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Kennebunk, Maine History

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Kennebunk, Maine
HISTORY
by
Joyce Butler, Town Historian
1996

*The name **Kennebunk** means "long cut bank," probably in reference to Great Hill at the mouth of the Mousam River, which would have been an important landmark to native Americans coming along the coast in their ocean-going canoes.*¹

The first Europeans to visit the shores of southern Maine probably were sixteenth-century fishermen. Although it is well known that these fishing parties put ashore along the coast of Maine, whether any landed on Kennebunk's beaches is not part of the present historical record. At that time the native population followed a pattern of seasonal migration, living near the coast during the warmer months of the year, moving inland during the colder months. The presence of native Americans in Kennebunk was even then an ancient tradition. Because of recent archaeological excavations it is known that 11,000 years ago PaleoIndian hunters traveled seasonally to the Kennebunk Plains from throughout the Northeast to trap and kill bison and caribou.

The early seventeenth century brought a period of English and French exploration. In 1602 Bartholomew Gosnold, seeking a northern route to what would become the English settlement of Jamestown, Virginia, made landfall on the coast of Maine². In 1603 Martin Pring, utilizing the services of the same pilot who had guided Gosnold, made his own voyage. Pring explored a short distance up the Kennebunk River, finding no natives but signs of fires where they had been. In 1604 Samuel de Champlain explored the coast of Maine and visited Cape Porpoise harbor, naming it "Le Port aux Isles" (Island Harbor). Cape Porpoise is clearly marked on the 1610 Simancus Map which is thought to have been prepared by Robert Tyndall, a surveyor employed by London's Virginia Company, who was sent over for the express purpose of mapping the coastline of the new world.

The first permanent settlement by Europeans in the Kennebunks probably occurred in the 1620s, and was along the coast and the shores of the Kennebunk and Mousam Rivers. By the 1640s coastal as well as inland farm grants were being made to settlers in Kennebunk, which was then a part of Wells.

By 1690 Indian uprisings and depredations had driven most settlers temporarily out of Kennebunk, as well as most of southern Maine. The struggle with native Americans continued until 1760. During the Indian wars, settlement was retarded, but not stopped. By 1750 centers had been established on the Mousam River at the site of the Larrabee family's garrison and at Mousam Village (today's village), and on the Kennebunk River at Kennebunk Landing and Lower Village. The demand for farmland was leading to the development of the Alewife Pond farming community, as well as at the Plains and inland on the Mousam River. Until the turn of the eighteenth century these settlements were commonly referred to as "the Kennebunk grants." "I have been over to the Kennebunk grants" was a common expression of those who visited this section of Wells.

Typically, the building of sawmills on the waterways of Kennebunk was an early manifestation of settlement. In 1669 a sawmill was built on the Mousam River in the present village area. Kennebunk's first Kennebunk River sawmill was built in 1681. In 1683 a sawmill was built on Little River (the ocean outlet of Branch Brook). When the first sawmill was built on Alewife Brook is not known, but this interior section of Kennebunk is thought to have been at least "temporarily occupied by white men several years" before the beginning of our written history (C. 1620-30)³. These early mills, like the houses of the settlers, were destroyed during the Indian wars or were swept away by recurrent freshets. They were rebuilt, and additional mills were built on Kennebunk's major waterways, for the harvesting of local timber was an important economic enterprise during the early years of settlement. Small coasting vessels came up the Mousam and Kennebunk Rivers for lumber processed at these mills.

The harvesting of local timber, which was abundant, gave rise to another industry: shipbuilding. It is not known when shipyards were established on the Mousam River, but perhaps as early as 1730 when John Butland, the first known builder on the Mousam, was an experienced shipbuilder in the prime of life.

Kennebunk's coasting trade was relocated from the Mousam to the Kennebunk River by 1755 because of the difficulty of navigating the circuitous, barred mouth of the Mousam, but the building of wooden sailing vessels continued. The last vessel was raised on the Mousam in 1793 when efforts to reroute the mouth of the river failed.

Shipbuilding on the more navigable Kennebunk River began in 1755 when a schooner was launched at John Mitchell's wharf near the river's mouth (site of today's Franciscan monastery). By the 1760s vessels were being built at Kennebunk Landing. In 1790, the Mousam River-builder Tobias Lord moved his shipyard operation to The Landing, recognizing it as a superior building site. From 1790, when the merchants and mariners of Kennebunk petitioned for and were granted their own customs district, until about 1860 numerous shipyards flourished at The Landing. The yards provided work for a community of builders and artisans as well as economic vitality for Kennebunk that is still visible in the Summer Street houses of the merchants and shipmasters who commissioned and sailed the ships.

Shipbuilding did not end in Kennebunk until 1918. It was the need for merchant vessels of large tonnage that brought shipbuilding to an end at The Landing. Even with the aid of a river lock to dam a sufficient flow of water it became too difficult to bring the large vessels down river from The Landing to the ocean. By the 1850s enterprising yard owners like Nathaniel Lord Thompson had moved their shipbuilding operations to Lower Village. There Kennebunk shipbuilding continued until Kennebunk's last large sailing vessel, the fittingly named Kennebunk, was launched in Charles Ward's shipyard in 1918.

Following the Revolutionary War, which ended in 1783, Kennebunk's flourishing shipbuilding industry and the allied shipping opportunities pursued by local owners of Kennebunk-built vessels made Kennebunk the Town of Wells's commercial center. In 1750, after almost a decade of petitions to the town fathers, the people of the rapidly expanding Kennebunk District of Wells had achieved their goal of being designated as the town's Second Parish with their own church and minister. By 1799 Kennebunk's leading men believed their district was capable of taking the next step--becoming a town in its own right. Their struggle to achieve that separation came to fruition in 1820, the same year the District of Maine achieved its separation from Massachusetts. On May 1st the Town of Wells voted in favor of division. On June 24 the governor of the new State of Maine signed the act that created the Town of Kennebunk.

By 1835 Kennebunk had four distinct centers: Mousam Village on the turnpike (Route 1), where local entrepreneurs had built a cotton mill; the Kennebunk Landing village, which had grown up around the shipbuilding industry; Lower Village at the mouth of the Kennebunk River, where the wharves used by vessels once involved in the West Indies trade and now by coasting vessels were located; and the Plains-Alewife farming district. Following the opening of the Portsmouth, Saco, and Portland Railroad in 1842, which provided marketing opportunities to local farmers, the village at West Kennebunk, where the railroad depot was located, began its development, becoming a center for Kennebunk's farming communities.

Kennebunk has almost a two hundred year-history as a manufacturing town. As early as 1825 the water power of the Mousam River, which had influenced early settlement significantly, was recognized by a new generation of local men as a valuable economic resource. In 1825 a corporation called the Kennebunk Manufacturing Company erected two dams on the Mousam River in preparation for building a cotton mill. This unsuccessful enterprise was followed in 1832 by the Mousam Manufacturing Company, which succeeded in building a cotton factory. These early cotton factories were followed by others producing thread and twine, as well as manufacturers of doors, sashes, and blinds; shoe laces; shoes and shoe counters; felt boots; leatheroid (simulated leather) lunch boxes, trunks, etc.; matting; and fiber board.

During the 1860s and 70s Kennebunk benefited from a regional economic trend, the rise in tourism. Urban dwellers, looking for seasonal escape from the cities, discovered the Kennebunks. The development of the Boston and Maine Railroad system, which took over the PSP Railroad and ran a branch line into Kennebunk Village in 1872 (and another from the village to the beaches in 1883), facilitated the influx of vacationers to Kennebunk and Kennebunkport. They came to enjoy the beaches, rivers, and small town life. Boarding houses opened and hotels were built to accommodate them. At the height of the Kennebunks's popularity as a "watering place" there were over forty hotels and inns in the two towns. Many visitors, charmed by the area, chose to return to cottages they built on lots sold to them by the Kennebunkport Sea

Shore Company.

The nature of tourism in Kennebunk gradually changed with the arrival of the automobile. "Touring" and today's "day tripping" led to the disappearance of the many large wooden hotels that lined Kennebunk's beaches. Tourist cabins followed and have now been replaced with motels and bed and breakfast inns. During the latter decades of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century Kennebunk's population centers changed. Electricity and water and sewer lines were introduced. From 1899 to 1927 Kennebunk was on the Atlantic Shore Line Railway, a trolley line that connected many points in York County. Agriculture remained a strong element of life in Kennebunk for most of the first half of this century, as did fishing in Lower Village. Following World War II the Maine Turnpike opened (1947). This brought further change to Kennebunk, contributing to a shifting of its small industries from the downtown village to outer Fletcher Street and Route 1. The eventual decline in the railroad and passenger service reflected a continuing trend to automobile travel.

Although Kennebunk's traditional population centers still obtain, their houses and landscape serving as strong reminders of the history of the town, the 1970s and 1980s brought significant changes in housing types and development patterns. The town's population is no longer concentrated in and around its village centers, but has spread along roadways to all corners of the community. Kennebunk now has its share of condominiums (some in one of the old hotels), large-lot single family housing developments, and has seen the adaptation of residences to commercial use, particularly on Main Street and in Lower Village. The increasing year-round population and healthy growth of tourism has fueled new commercial and residential development. While manufacturing as it once existed has declined, a revitalization of Kennebunk's Main Street village has brought adaptive use to its surviving factory building (Kesslen Shoe, now called the Lafayette Center). A bank, offices, and retail stores have kept that building vital.

One of the heartening developments of the last decade (1985-1995) has been a renewed appreciation of Kennebunk's history. The designation in 1974 of a historic district, which runs from Main Street to Kennebunk Landing's village, pointed the way to an appreciation of the architectural riches of the town. Kennebunk's state-mandated Comprehensive Plan, which was adopted in 1991, strongly reflects the importance of preserving the small-town ambience of its village centers and the open vistas of its once agricultural landscape. New homeowners and businesses prize their property's history. Because of this awareness Kennebunk is a town with not only a rich past, but a promising future. It represents small-town America at its finest. Many would say that the State of Maine's advertising slogan--"Life, the way it should be"--applies to Kennebunk.

¹Fannie Hardy Eckstorm, *Indian Place Names of The Penobscot Valley and The Maine Coast* (Orono: University of Maine Press, 1978), p. 174.

²Kennebunkport historian Charles Bradbury believed Gosnold visited either Cape Porpoise or "some other point of land in the neighborhood of Wells Bay."

³Daniel Remich, *History of Kennebunk* (Kennebunk: Privately Printed, 1911), p. 46.