

SETTLING THE MAINE WILDERNESS



Moses Greenleaf, Maine's First Mapmaker

The Times

Change and Growth

In the years following the American Revolution, the rapidly growing United States faced many challenges. By 1800, the population of the U.S. was approximately five million people, and nearly one-fifth of those were Negro slaves. Slavery had been a significant part of the economy of the South because it had supported the livelihood of the people who had settled there since the early 1600s. Although Northerners owned slaves, they were employed as a means of luxury; wealthy people used slaves to help with simple chores like cooking, cleaning, and farm animal care. In the South, slaves were an important part of the working economy because many Southerners owned large plantations that required an abundance of manual labor. These differences between the North and South were already apparent early in our nation's history and would eventually lead to a Civil War.

In 1801, when Thomas Jefferson became the third president, America included thirteen states, all close to the Atlantic seaboard. Although two thirds of the population lived within fifty miles of the coast, settlement was beginning to expand westward and inland. In 1803, Jefferson engineered the Louisiana Purchase, which doubled the size of the United States. These western territories were largely unknown, so Jefferson sent Meriwether

Lewis and William Clark to explore the land that had been purchased for less than three cents per acre.

As curiosity about the West grew stronger, interest in the District of Maine and other inland areas of New England was also growing. Native Americans were no longer a significant threat in the East, which made it easier for white settlers to occupy the previous wild lands of Maine. When the United States won its independence in 1783, an enthusiastic group of citizens were ready for self-government and the undeveloped lands of America were ripe for growth and settlement. In Massachusetts, a Committee of Lands was established and supported by the state government, to encourage people to move to the District of Maine. The fertile land, forests, and ocean frontage in Maine appealed to many homesteaders, and the population grew from 24,000 to 229,000 in less than fifty years. In 1800, there were 150,000 people living in the District of Maine, which was then still part of the state of Massachusetts. Settlements followed the coast as far north as Machias, and coastal villages had churches, shops, taverns, and large houses. Coastal towns like Kittery, York, and Portland had strong trade connections to Boston, although inland settlements were less inclined to want connections with Massachusetts. Many Mainers were beginning to resent government rule by those living far away in Massachusetts and questioned whether separation and statehood might be preferable to being a “colony within a colony.”

Daily Life

Life was challenging for the Maine settlers. Transportation was difficult; roads were scarce, often little more than rough trails. In coastal villages, people traveled by horseback and by horse-drawn vehicles. The lack of roads in the sparsely settled regions necessitated traveling by foot. Waterways provided the easiest means of getting around, but few offered access to the inland areas.

In 1800, most Americans lived on small farms. Like their New England neighbors, the Maine settlers raised cattle, chickens and hogs, and grew fruits, vegetables, and wheat for their own use. They harvested corn and hay for their livestock. Fishing, hunting, and picking wild fruits and nuts supplemented what they grew or raised, and settlers sold or traded their surplus to get basic necessities like sugar, coffee, molasses, tea, and salt. They worked hard and long, with few machines to help. On the positive side, the tasks were varied and creative. Journals from the early 1800s tell of days

spent collecting and boiling maple sap, making soap, digging out a spring, or cutting wood for snowshoes or tool handles.

Homesteading men cleared land, built houses and other buildings, tended livestock, plowed and planted fields, and handled most of the family's business. Large work projects were often shared by an entire community. Neighbors got together to cut wood, dig wells, build barns, and harvest crops. Women often worked collaboratively on their chores, sewing quilts, making soap, or preserving food with their neighbors. These activities were important social occasions, often with food, music, and dancing. Sometimes tasks were turned into friendly competitions, such as races to husk piles of corn.

Homesteading women spent much of their time preparing and preserving food. Because there was no modern refrigeration, meat had to be canned, smoked, pickled, or salted. Butter had to be churned and bread had to be baked. Crops were harvested and cooked for immediate consumption or dried for later use. The absence of running water added many hours to the preparation and cleanup of a simple meal, and keeping cookfires burning was a never-ending job.

Women were also responsible for keeping their families clothed. Wealthy people hired tailors to make their clothing, but most early settlers wore homemade clothes. Women made cloth and fashioned it into simple garments. Working class people owned one set of everyday clothing and another set for "best." Shoes were usually made by a cobbler, and until the early 1800s, shoes for the right foot and the left foot were identical! Children rarely wore footwear during good weather, and shoes, like other garments, were often shared between siblings.

Medical care in 1800 was limited, especially in remote areas. Many people died early, because doctors and medical supplies were scarce. Typhoid, scarlet fever, diphtheria, and consumption were common, and the average life expectancy in 1800 was barely 40 years. Sick or injured people were cared for at home, giving the women even more to do.

The average family in 1800 had six or seven children, and the children were expected to help with the work. From an early age, they carried wood and water, helped tend animals, worked in the gardens, picked berries, and did whatever was needed to support the family. Because children in rural areas were needed for farm work, most did not attend school regularly. They were often taught at home, but when more families moved to an area, a schoolhouse would be built by the town settlers. Schoolhouses were one room buildings, with one teacher for students who ranged from five to twenty years old. The scholars studied reading, writing, and arithmetic, all

considered essential for being a successful and productive citizen. Basic values such as courage, honesty, and generosity were also stressed.

Despite the difficulties of life in the early 1800s, settlers made time for amusement. They visited friends and neighbors, played card games and board games, and read books and magazines. In the winter they went sledding and skating. Children played with homemade dolls, sleds, wagons, and slingshots. They whittled, and swam, and gathered nuts and berries. Community events were eagerly anticipated, and many towns had a multi-use building that served as church, school, town office, and even theater. Unlike today, people knew all of their neighbors, and often lived close to their relatives.

Early Mainers who were not farmers were likely to be craftsmen. They were responsible for making and maintaining all of the objects needed for everyday life, and the economy of the country depended on their ability to make the tools that would enable people to tame the land and build a nation.

The largest and wealthiest towns had many small shops and specialized craftsmen, as well as larger manufacturing industries. Shipbuilding was important in coastal Maine towns, and many different craftsmen were involved in building a vessel. Even simple boats required carpentry, sailmaking, and iron crafting.

Carpenters performed a wide range of services in early Maine communities, everything from felling trees to making fine furniture. In the large towns, they might specialize in house framing, carving, coffinmaking, cabinetmaking, wagonmaking, coopering (barrelmaking), or picture framing. In the inland communities, most settlers had basic carpentry skills, and collaborated on projects such as barn building or erecting a public building or church.

General stores were the most common retail stores at the beginning of the 19th century. It was rare to find a specialty shop outside of a large city. The general storekeeper stocked everything from tools and nails to molasses and linen. Beeswax, gunpowder, coffee, and leather shared shelves with fresh eggs and shoes. Candles, whale oil, window glass, medicine, and pork preserved with salt could all be obtained from the general store. Storekeeping wasn't always profitable, as people had little cash and often bought on credit. Bartering (trading) goods was as common as cash transactions. In many Maine communities the general store housed the post office.

By 1800 there were numerous sawmills and gristmills in Maine powered by the flowing water of rivers or even by tidal action. Farmers

hauled their wheat or corn to the mills, and gave the miller cash or goods to grind their grains between large millstones. Inland settlers who did not live near a mill site were often forced to use hand grinders to produce flour and cornmeal, since roads were limited and traveling long distances was difficult.