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History of Boothbay Maine

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About Our Town

Highlights of Boothbay History
by local historian Barbara Rumsey

The Etchemin, also called Canibas, were the native American inhabitants of the area between the Kennebec and Penobscot rivers before being eventually driven out by white settlers in the early 1700s. This area was used by white fishermen during the first half of the seventeenth century and by the 1660s there were year-round families settled in the region. Some of the sites of those settlements were: Cape Newagen, East Boothbay (then called Winnegance) on Barlows Hill and Murray Hill, Oak Point in Boothbay Harbor, Fishermans Island, and Damariscove Island. By 1689, the white settlers were driven out of the locality.



In 1729 the region was renamed Townsend and finally permanently resettled by a group of around 60 Scotch-Irish, including McCobbs (leaders of the group), Fullertons, Beaths, McFarlands, and Montgomerys. Barthers arrived around 1736, with Alleys, Reeds,

Lewis, Linekins, and Wylies settling within the next ten years. Settlers of English extraction, such as the Pinkham, the Tibbetts, and the Giles families came from Dover, New Hampshire in the mid-1750s. All these families endured privation, near starvation, and the French and Indian wars; some were kidnapped and taken to Canada. Nearly the whole town left the area for a period of years during one war.

Townsend was a very poor community on the edge of the frontier, and though the settlers were of a farming background, Boothbay was a rocky place and agriculture was a struggle. The early settlers relied heavily for hard cash on woodcutting for the Boston market. However, over the years a fine fishing tradition emerged; it was inevitable since the fishing banks in the Gulf of Maine were what initially brought white people here regularly. Everything from clamdigging to whaling has been carried on in Boothbay, but historically the banks fishermen prospered the most.



In 1764 Boothbay became a legal town, dropping its prior name of Townsend since there was already a town by that name in Massachusetts. Though there have been explanations offered, none has satisfactorily explained the choice of the name "Boothbay" for the town which included what is now Boothbay, Southport, and Boothbay Harbor.

By the 1760s Boothbay's permanent settlers had already erected saw and grist mills, and vessels were being built though that cannot be documented; however, shipbuilding is a reasonable and necessary deduction. Brickmaking also was carried on at numerous sites. The first century of the 1729 settlement saw the population centered in the pastoral farmland of the Back River-Dover-Pleasant Cove area. The early nineteenth century saw a shift with the village of presentday East Boothbay emerging as a commercial center, the magnet being Caleb Hodgdon's tidemill and shipbuilding.

Simultaneously, Boothbay Harbor emerged as a commercial center with the McCobb-Auld business a big attraction for Banks fishermen. The hard economic times, war years and embargo years, were finally over by 1820 and the town did very well in coasting and fishing. Nathaniel McFarland deposed in 1827 that 2,125 vessels had dropped anchor in Boothbay Harbor during the 1826 calendar year. Occasionally later on there were 400 fishing vessels at a time anchored in Boothbay Harbor. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, pogie factories provided much income for local workers as did the ice industry and sardine canneries.

In 1842 what is now Southport left Boothbay, and in 1889 what is now Boothbay Harbor left Boothbay. The attraction of the region as a summer resort was recognized before 1850; by the 1880s the big hotels and summer developments were well underway. The tourist and summer resident industry has continued to grow, as all others have shrunk. The only traditional fishing business left of any size is lobsterfishing. Our venerable shipbuilding tradition, which continues to this day with boatbuilding and vessel repair, has the highest profile in the public's mind.

It would be hard to identify any one thing that sets Boothbay apart from other coastal communities for there is no single defining event or thing. It has had a history that could just as well describe many of the neighboring seaside towns; what makes it unique is that it is our history.

For more information regarding Boothbay Region history please visit the Boothbay Region Historical Society.

<http://boothbayhistorical.org/>

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