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## Encounters with a Wilderness City - Wassataquoik Valley - Aaron Megquier - 2004

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Encounters with a Wilderness City

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American Environmental History  
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November 29, 2004

The Wassataquoik Valley is a place that gently saturates the senses. Here in the 200,000 acres of Baxter State Park, the sighing of the wind in the spruces mingles with the distant rumble of running water to produce a sound that speaks quietly of wildness. The defining feature of the valley is Wassataquoik Stream, which begins on the northern slopes of Katahdin and tumbles through a high country of forests and lakes before meeting the East Branch of the Penobscot River just outside the Park boundary. I grew up experiencing the Wassataquoik Valley as the epitome of pristine Nature, where I could look moose in the eye, catch native brook trout, and drink freely from the mountain streams. For me, this has always been a place of reverently whispered conversations.

Despite my best efforts to whisper, there is a paradox in this seemingly unspoiled wilderness: with every step that one takes into the park, the illusion of untouched nature slips further and further away. For the northbound hiker headed into the backcountry, the trail enters the Wassataquoik Valley through a notch between South Turner Mountain and the eastern slopes of Katahdin. After several miles of dense, young forests, the trail meets Wassataquoik Stream at a broad shallow area where the river is forded at low water levels. As the trail heads upstream after this crossing and approaches Turner Brook, the dense forest cover suddenly breaks into a patchwork of old fields. Grasses and tall wildflowers dominate in some areas, while in other spots sun-loving tree species like white pine, aspen and birch are in various stages of colonization. At one point, the trail becomes straight, flat and broad for a few hundred feet, with a noticeable earthen berm on each side. A profusion of tin cans, crocks and barrel hoops hide among the ground pine. After hours of dense woods and solitary hiking, it feels for all the world like walking down Main Street.

The Park management is not at all secretive about this place, and trail signs generally refer to it with the bland, vaguely urban label of 'New City'. For an area of old fields in the middle of a wilderness park, this is a very provocative name that raises many questions. First of all, why was there a city in the middle of the wilderness? Who lived here and why did they come? And perhaps most importantly, why aren't they here anymore? To tell the tale of how these old fields came to be in the middle of a wilderness park, we must pay

deference to the human values that created the fields as well as those that created the current wilderness. For all of its apparent wildness, the landscape of this valley has been profoundly shaped by the spiritual, economic, and political values of human beings. The story of the Wassataquoik and New City speaks powerfully about changing human relationships with the land and the myriad ways in which we write our values onto the landscape.

From the New City fields, the rushing presence of Wassataquoik Stream to the south is inescapable, and it is with flowing water that the story of this place really begins. In the dense Maine woods, waterways provide a vital source of connectivity through the landscape, and the Wassataquoik is perhaps connected more auspiciously than most. Wassataquoik Stream flows into the East Branch of the Penobscot about 20 miles downstream from the New City fields, and thus is a tributary to the largest watershed in Maine. The Penobscot flows down from the mountains into a broad, coastal valley and meets tidewater at Bangor before emptying into Penobscot Bay. The flowing water linkage between the Wassataquoik Valley and Maine's most important river system has been critical to its history since the glaciers left Maine ten thousand years ago.

Although today's landscape yields few clues about their presence, the area around the New City fields figured prominently in the cultural geography of the Penobscot Indians. As the region's aboriginal inhabitants, it was the Penobscots who called this place Wassataquoik – 'clear, shining stream' - and who left their villages along the main stem of the river to hunt in these woods (Clark 1978). According to the best ethnographic accounts of Penobscot culture, hunting rights were family-based and linked to particular watersheds, which underscores the historical importance of rivers for transportation. Although no surviving records of Penobscot hunting territories explicitly mention the Wassataquoik, the valley is very close to the historical territories of the Ezeba'nes (Raccoon) and Ki'uni'ge (Otter) families. The landscape of this area was critical to the material and spiritual life of these two families, but also was very important to the Penobscot nation as a whole. The Wassataquoik drains the northern slopes of Katahdin, and the entire watershed stands in the shadow of this central feature of Penobscot cultural and physical geography (Speck 1970). To the Penobscots, *k'tadene* was a powerful mountain inhabited by three distinct spirits collectively

known as *bumole*. Of the three spirits, it was the malevolent storm bird that enforced strong taboos against climbing above treeline on the mountain, and who has persisted in latter-day legend as Pamola (Baxter et al. 1972; Hall, Thomas, and Harmon 1991). The uppermost reaches of Wassataquoik Stream approach the treeline and thus border the highly spiritual realm of the storm-bird and the other deities.

In the middle decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the economy of white settlers gradually expanded into the wild upland watersheds so important to Penobscot spiritual and material culture. For many years, the remote location and relative inaccessibility of the Wassataquoik Valley had kept the area isolated from lumbering operations. However, as readily accessible lumber in the coastal areas became exhausted and prices began to rise, the high transportation costs of lumbering in this remote location gradually became economically justifiable (Hempstead 1931). As the most valuable tree species at the time, white pines were the first trees that could pay for their journey to market from remote areas. Investors and mill owners sent timber scouts to explore the northern part of Maine in search of old-growth white pine (Wood 1935), and it seems that they found some in the Wassataquoik Valley. When Edward Hale ascended Wassataquoik Stream on his way to Katahdin in 1845, he found a series of small logging camps and pine cutting well underway (Hale 1901).

Shipping technologies provided a critical linkage between these remote stands of timber and rising market demand from around the globe. By the time the first white pine was driven down the Wassataquoik in 1841, the downstream city of Bangor had already claimed the title of the busiest lumber port in the world. Penobscot lumber fed a thriving shipbuilding industry in Penobscot Bay, and these ships transported Maine lumber to markets as distant as Chile and Australia. However, the bulk of the Maine export lumber trade during the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was with Europe, the Caribbean, and South America, with a particularly busy trade centered in Cuba. The profits of this trade included sugar and molasses, which quickly appeared as staple foodstuffs in the diets of Maine loggers during this time period. Maine lumber also met rising demand from domestic expansion, and over 5 million board-feet followed the gold rush to California during 1849 alone (Wood 1935). As the Maine economy responded to this increased demand, pine logging operations pushed ever farther up the primary river systems into the northern reaches of the State.

As heavy cutting began to deplete stands of high-quality white pine even in remote northern Maine, logging operations for saw timber gradually made a shift to spruce. While slightly less valuable than pine, spruce covered vast areas of northern Maine and had experienced relatively little cutting pressure. This shift from a species that grew in dense, high-value stands to one that was more widespread ushered in an era of intensification of logging operations on the Wassataquoik and throughout northern Maine. A short hike downstream from New City is a place known as Inscription Rock, which commemorates the arrival of this new lumbering era on the Wassataquoik. Chiseled in a huge granite boulder, the inscription reads: “Tracey and Love commenced operations on Wassataquoik October 16, 1883.” Soon after their arrival, Foster Tracey and Hugh Love built a depot and headquarters about three miles downstream from the New City fields. This headquarters was known as City Camp, and the site currently known as New City was first established as Russell Camp in honor of the logging boss there (Hakola 1981). By February of 1885, Tracey and Love had nine camps in operation, with 270 men, 110 horses and 12 oxen in their employ (Bunting 1997).

Supplying provisions to such an extensive labor force was one of the biggest costs that a camp operator had to bear, and the costs on the Wassataquoik were especially high. Although the discarded crocks and barrels in the woods speak plainly to the provisions shipped in from the outside, the full magnitude of what 270 hungry men can eat is astounding. In early 1885, an observer at the Tracey and Love camp noted that the men were consuming almost three and a half barrels of flour a day (Bunting 1997). Multiplied over 6 months in the woods, the expense and logistical effort required to simply provide biscuits for the men is staggering. When barrels of pork, gallons of molasses, and bales upon bales of hay for the livestock are factored in, it is no surprise that many operators tried to defray these costs with agricultural production at the camp (Wood 1935). Thus, the rusty plow that can still be seen at New City says a great deal about the remoteness of the site and the role of both geography and transportation technologies in shaping the way that people here interacted with the land.

Although the barest hint of a furrow can still be detected in the New City fields, the relative independence of the camp from local food sources left a different and perhaps more enduring mark on the landscape. In sunny, open places among the asters and goldenrod, a plant known as orange hawkweed is

easily found here. This perennial is common throughout Maine and is widely presumed to be native, but was actually brought as a garden ornamental from Europe during colonial times. As an ecological generalist adapted to disturbance, orange hawkweed escaped cultivation where it found a suitable niche and gradually colonized roadsides, fields, and areas of disturbed soil (Alden and Cassie 1998). The linkage of New City camps to land-based transportation networks seems to have given this exotic species a passage into the wilderness. Muddy stagecoach or buckboard wheels could plausibly have provided transportation for orange hawkweed seeds, but animal fodder brought in for the draft animals is a more likely culprit. The presence of orange hawkweed in the middle of a wilderness park suggests that it found significantly disturbed ecosystems upon arrival, probably in the form of muddy tote roads, cleared fields, or burned lands. It remains here as a bright orange reminder that human beings rarely travel alone.

While the New City camps used land-based transportation networks for supplies, the overall success of the lumbering operation hinged on the waters of Wassataquoik Stream. The successful delivery of lumber to market depended entirely on the kinetic energy of flowing water to carry logs to the sawmills and port cities waiting downstream. The driving of logs was a dangerous, labor-intensive business, and the Wassataquoik quickly earned a bad reputation in this regard. The stream was notorious for the unpredictable onset of the spring floods, and the channel was blocked by enormous boulders that created dangerous log jams. In an attempt to regulate the flow of the stream and improve it for driving, Tracey and Love immediately began the wholesale modification of the Wassataquoik watershed. They spent forty thousand dollars, many tons of dynamite and six human lives in efforts to clear and straighten the channel (Bunting 86). During their ten years of operation, Tracey and Love built a total of 24 dams on the Wassataquoik and its tributaries, first on the lower reaches of the watershed and later in the headwaters. After ten years of heavy cutting and watershed engineering, they passed the axe to a pair of men from Patten by the names of Ayer and Rogers. The first step of this new operation was to dynamite all boulders bearing the inscribed names of lumbermen killed on the Wassataquoik (Bunting 1997). With this deed done, Ayer and Rogers continued to cut the forest hard for spruce timber and pulpwood until 1901 (Hakola 1981).

Although these operations were relatively short-lived, they had massive environmental impacts on the Wassataquoik Valley. Lumbermen clear-cut forest, dammed and channelized the watershed, built tote roads, cleared lands for agriculture, and introduced exotic species. An unknown photographer was present at the Ayer and Rogers camp in 1901 to take pictures of the logging operations, and perhaps unwittingly documented the environmental changes that had occurred in the area. Photographs from this year show mountainsides denuded of vegetation, logging slash protruding from deep snowfall, and remarkably small spruce logs being rolled into the stream (Bunting 1997). The visible impacts of deforestation are readily apparent in these images, but the more subtle ecological effects left little in the documentary record. The large-scale removal of old-growth forest must have decimated populations of forest interior species, and regrowth of early successional forests may have increased populations of species adapted to those habitats. The nearly complete loss of forest cover probably increased rates of erosion dramatically. Increased erosion and sediment discharge may have been sufficient to impact annual runs of anadromous fish when combined with the presence of multiple dams. Although this is purely speculative, it is not unreasonable to claim that logging operations disrupted many aspects of ecosystem function in the Wassataquoik Valley.

Soon after the departure of Ayer and Rogers, the environmental damage done by twenty years of exploitative logging reached a literal flashpoint. During the summer of 1903, a massive fire fueled by logging slash roared down through Pogy Notch to the north and burned most of the Wassataquoik Valley (Coolidge 1963; Hakola 1981). Although fire is an irregular but natural part of this ecosystem, this fire was quite different. Concentrations of woody debris left over from logging intensified the blaze, and led to temperatures so high that the organic content of the soil was completely destroyed in many places (Clark 1978). A century after the fire, the landscape still bears many signs of its violent passage. The most visible documents of the fire are scattered through the valley in the form of ancient stumps with thick layers of charred wood at their bases. Some of these stand head high and three feet across, and with their dull silver color they form a striking image amid the young forest. The fact that these stumps have survived for a full century in such a wet climate is probably a testament to the severity of the fire, which apparently heated the stumps enough to kill the decomposing organisms living within the wood (Wessels 1997). In areas where no



stumps are to be found, the story of the burn is told by vast expanses of early successional forest that regenerated after logging and the passage of the fire.

The only area of the Wassataquoik Valley that did not burn was its uppermost reaches, which lie in a deep gorge between the slopes of Katahdin and its neighbors to the north. Enough valuable lumber remained in this steep, rugged area that the Katahdin Pulp and Paper Company began operations there in 1901 in the hopes of getting it to market. After the 1903 fire destroyed their headquarters at City Camp and most of the logging infrastructure, the company attempted to turn a profit for one more year before abandoning the area in 1904. Some timber had still managed to survive the onslaught in the upper Wassataquoik valley and on mountaintops north of Katahdin, so a former company official named Draper returned to run a pulpwood operation in the park in 1910. As the closest existing camp to the forested area and one of the few that didn't burn in the 1903 fire, Russell Camp was renamed New City and became the headquarters of the operation (Clark 1978; Hakola 1981).

This era marked the peak of human activity at New City, and the settlement boasted a church, school and blacksmith shop during its four-year heyday. With New City as its headquarters and depot, the Draper operation constructed more dams on the Wassataquoik and its tributaries, as well as two enormous sluices to remove trees cut high on the slopes of Fort, Wassataquoik and Pogy Mountains (Hakola 1981). By the time that Draper had finished with the area, the landscape had been almost completely deforested and was consequently of little economic value. Loggers, family members, clergy, teacher and blacksmith abandoned the settlement at New City as quickly as they came. Logging operations dwindled into the early 1930's at nearby Russell Pond, but the departure of the Draper operation in 1914 marked the end of uncut forests in the Wassataquoik Valley (Clark 1978). The landscape of this remote, wild valley had been altered almost beyond recognition in the span of one human lifetime, and the implements and fields at New City remain as a symbol of the exploitative land use and market forces that drove these changes.

Despite their devastating environmental impacts, the early lumbering operations on the Wassataquoik were instrumental to the opening of the Katahdin region for recreation (Hakola 1981). In particular, the infrastructure of camps and roads developed by logging operations in the Wassataquoik Valley

was a major draw to visitors making the long and difficult journey to the mountain. As one of Maine's strongest promoters of outdoor recreation, the railroad industry published a book called In the Maine Woods to promote tourism in the area. Among the advertisements, photographs and tales of hunting exploits, the publication spent nearly a page casting the trip up the Wassataquoik to Katahdin in a particularly rosy light (Clifford 1905). Once off the train and into the forest, the rough buckboard trail built along the Wassataquoik to supply the Tracey and Love operation was a favorite route, and many summer travelers spent their nights in the deserted logging camps along the way (Waldo 1896). At least one early visitor saw logging as an excellent way to open up the mountain country for tourism and development (Hamlin 1881). In any case, the willingness of these early visitors to approach Katahdin through a logged and burned landscape that was "barren and desolate in the extreme" emphasizes the draw of the sublime mountain grandeur that many of them sought (Carpenter 1888).

Though relatively small in number, the early trickle of visitors to the Wassataquoik Valley and Katahdin was incredibly influential to the region's future. Artist Frederic Edwin Church used the Wassataquoik route during his 1877 expedition, and his paintings of Katahdin from that trip were unquestionably important to awareness of the region. A number of botanical and geological expeditions visited Katahdin during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and reported back on its unique natural qualities (Hakola 1981). Some of the most influential visitors were members of the Appalachian Mountain Club, who would often write and speak publicly about their visits to the area. These returning members generally published trip accounts in the club's journal *Appalachia*, and often provided practical information on guides, routes, and trail conditions for future visitors (Carpenter 1888; Waldo 1896; Witherle 1883, 1884). However, the flurry of articles and discourse about Katahdin had the additional effect of placing the region within the ken of conservation-minded individuals on a broader scale. By the 1920's, a group of very politically influential figures in the Northeast were debating about how to best conserve the Katahdin region. The story of conservation in the region is exceedingly complex, but the man who eventually persevered was former Maine legislator and governor Percival Proctor Baxter. After his political efforts to establish a park failed, Baxter reached his goal of a park in the Katahdin region through a singular act of generosity. Using his own

family fortune, he purchased over 200,000 acres of land for the park over a span of three decades and donated the entire parcel to the people of Maine (Hakola 1981).

Although Baxter cut his political teeth during the height of the progressive conservation era, his beliefs about conservation differed substantially from at least some of the prevailing notions of the time. Perhaps most importantly, Baxter did not seem to share the overriding faith in human endeavor and environmental dominance that characterized some progressive conservationists (Smythe 1969). Instead, Baxter famously argued that natural features were what endured: “Man is born to die. His works are short-lived. Buildings crumble, monuments decay, and wealth vanishes, but Katahdin in all its glory forever shall remain the mountain of the people of Maine.” In addition to this tacit recognition of human limitation, Baxter seems to have had little of the faith in government that characterized the New Deal era. In particular, he seems to have been very aware that government designation of land as a reserve or park did not guarantee its preservation in perpetuity. In his seminal work on Percival Baxter and his Park, John Hakola suggests that the controversy over Hetch Hetchy had a substantial impact on Baxter during his formative years in politics. Many years later when he donated the Park to the people of Maine, Baxter carefully wrote his ideas of wilderness into law with a very complex system of perpetual trusts. These were meant to ensure that the Park would be managed in accordance with his ‘forever wild’ principles and that it would never be threatened by any vested interests (Hakola 1981).

The way that this park is managed, even to this day, is writing Baxter’s definition of wilderness onto the landscape. At a very fundamental level, wilderness in Baxter State Park is about drawing people in, but restricting the technologies that they can bring with them and the marks that they can make on the land. At times, Baxter was quite specific about what he did not want in his park: “I seek to provide against commercial exploitation, against hunting, trapping, and killing, against lumbering, hotels, advertising, hot-dog stands, motor vehicles, horse-drawn vehicles and other vehicles, aircraft, and the trappings of unpleasant civilization...” (Baxter et al. 1972). By using such a laundry-list of exclusions, Baxter effectively laid out his vision of wilderness by defining its antithesis. It is important to note that the definitions of wilderness

commonly used by Baxter focused strongly on the present use of the land, and did not often dwell on the fact that the entire park had been intensively logged (Hakola 1981).

In the decades since Baxter State Park was presented to the people of Maine, it has attracted national attention in the discourse about wilderness. As one of the most passionate wilderness advocates of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas was a frequent visitor to the Wassataquoik Valley and the Katahdin region. In his extensive writings, Justice Douglas held up Baxter State Park as an example of what it meant to be wild: “No cutting of trees. No killing of animals or birds. No roads. This is the kind of wilderness for which men pray.” In the closing paragraphs of his book My Wilderness: East to Katahdin, Douglas singles out the Wassataquoik Valley as Maine’s last retreat, a place “where man can once more come to understanding terms with the earth of which he is only an infinitesimal part.” Although Douglas recognized that Baxter State Park was in the process of healing from the degradation that it had seen, he regarded its landscape as fully in possession of a wilderness character (Douglas 1961). Even when I am standing in the center of the New City fields, this is a truth that I am willing to accept.

The question, then, is how to come to grips with the widely disparate uses that have characterized human relationships with this place. The past is always close at hand in the Wassataquoik Valley, but it brings meaning to the present in a way that is relevant to wilderness areas everywhere. Although the story is rich with detail about human values and ways of interacting with the land, the lesson that emerges from it is surprisingly simple: wilderness and human history are not mutually exclusive. Recognizing the hand of humanity in our most cherished wilderness areas does not compromise their wild character, but rather leads to a fuller understanding of the wilderness story in all its nuanced complexity. The inscribed boulders and burned stumps never seemed out of place to me at all, but perhaps this is because the image of the rusty plow in the woods has been part of my wilderness experience since I was a young boy. Somewhere between the soft pucker of a rising trout and the flutter of mayfly wings, the conflict between past use and present wilderness simply falls away.

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