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History of Kittery Maine

Town of Kittery

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About Kittery

MAINE'S FIRST TOWN

Kittery has the distinction of being the oldest town in the State of Maine, incorporated in 1647 -- more than a century and a quarter before the birth of the United States

English settlers first made their home in this area in 1623. The town's name is derived from Kittery Court, the family home of early inhabitant Alexander Shapleigh in Kingswear, England. The earliest European settlers were hunters, trappers, workers of timber and men of the sea.

The area was previously known as the Piscataqua Plantations. For a time the southern part of Kittery was called Champernowne's, after Capt. Francis Champernowne, another

Address:

Town of Kittery

200 Rogers Rd

Kittery, ME 03904

United States

See map: Google Maps

local pioneer.

Before the arrival of Europeans this area was known to Native Americans as Amiciskeag, which in the Algonquin dialect translated roughly into "fishing point."

Kittery originally included what are now the towns of Eliot, Berwick, North Berwick and South Berwick. It was considered part of Massachusetts Bay Colony after 1652 and over time became a key center for trading and shipbuilding.

In the early years of Kittery's history there was relative peace between the settlers and the Wabanaki-affiliated natives already living here. This was followed by periods of brutal hostilities, starting with King Philip's War in 1675. Over the next century the nations of France, England and Native American tribes engaged in a series of armed conflicts for control of North America.

Several of the historic Isles of Shoals located six miles off the coast, including Appledore and Smuttynose Islands, are also part of Kittery. In past centuries the Isles were reportedly a stopover for pirates such as Blackbeard and Captain Kidd, and according to Seacoast lore lost treasure may still be hidden there.

Gen. William Whipple -- seaman, soldier, statesman and signer of the Declaration of Independence – was born in Kittery in 1730. Whipple grew up in the home that still stands near the back gate of Portsmouth Naval Shipyard. He went to sea as a boy and was

captain of his own ship by the age of 21. He later retired from the sea and relocated to Portsmouth, New Hampshire, to become a successful merchant. During the Revolution, Whipple was elected to the fabled Second Continental Congress and in this capacity signed the Declaration of Independence – the only Maine native to claim this distinction. He also served as a brigadier general of militia during the Battle of Saratoga and other campaigns.

Warships including the Ranger were built in Kittery for John Paul Jones, the Father of the American Navy, during the American Revolution.

Portsmouth Naval Shipyard, the nation's oldest continuously serving Navy yard, was established in Kittery in 1800. Commodore Isaac Hull, a national hero for his exploits as captain of "Old Ironsides" – the USS Constitution – was the shipyard's first military commander. And Old Ironsides herself was stationed in Kittery for several years.

The great Civil War hero Adm. David Farragut, of "Damn the torpedoes – full speed ahead" fame, died at the Shipyard in 1870.

The Shipyard produced Navy submarines at a record pace in the 1940s to help America win the Second World War. In 1963, the locally-built USS Thresher sank during sea trials more than 200 miles off the New England coast, costing the lives of 129 men including Shipyard civilian employees and military personnel. It remains the worst submarine disaster in history, but resulted in safety measures to prevent future tragedies. Today the Shipyard continues to overhaul and maintain nuclear submarines for the U.S. Navy and is one of the area's largest employers. For years the states of Maine and New Hampshire both claimed jurisdiction over the Navy facility, with the United States Supreme Court finally ruling in favor of Maine in 2001.

Kittery remains one of the state's most popular tourist attractions, renowned for its outlet stores and restaurants.

--- D. Allan Kerr

The Lady Pepperrell House, Kittery Point, Maine

Fort McClary, Kittery Point, Maine

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