

# SETTLING THE MAINE WILDERNESS



Moses Greenleaf,

His Maps, and His Household of Faith, 1777-1834

Osher Map Library & Smith Center for Cartographic Education

[www.usm.maine.edu/maps/home.html](http://www.usm.maine.edu/maps/home.html)

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## **Introduction to Moses Greenleaf Maine's First Mapmaker**

In the years following the American Revolution, which was from 1775-1783, many people moved to the region that is now Maine. In fact, between the years 1790 and 1810, the population of Maine nearly doubled! One of the people who came to Maine during this time was a young boy named Moses Greenleaf, who would grow up to be the first cartographer (mapmaker) of the State of Maine.

Most people in early America were farmers, although some made a living in the growing cities. Shipbuilding, storekeeping, and carriage-making were profitable businesses in the cities. Many of the new settlers of Maine, including the Greenleafs, came from southern New England, particularly Massachusetts and Connecticut. The populations there had been growing rapidly and people were looking for more land for farming and for harvesting natural resources such as timber.

While many people were happy with the growing cities and prospering businesses of southern New England, others longed for a simpler way of life. The District of Maine, which was then part of Massachusetts, had large towns along the coast, but much of the interior was open and available for settlement. Land was inexpensive and plentiful, and Moses

Greenleaf's father was eager to move his family to a more rural environment.

In 1790, the Greenleafs left their home in Newburyport, Massachusetts, and moved to Peacock Hill, in New Gloucester, Maine. Captain Moses Greenleaf, father of the mapmaker, was determined to spend his "evenings by the fire and his days close to the soil." He was worried that wealth was becoming too important to many people in Newburyport, so he gave up his business to become a farmer and a country gentleman.

Moses the mapmaker was thirteen when the family moved to New Gloucester. The oldest of five children, he had spent his early years in Newburyport, a town booming with activity and widening interests. He learned draftsmanship and naval architecture from his father, and was a strong student, particularly in mathematics. He was an avid reader with an excellent memory and excellent penmanship. Although his formal education was not extensive, he had a solid background in the basic skills and a strong interest in everything around him.

Moses grew into an easy-going, likable young man with a quick mind and strong writing and speaking skills. When he turned twenty-one, he opened a store in New Gloucester, selling "razors, files, penknives, beef shad, tobacco by the pound, cider by the barrel, rum by the gill, blank books, gum paper, twine – in short, everything from tea to the pot in which to brew it."

Moses kept store for the next seven years, in several Maine towns. He taught school for awhile, but his greatest interest was in land, especially the land to the north, "where a man might own part of a township and live as an independent gentleman." His consuming interest in the land north of the Piscataquis River, along with the debt that came from his kindheartedness, ended his storekeeping career, and led him to a life promoting the sale of land in Maine.

In 1805 Moses married Persis Poor of Bangor, and shortly thereafter took a job as land agent for William Dodd, owner of a large tract of land in Maine. As land agent, Greenleaf agreed to settle and develop a new town near the Sebec River. The town was named Williamsburg, after William Dodd, and Moses and Persis moved there with their children on December 30 of 1810.

Moses Greenleaf had a vision for the kind of town he wished Williamsburg to become, and he spent the rest of his life working toward that vision. In 1814 he built a new home on Greenleaf Hill, and continued to encourage other members of his family to join him in Williamsburg. He established a town government, built a church and a school, and started

community organizations in an attempt to convince other people to move to the new town. He promoted the use of the area's natural resources, notably slate and iron, to create jobs for the people living in Williamsburg. He built roads and brought railroads to the area, so that people could move themselves and their products around. Eventually, stagecoach and mail service came to Williamsburg, signs of a successful settlement.

Moses became a distinguished member of the Williamsburg community, and he served as a Court Justice for several years. In his effort to encourage settlement in Maine, he worked to gather information about the interior sections of Maine. He took trips to survey and map the unsettled land, and collected geographical information about lakes, rivers, mountains, resources, and climate. Greenleaf then published books and maps describing the land and encouraging people to move there.

In 1815 Moses Greenleaf's first map of the District of Maine was printed. Although other maps of the area existed, Moses' maps were important because they showed geographical features, distances, and other aspects of the Maine landscape that had not been widely known before his maps were published. Moses continually updated his maps and produced the first map of Maine when it became a state in 1820, making him Maine's first cartographer. After publishing two books and several maps, Moses Greenleaf died in 1834. A monument to him was erected in 1947 to acknowledge his contributions to the settlement of Maine.

After Moses died, his son Moses Jr. helped to promote and publish more of Moses' detailed maps and information. Moses' maps helped encourage settlement throughout Maine, but his own town of Williamsburg reverted to a township when its population declined after mass migration to the mid-western states following the Civil War. Even so, Moses Greenleaf's foresight in helping to make people aware of the geography and resources of Maine was so important that he deserves to be remembered as one of principal founders of the State of Maine.