

II. Bangor, Maine

When Nathan Cohen arrived in Bangor in 1882 the city was a flourishing metropolis with nearly 25,000 residents. Justifiably proud of its colorful past and looking forward to every kind of expansion in the future, the city fathers and residents alike must have approved of this description of Bangor published a few years later:

The city is noted for its fine residences and beautifully shaded streets, which indeed, together with its location, extent of business interests and commercial advantages, have given it the merited appellation of "Queen City of the East." The climate is cool and delightful during the summer months, and the fogs which are so prevalent at certain seasons in localities nearer the coast are here almost entirely unknown. There are many pleasant drives in the vicinity, and numerous lake and mountain resorts within a few miles of the city, provided with suitable accommodations for excursions and picnic parties. The regular lines of steamers and the numbers of excursion boats which ply the waters of the river and bay during the season render every point of interest along the coast available and easy of access, and furnish residents and visitors every facility for enjoying the refreshing breezes and charming scenery for which the picturesque Penobscot is famous. All these and other inherent attractions - its natural scenery, healthfulness, perfect drainage, pure water, and the culture and social nature of its citizens - combined with its central location as point of departure for all noted health, pleasure and fishing resorts of eastern and northern Maine and New Brunswick, render the Queen City one of the most desirable places of sojourn, either for the permanent resident or the summer tourist.¹

Bangor's history began in 1604 when French explorer Samuel de Champlain piloted his sixteen ton vessel up the Penobscot and anchored at the intersection of the river called "Kenduskeag" by the Tarratine Indians. Champlain established friendly relations with the local chief which led to the establishment of trading posts along the river through which the Tarratines sold their furs. Although the French were driven out by the British in 1759, it wasn't until 1765 that the first permanent settlement on the Penobscot was established at what is now known as Bucksport. Other settlements gradually appeared along the river, including one which was established in 1769 at the foot of what was to become Newbury Street in Bangor. This was called Kenduskeag Plantation.

Kenduskeag was a typical remote pioneer community with a few residents who subsisted through fishing and hunting. Ten years after its settlement, the hamlet was the scene of what may have been the northernmost naval battle of the Revolutionary War. In June of 1779 three British ships carrying 650 soldiers arrived at the mouth of the Penobscot River where they erected a fort. Several weeks later a Revolutionary fleet sailed from Massachusetts to challenge the British. The ensuing confrontation sent the Americans retreating up the Penobscot to Kenduskeag where they set fire to their ships to avoid capture. Ten

vessels carrying 154 guns were lost and the British succeeded in retaining control of the area until the close of the war.

The settlement's growth resumed after the war; by 1790 the population had increased to 150 and the inhabitants petitioned the Massachusetts legislature for a town charter:

We labor under many disadvantages for want of being incorporated with town privileges, therefore humbly pray your honors would be pleased to take our difficult circumstances into your wise consideration, and incorporate it into a town by the name of Bangor. We have no Justice of the Peace for thirty miles this side of the River - no Grand Jury, and some people not of the best morals. Your honors know what the consequence must be. We doubt not but what you will grant us our request, and your petitioners, as in duty bound, shall ever pray.²

The petition, which was granted February 28, 1791, had an immediate effect upon the town. Shipbuilding commenced and the fishing industry increased with large shipments of salmon, bass, shad and sturgeon going to the South and West Indies. By the beginning of the new century more settlers had arrived from Massachusetts and the population had grown to almost three hundred people. Once again, war threatened Bangor when the British initiated an embargo on exports from the town and other settlements on the Penobscot. This was circumvented by privateering and the running of contraband, but in September, 1814 the British sailed up the river and forced the unconditional surrender of the town. Ten vessels were burned and many homes and businesses were destroyed in the invasion.

After the War of 1812, Bangor began to develop in importance as a commercial and population center. A steamship line was established in 1830 making weekly trips to Boston; this contributed to the development of the area, which was in the beginning stages of the lumber boom.³ When the population trebled to over 8,000 people, Bangor applied to the State Legislature for a city charter, which was granted in 1834. The following year \$250,000 worth of shares of the Bangor and Piscataquis Canal & Railroad Co. were purchased by local business men to launch the first local rail line. This line, which hauled lumber between Old Town and Bangor, became the second steam railroad to be constructed in the United States.

Bangor's prosperity was founded on the export of lumber, a trade that was established in 1771 when a pioneer firm shipped logs and other forms of timber from the area to Castine. Prior to 1816 relatively modest amounts of lumber had been harvested in the central Penobscot Valley, but by 1832, when nearly 38 million feet of sawed lumber were surveyed, the town's fame began to spread. Its reputation as the "greatest lumber market in the world" was solidified over the next twenty years when 2.5 billion board feet of long lumber passed through the city. Bangor reached its zenith as a lumber center in the 1850's when pine logs were shipped down the Penobscot in record amounts. Nearly three thousand men and two thousand horses were employed in cutting and hauling the logs which supplied the Bangor market where another fifteen hundred men were employed in the saw mills. Fueled by a growing

demand for telegraph poles, railroad ties and posts, more than 246 million board feet of lumber were surveyed in 1872 - an output that placed Bangor second only to Chicago in its shipments of wood.

From the beginning of the boom years gamblers and adventurers arrived in Bangor from the corners of the globe as land, which sold for a few cents in the morning, was resold - sight unseen - for as many dollars later in the day. In 1835 the *Baltimore Niles Register* reported, "It is rumored that one evening last week two paupers escaped from the Bangor almshouse, and though they were caught early the next morning, yet in the meantime, before they were secured, they had made \$1800 each by speculating in timberlands."⁴ Speculative fever collapsed when people began to look at the lands they had purchased; then the days of dishonest surveyors' reports and swindling were over.

Bangor's character during this period took on a freewheeling appearance:

For approximately fifty years in the middle of the nineteenth century, a section of the city which compared with San Francisco's Barbary Coast in its palmy days flourished in the vicinity of Washington, Hancock, and Exchange Streets. This part of Bangor was known as the "Devil's Half-Acre." Here were the taverns and grogshops, the lodging houses and brothels, which catered to the teeming life of the busy seaport. In the spring, when hundreds of lumbermen and rivermen thronged into Bangor fresh from the log drives with a winter's wages and the accumulation of a winter's thirsts and hungers, the population of the Half-Acre swelled. After months of hard and dangerous labor, the men of the North Woods were ready for relaxation; and there was nothing half-hearted in the way they went about it.⁵

Although lumber-related industries dominated the city's commercial activity, Bangor's location on the Penobscot, which was the third largest river flowing into the Atlantic, was valuable in other capacities. As a shipping channel it allowed the city to serve the surrounding countryside which numbered over 100,000 people. In 1882 over two thousand ships arrived at the port containing huge cargoes of corn, salt, coal, iron ore, kerosene and lime. Over 14 million bricks were shipped down the river and seven or eight firms involved in the quarry of granite and marble moved their product by barge. The harvest of ice from the river also became a complementary industry to the lumber trade. The planing mills provided all the sawdust necessary for the storage of ice; consequently, permanent ice houses were erected in Bangor with a capacity of 235,000 tons and the largest ships of the times could load ice from any number of houses for export down the eastern seaboard. Over three hundred firms were involved in the manufacture of nearly a hundred different products - much of which was exported - including shoes, clothing, bricks, canoes, boats and carriages. Iron and machine works produced boilers, tools and stoves and cooperages produced half a million barrels annually to supply the fishing and produce industries. Shipbuilding also became a prominent industry with the rise of the lumber trade when vessels built and owned by Bangor people carried local lumber to ports all over the world. Even before the lumber boom, many vessels were launched beginning with the *Red Bridge* in 1791 and the *Thinks-I-to-Myself* which was captured by the British in the

War of 1812. The Bangor-built *Gold Hunter* was the first ship to carry prospectors around the Horn to California on the way to the gold rush of 1849.

Economic expansion did not occupy the thoughts of its citizenry to the exclusion of all other matters. The Anti-Slavery Society, formed in 1837, positioned Bangor as a leading northern city in the abolitionist movement and it became a well known stopping place of the underground railroad. When the Civil War erupted, Maine's own Hannibal Hamlin was serving as Vice President to Lincoln and about one-fifth of the male population of Bangor, or nearly three thousand men, enlisted and served in the Union cause.

By the last decades of the century the city prospered to the extent that its citizens owned approximately one-fifth of the entire state, including over four million acres of forest lands. Bangor's total assessed valuation for the year 1886-7 exceeded \$10 million, which did not include the holdings of its citizens outside the city limits. There were two telegraph companies in the city handling over a thousand telegrams daily. Ten operators, two delivery clerks, five messengers, two line men, and two operators at the railroad station were required to handle the demand. Separately, the telephone company transacted one thousand calls a day for its subscribers.

Unfortunately, the very circumstances that had propelled Bangor to the forefront of a commodity boom were soon turned against her. In the early 1880's the city's promoters mistakenly believed that "the supply of timber, though continually being cut, is growing up more rapidly than it can be removed, and it must be many generations, and even centuries yet, before it can fail;"⁶ nevertheless, Maine's great white pine was rapidly becoming a diminishing resource. An industry analysis from the 1950's noted that "possibly only 10 percent of Maine's white pines were actually marketed; the rest were wasted in cutting, sawing, driving and sorting."⁷ Though outside capital continued to be invested in the state's forestry business and large quantities of wood continued to be processed, only about 25 percent of that cut was long lumber (boards, planks and timber). The balance went to satisfy the growing demand for paper, and with that the number of logs floating down the Penobscot declined drastically. Moreover, the railroad became the most efficient method for transporting the wood that was available for harvest, making the Penobscot waterway obsolete. The rail lines from the north woods bypassed Bangor with the consequence that by 1915 only 42 million board feet of timber were shipped through the city.

Though the glory of the timber days was over and the economic and population growth of the city slowed, Bangor continued to thrive as a commercial and small manufacturing center. During the ten year interval between the arrival of Nathan Cohen and his brother, Samuel M., the city's land valuation increased nearly \$2.5 million. During the next twelve years the value of the city's property increased another \$5 million, to over \$16 million. Despite the collapse of lumber trading, Bangor's future seemed secure.

Notes

1. *Bangor and Vicinity Illustrated*, pp.63, 65.
2. From the petition for the granting of a charter to Bangor, *History of Penobscot County*, p.540. Some sources identify the original settlement name as Condeskeag, and others, including the authoritative W.P.A. American Guide Series, as Kenduskeag Plantation. The A.G.S. states that the settlement was known as Kenduskeag Plantation until 1787 and as Sunbury from 1787 to 1791, when it was renamed Bangor.
3. The first ship to operate on this run, a wooden sidewheeler, was appropriately called *Bangor*. This was replaced in 1845 by another ship of the same name, but with an iron propeller. This was the first iron steamboat to be constructed in the United States. After retiring from the Bangor to Boston run, the original *Bangor* transported pilgrims from Alexandria to Mecca and then served as the royal yacht of the Sultan of Turkey.
4. *Baltimore Niles Register in Maine: A Guide Downeast*, p.132.
5. *Maine: A Guide Downeast*, p.131.
6. *Leading Business Men*, p.34
7. *Modern Maine*, Vol.1, pp.497, 503.