot, Passamaquoddy and Micmac tribes.



Over the centuries, the land turned from tundra to forest, from mastodon to moose—and the people living here adapted. Until about 4,000 years ago the Gulf of Maine wasn't even filled with water. Once it was, the native people took full advantage of its bounty.

A French Jesuit missionary who lived with the Wabanaki in the early 1600s recounted:

Their food is whatever they can get from the chase and from fishing . . . In the month of February . . . is the great hunt for beavers, otters, moose, bears . . . and for the [deer] . .

. In

the middle of March, fish begin to spawn, and to come up from the sea into certain streams,

often so abundantly that everything swarms with them . . . From the month of May up to the

middle of September they are free from all anxiety about their food, for the cod are upon the coast.

The Wabanaki were wise to settle here. The Gulf of Maine stretches 450 miles from Nantucket to St. John, New Brunswick. Only 100 feet below the surface are two submerged islands, Georges Bank and Brown's Bank. They shape the tides and provide protection from the open ocean.

When the Kennebec, the Androscoggin and the Sheepscot converge to the sea they deposit the nutrients necessary for microscopic plants and, eventually, larger life forms. The people living on the coast were blessed with richness. Lobsters weighing 20 pounds or more were everywhere. Native people feasted on oysters as large as their feet.



The ruler of these waters, though, was the bottom-feeding cod, and it was the cod that brought the white men.

Let's hear from a Wabanaki woman who lived in this area, speaking in 1503.

I am Black Turtle. I have lived here in Ketakamigwa (the big land on the seacoast) for my 73 years. My people, the Wabanaki—People of the Dawn--have lived here since the beginning of time. We live in harmony with our surroundings and with one another.

My ancestors speak of a time when this land was ice and snow, and they followed herds of caribou (which are no more) and the great-hairy beasts with long tusks. Now the land is friendlier and we no longer have to travel so long for food.



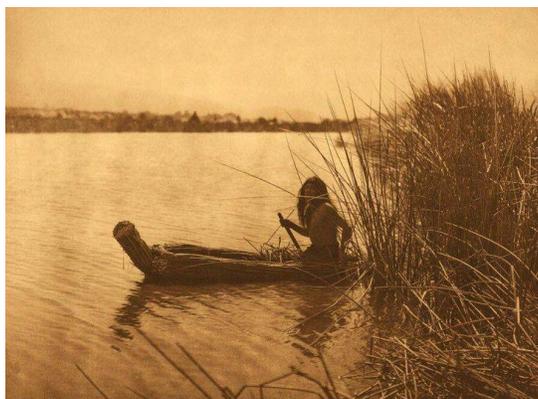
My people number about 20,000, and another 60,000 Algonquins live north of the Kennebec. At a place called Penobscot, we meet with others to trade. In past years, we have traded furs for strange materials called “brass” and “copper” and “iron,” with white-skinned people who have come from far away. From them we have learned new words like “God” and “Christ.”

We have heard that some of these men kidnap and kill, so we are wary. Our villages are safe, though. They lie up and down the coast and the white men do not come there.



Our gardens and fields are full of maize and beans. We burn parts of the forest to make grassy places for the deer to feed in, and we are careful about how many trees are damaged. We do not own the land—no one can own the land—and we are mindful of other peoples' historic territories.

My band lives on the Sagadahoc River where the Kennebec and the Androscoggin meet the sea. The sea is bounteous. Our men go out in canoes and bring back seals and whales, fish and seabirds, which we smoke for winter food. In a place called Damariscotta, we gather and feast on oysters and make great piles of shells as tall as six men and as wide as an island.



Life is good for us by the sea, but some in my village are worried. For many years, white men have come looking for fish way up in Nova Scotia. Last moon, people in the next village said they saw a mighty boat coming from the Dawn into the waters that we know. The wise men say this is a bad omen.

A Fruitful and Dangerous Place

Black Turtle lived in a land little known by Europeans, but her people's lives were about to change.

Imagine walking through forests so thick that underbrush was scarce, where trees sprouted no branches for the first 80 feet. It was not uncommon for old growth pine to

be 200 feet tall and 3 feet wide—perfect material for the masts of ships for the Europeans who were soon to come.



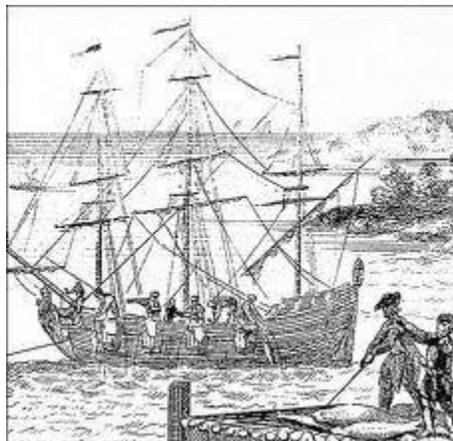
Because this new land was so different from the Old World, many British explorers were convinced the place was magic. Some came to find Norumbega, a mythical city of riches sitting near the Penobscot River. Before long, they discovered the treasure that was actually here.

Explorers like John Smith and Samuel de Champlain sailed into the region in the early 1600s, and they were pleased at what they saw. Smith said:

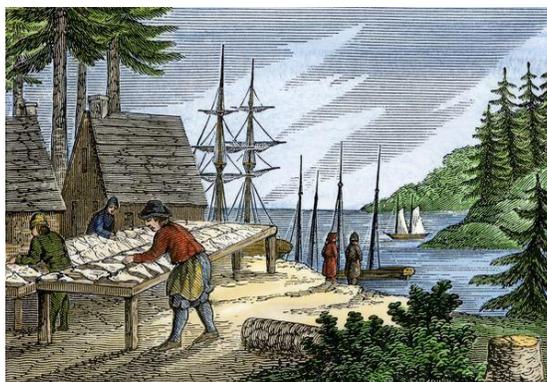
*These rocky Iles are so furnished with good Woods, Springs, Fruits, and Fish and Fowle,
and the Sea the strangest Fish-pond I ever saw.*

Rather than a vast wilderness, De Champlain saw meadows and fields cultivated by the natives. The Europeans came to view the new land as a dangerous but bountiful resource.

As early as the 1500s, the French, Basque and British had established a busy industry in Nova Scotia, catching and salting fish and shipping it to the Old World. Why couldn't the area around the Gulf of Maine, wondered British entrepreneurs, be just as profitable?



The first Maine settlers were fishermen. By the early 1600s, several permanent fishing stations owned by British companies were established, most prominently on Monhegan Island (1610) and closer to our area on Southport and Damariscove islands (1614). The men enlisted for 3-year stints. Unpolished and irreligious, they were nevertheless determined to succeed.

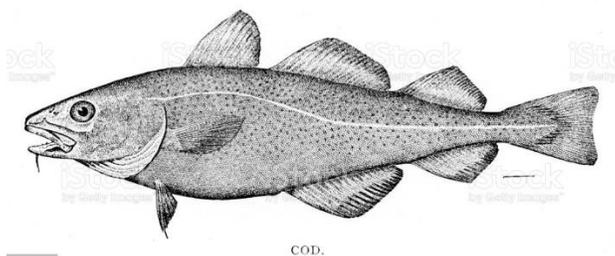


Let's hear from a Maine fisherman, speaking in 1615.

I am Jonathan Stone. I arrived at Cape Newagen on the tip of Southport Island in 1613, determined to make a better life for myself than I had as a fisherman in Cornwall. I came to seek my fortune, though I am not sure I will find it.

Here it is lonely and cold. We fish for cod all winter in small open boats called shallots. These boats are not up to the hearty winds here, so we have to row into the sea in search of fish—and all the time the bitter spray freezes our canvas clothing.

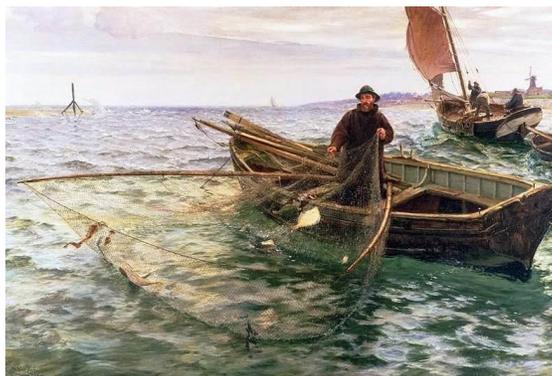
Once we reach the fishing grounds, we cast out handlines baited with a chunk of lobster or herring. Lately we've been using birds called auks for bait, as they cannot fly and are easy to catch.



When I came here last year, I was a scrawny lad. Hauling up the great cod has turned me into a man. Each of us brings in 400 fish a day, and each fish weighs over 100 pounds. I cut out the tongue of each cod I catch and am paid accordingly.

While we fish, others work at cleaning and salting and hanging the cod to dry. The beaches are covered with long racks of fish. Next month, an English ship will come and take it all back to my homeland. I sometimes think I should sail back with them.

I am not proud to say it, but sometimes I wish for great storms, as that is the only time we are able to rest. There are barrels to make, lines to mend, boats to repair, but at least we are not in danger of dying on that cold, grey sea.



My mates and I have no time for God, but we would welcome the gentle touch of women. Our only delight is the drink brought here by the Elizabeth Anne every month. Some call her a “walking tavern,” filled as she is with spirits and tobacco. I confess that too much of my pay has been lost to her wickedness.

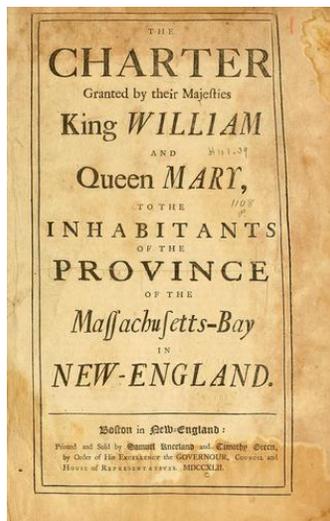
If the sea has not swallowed me before my time is done here then, I will go home to England with my earnings and seek the comfort of a landlubber’s life.

Settling a Wilderness

The history of early Maine is complicated. From 1500 to the late 1700s, this vast area was claimed by several countries at once. Most of the northeast coastal region had been claimed by the British crown, sight unseen, well before they settled here. Early on,

it became part of the British colony of Massachusetts Bay and, finally, was named the colony of Maine.

In the 1600s England's king granted charters to swaths of Maine to his noblemen. These royal charters allowed them to rule parcels of land in the king's name.



In 1606, two rival groups of noblemen formed stockholding companies to help finance their explorations and settlements. Their royal charters essentially gave them control of the entire east coast of the New World. Colonies emerged in Plymouth, Massachusetts Bay, and, eventually, in areas of Maine. Who were these noblemen, and what did they hope to gain from their gamble?

Let's hear from one of them, 59-year-old Sir Ferdinando Gorges, speaking in 1625:

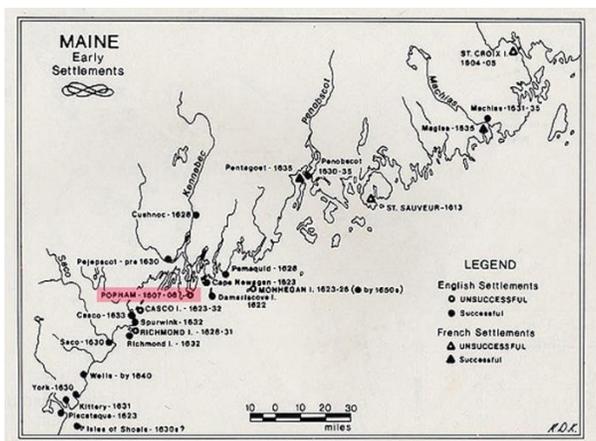
My name is Samuel Gorges. My friend Captain John Smith first made me aware of profitable land in the New World after he returned from a whaling hunt in the Gulf of Maine in 1614. A fine captain he is (though not a great fisherman because he caught nary a whale).

Nevertheless, he had only glorious things to say about the place. He said to me, "Of all the four parts of the world that I have scene not inhabited, I would rather live here than any where." He thought of this place so highly that he called it "New England." I confess, he made a strong argument for my investment there.



I am no stranger to Maine. In 1606, my friend Sir John Popham and I established a trading fort in Pemaquid. How we hoped it would be the first permanent settlement in the New World!

Alas, it was not . . . and not a good use of my efforts or my money. Popham, the dear fellow, was ill-suited to such a task. He built the fort at the mouth of the Kennebec River too close to the forces of tide and wind. All of our hopes were frozen to death.



Most distressing was the behavior of the nearby savages, who did all they could to make the colony fail. I had hoped they had been weakened by the “Great Dying” when the poxes killed so many Wabanakis, but, alas, they trouble us.

I am a strong man. I will not be conquered by misjudgment and a passel of savages, for, you see, there is profit to be made in this Province of Maine.

One can walk barefoot in the shallows and pluck fifty lobsters for a feast. The ugly beasts are not suitable for drying and shipping to the homeland, but, boiled soon after capture, they are sweet and delectable.

It is not lobster, it is cod that is the promise of this land. I am convinced that with careful planning we could feed all of England with this great fish. Why, when

Captain Smith fished at Monhegan in 1614, he returned with 50 thousand of the whiskered fish.



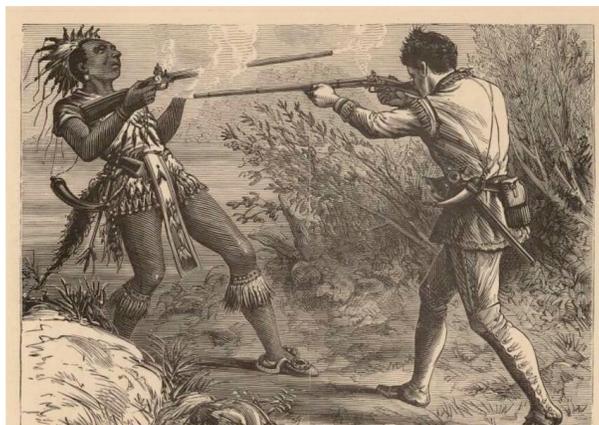
Cod have been a blessing to many. In 1622, the half-starved Plymouth settlers sent up a boat to Damariscove Island—my island. A pitiful sight they were. We filled them with cod, else the whole lot of them would have perished.

A Time of Blood

Attitudes about the native peoples and the belief that settlement meant ownership fueled the troubled times ahead. They were also made worse by disagreements in New England between Puritans and Anglicans.

The Puritans who dominated the Massachusetts Bay Company intended to get control of the area in Maine by resettling hundreds of like-minded zealots in the great Puritan Migration of 1630. Twenty years later, the Puritans announced they had rightful control over the “wild English” settlers in both Maine and New Hampshire. New Hampshire didn’t put up a fight, but Maine was an uneasy part of the colony of Massachusetts until 1658.

Maine’s Puritans were by no means the largest population. The Wabanakis were. Between 1675 and 1712, a series of bloody confrontations decimated the New England countryside. The first conflict, King Phillip’s War, killed more people proportionately than any conflict in America’s history. Settlers wiped out entire villages. Wabanaki killed 3,500 settlers in less than two years. Ten percent of the settlers lost their lives, and 80 percent of their homes.



At first, the Maine Wabanakis did not join in the fight—until the Massachusetts colony sent troops to take away their arms. Weapons meant survival to the Wabanakis, and they resisted. They sacked Falmouth, South Berwick, York and Saco.

Everyone suffered.

Let's here how John Parker from Arrowsic saw the conflict, speaking in 1677:

I am John Parker, father of James who has just died in my arms. I have lost much blood and will join him soon. Please hear my tale.

I am the first son of John Parker, who sailed from Bedeford, England in 1625 on the Mayflower. He bought the island of Racohegan from a native called Robinhood. He was the first settler in the area called Georgetown.

My boyhood days fishing alongside Father were glorious. When I came of age, I bought 100 acres in Arrowsic, and my family was close by. My brother Thomas owned a third of the island of Georgetown.

I sold my land in Arrowsic and moved to the shores of the Kennebec. It was there that our troubles began.

We had always lived peacefully alongside the Wabanaki, until the soldiers came up to take away their guns. My friend Thomas Gardiner pleaded with the governor of Massachusetts: "Indians in these parts did never appear dissatisfied until their arms were taken away . . . they may be forced to go to the French for reliefe or fight against us."

Then what happened in Saco. Some drunken sailors, believing Indian children were born knowing how to swim, upturned a canoe in the harbor with a squaw and her baby. The baby sank. The mother dove. They died. She was the wife of the great Saco chief, Squando, and now the Androscoggins and Abenaki, the Wabanaki and the Sacos, have turned our Maine into hell.

I fled with my wife and children to the trading station in Arrowsic, as it has strong, thick walls. As we slept one night, the Androscoggins made their way in. My dear wife, and all but one of my children were slaughtered. James and I escaped into the night, making our way down river in a boat with others heading for the safety of Monhegan.

A week later, we made our way to this fort in Falmouth, but last night they came again. The blood and screams will accompany me to the grave. James, my son, lies yonder, his fair hair black with blood. I am soon to join him.

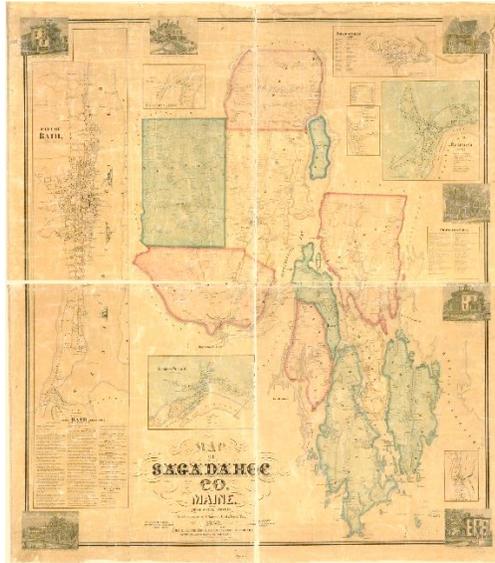
The conflicts did not end for decades. "From 1689 to 1713, not a single English home stood in all of Maine north of Wells."

Atrocities occurred on both sides. In Norridgewock, the English killed 80 Kennebec men, women and children, scalping many. In 1692, natives castrated and scalped a

man in front of the fort where his companions watched in agony. By war's end, the natives were starving and many fled north to Canada.

Once a beautiful and bounteous land, Maine had become a "howling wilderness."

Though Maine was almost empty now of settlers and natives, it was not to remain unpeopled. In 1729, the king revoked Massachusetts's claim to Maine. The new Surveyor-General of His Majesty's Woods, David Dunbar, established at Pemaquid a new settlement, which he called Sagadahoc.



Settlements need settlers, and this land required new people willing to endure the hardship of Maine's coast. Dunbar found them in the Scots of northern Ireland. They would start up again the life of Mid-Coast Maine.

Let's listen to one of those settlers, speaking in 1728.

I am Sarah Elizabeth O'Stuart, twelve years of age. I live on a place called the Knubble on Georgetown Island. My family and I sailed from County Antrim to Boston in 1718 with 100 other souls.

We spent our first winter in a cold place called Casco Bay. My family left with some others to make our lives in Merrymeeting Bay, and we named our settlement Cork.

My father is a fisherman and longed to be closer to the sea, so we moved to these few acres near a place called Robinhood Cove, and here we have lived these 10 years. Sadly, the Wabanaki burned down our little settlement at Cork, but we remained safe.

The land is hard here, and nothing wants to grow without much care. My father, though, trades fish for furs and food. I gather oysters and lobsters from the shore

with my brother and carry armfuls of seaweed to bank against our little house that looks over the bay.

Every year, more and more come from the Old Country, some from Ireland, some from Scotland. Last month, a family from Germany settled nearby. They have a girl my age, Helga. We do not understand each others' words, but we love to sit on the crest of the Knubble among the buttercups and watch the great birds fly overhead.

I want to remain in this beautiful place forever, but, lately, father has been talking with the other men about the Micmac and the Passamaquoddy, and the wicked French. He fears we cannot survive if war comes again to this place.

The upcoming French and Indian War did strip the land one more time. Many who survived the conflict subsequently died of cold and starvation.

Once the French were defeated in 1763, Mid-Coast came back again like the buttercups at Knubble Point. Poor people came up from southern New England where land was getting scarce, calling Maine "an assalum for people . . . that could not live anywhere else."

Many years of Mid-Coast land disputes followed, but by the time of the Revolutionary War people began to think of themselves a Mainers. The years to come would ask them to think of themselves as Americans, and they did that too.

Most of those who came before us here are not forgotten, as we never knew them. Some of their names remain on Georgetown gravestones and place names. As you walk along the shore at Beal Island or watch the ospreys over Robinhood Cove, consider that the richness of this place comes from the lives that it has held.







