A History of Maine

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Introduction

To understand Maine, one must first understand its magnificent and often unforgiving geography. It is a land of paradoxes, a place where the North American continent

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makes its most dramatic and serrated meeting with the Atlantic Ocean. Its coastline, when measured directly from Kittery to Eastport, spans a mere 228 miles. Yet, to follow its every nook, cranny, inlet, and bay—to trace the shoreline of its 3,000-plus islands—is to embark on a journey of nearly 3,500 miles. This jagged edge has defined Maine's character, fostering a maritime tradition that has shaped its economy, its culture, and the very soul of its people for centuries.

Venture inland from this crenelated coast, and the landscape transforms into a vast, rolling tapestry of forest. This is the North Woods, a seemingly endless sea of pine, spruce, and fir that blankets more than seventeen million acres, making Maine the most heavily forested state in the nation. This immense woodland, punctuated by thousands of lakes and threaded with rivers, has been both a source of immense wealth and a symbol of wild, untamed nature. It has been logged, dammed, and managed, yet it retains an aura of primordial wilderness, a testament to the enduring power of the natural world.

Between the wild coast and the deep woods lies a network of communities, from the bustling urban center of Portland to the quiet mill towns and agricultural hubs that dot the river valleys. Here, the story of Maine is written in the brick facades of former textile factories, in the white steeples of village churches, and in the enduring rhythm of life tied to the changing seasons. It is a human landscape carved out of a formidable natural one, a place where self-reliance is not a romantic notion but a practical necessity, and where a deep sense of place is forged in the shared experience of long winters and glorious, fleeting summers.

The very name of this place, "Maine," is itself a small piece of the historical puzzle, its origins not entirely certain. One popular theory, formally recognized by the state legislature in 2001, suggests it was named for the French province of Maine. This idea connects the state to Henrietta Maria, the French-born queen of England's King Charles I, although her direct link to the French province is historically tenuous. Another, more practical explanation points to the language of sailors and early explorers. For those navigating the complex coastline, "the main" or "mainland" was a crucial distinction from the bewildering archipelago of islands.

The first known official use of the name appears in a 1622 land charter granted to two English adventurers, Sir Ferdinando Gorges and Captain John Mason. They received a vast tract of land between the Merrimack and Kennebec rivers, which they intended to call the "Province of Maine." A subsequent royal charter in 1639, granted to Gorges alone, solidified the name, declaring that the territory "shall forever hereafter, be called and named the PROVINCE OR COUNTIE OF MAINE, and not by any other name or names whatsoever..." Whether inspired by a French province, a nautical term, or perhaps even an English village from Gorges' ancestral past, the name stuck, a simple, one-syllable declaration for a place of immense complexity.

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This book traces the long and winding history of that place, a story that begins long before any European charters were drawn. It is a narrative that starts in the Dawnland, the ancestral home of the Wabanaki peoples, who have inhabited this region for thousands of years. Their story forms the essential bedrock of Maine's history, a deep and resilient cultural foundation that predates and has profoundly interacted with every subsequent chapter of the state's development. We will explore their world, their societies, and the cataclysmic changes wrought by the arrival of European fishermen, traders, and settlers.

The arrival of the French and English in the 17th century marked the beginning of a new and often violent era. As we will see in the early chapters, Maine became a contested frontier, a borderland where empires clashed and local communities, both native and European, were caught in the crossfire. The French established missions and trading posts, forging alliances with Wabanaki tribes, while the English pushed northward from Massachusetts, establishing settlements and asserting their own claims to the land and its resources. This period of conflict and accommodation set patterns that would echo for generations.

For nearly two centuries, the destiny of Maine was inextricably linked to that of its powerful southern neighbor, Massachusetts. Administered as the "District of Maine," it was a vast, sparsely populated appendage, valued for its timber, its fish, and its strategic importance, but often regarded as a rugged and somewhat unruly frontier. The people of Maine developed a distinct identity during this long period of political subordination, one forged in the hardships of frontier life and a growing resentment of being governed from Boston. The journey from district to independent state was a long and arduous one, culminating in its 1820 admission to the Union as part of the momentous Missouri Compromise.

Statehood unlocked a new era of growth and transformation. The 19th century saw Maine emerge as a global powerhouse in shipbuilding and maritime trade. Its legendary "down-easters," massive square-rigged sailing ships, were built in bustling coastal towns and sailed the world's oceans, carrying lumber, ice, and granite from Maine's abundant natural stores. This "Golden Age of Sail" was paralleled by the rise of the lumber industry, as vast fortunes were made from the seemingly inexhaustible supply of white pine in the state's interior. These industries shaped the state's economy and its landscape, creating boomtowns and leaving an indelible mark on its culture.

Yet, this era of prosperity was also one of profound social and political turmoil. Maine found itself at the forefront of two of the 19th century's most significant social movements: abolitionism and temperance. The state became a hotbed of anti-slavery sentiment, contributing a disproportionate number of soldiers to the Union cause during the Civil War. Simultaneously, it became the crucible of the temperance

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movement, enacting the nation's first statewide prohibition law, the "Maine Law," which would serve as a model for reformers across the country. These crusades reveal a deep-seated Yankee impulse toward moral reform that runs through the state's history.

The story of Maine is also a story of its people, a diverse cast of characters who have shaped its unique identity. Beyond the archetypal fisherman, logger, and farmer, Maine's history has been enriched by waves of immigration. The arrival of Irish and, most significantly, French-Canadian immigrants in the 19th and early 20th centuries transformed the social and cultural fabric of its industrial towns. They brought new languages, new faiths, and new traditions, adding vibrant new threads to the state's evolving tapestry and challenging its predominantly Anglo-Protestant culture.

As the 20th century dawned, Maine faced the challenges of a changing national economy. The decline of its traditional industries—the shift from sail to steam, the depletion of its old-growth forests, and the eventual closure of many of its textile and paper mills—forced the state to adapt and reinvent itself. The rise of tourism, branding Maine as "Vacationland," created new economic opportunities but also new tensions between development and conservation. This ongoing dynamic, the struggle to balance economic progress with the preservation of the natural beauty that defines the state, is a central theme of modern Maine history.

This book will navigate these historical currents, from the earliest human settlements to the complex challenges and opportunities of the 21st century. It is a chronological journey that seeks to illuminate the major political, economic, and social forces that have shaped the state. It will delve into defining moments like the Aroostook War, the Great Fire of Portland, and Maine's crucial contributions to the nation's efforts in two World Wars. It will also explore the quieter, long-term trends: the evolution of agriculture, the building of the railroads that connected a rural state, and the roots of the modern environmental movement, which found fertile ground in Maine's woods and along its shores.

Telling the story of a place like Maine requires an appreciation for its contradictions. It is a state known for its fierce independence, yet its history is one of deep connections to national and global events. It is a place of stunning natural beauty that has also been the site of intense resource extraction. Its people are often characterized as taciturn and reserved, yet they have produced a remarkable lineage of poets, artists, and political leaders with a national voice. It is a state that often seems to exist slightly apart from the rest of America, yet its history is a microcosm of the broader American experience.

From the struggles of its earliest inhabitants to the debates that shape its future, the history of Maine is a compelling narrative of resilience, adaptation, and enduring identity. It is the story of how a rugged geography and a unique confluence of

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historical forces created a place and a people unlike any other. This book aims to tell that story, to trace the long and fascinating journey of the place they call the Pine Tree State.

CHAPTER ONE: The Dawnland: Maine Before European Arrival

Long before the first European sails appeared as bewildering specks on the horizon, the land now called Maine was, to its inhabitants, the Dawnland. It was *Wabanahkik*, the place where the day first broke over the continent. For more than 13,000 years, this was a world shaped not by charters and provinces, but by the slow, inexorable retreat of glaciers, the steady rhythms of the seasons, and the deep, evolving relationship between a people and the often-demanding land they called home. To understand the history of Maine is to first understand this deep history, an epic written not in ink, but in stone tools, ancient fire pits, and the enduring traditions of the Wabanaki peoples.

The story begins at the end of the last Ice Age. Around 13,000 years ago, as the colossal Laurentide Ice Sheet that had entombed the region began its final, groaning retreat, the very first people moved into the newly exposed landscape. Archaeologists call them Paleo-Indians. They arrived from the west and south, entering a world that would be almost unrecognizable to us today. The environment was subarctic, a mosaic of tundra, grasslands, and sparse spruce forests, more akin to modern Labrador than the dense woods of contemporary Maine. Remnant patches of the ice cap may have still clung to the northern mountains. This was a stark, open world, a landscape recently scoured and reshaped by unimaginable geological force, where the St. Lawrence and Champlain valleys were still a cold, subarctic sea.

These pioneers were highly mobile hunters, moving across the vast, chilly plains in pursuit of large game. Archaeological evidence, though scarce, suggests they hunted migratory caribou herds and possibly even the now-extinct mastodon. Their presence is marked by distinctive, skillfully crafted stone spearheads known as fluted points, a hallmark of Paleo-Indian technology across North America. Finds of these tools, particularly at sites like the Vail site in the mountainous interior and those in the Munsungun Lake region, offer fleeting but powerful glimpses into this earliest chapter of human history in Maine. The people of this era likely camped on well-drained, sandy soils, elevated spots in a landscape dominated by the meltwater of the receding glaciers.

As the climate continued to warm, the landscape of Maine underwent a profound

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transformation. Around 10,000 years ago, the tundra and open parkland gave way to a dense, mixed forest of pine, poplar, oak, and birch. This environmental shift marked the beginning of a new cultural era, known as the Archaic Period, which would last for roughly 7,000 years. The great migratory herds of the Paleo-Indian era vanished along with the open tundra, replaced by the deer, moose, bear, and smaller game that thrived in the expanding woodlands. The people adapted with remarkable ingenuity, developing new technologies and new ways of life suited to their changing world.

The Archaic Period is characterized by an increasing focus on the resources of the forest and waterways. Heavy stone axes, gouges, and adzes became common, signaling a sophisticated woodworking technology. Though the acidic soils of Maine have not preserved the final products, these tools were used to fell trees and, crucially, to craft heavy dugout canoes. For millennia, these sturdy vessels were the primary means of transportation, allowing people to travel along the coast and navigate the major rivers and lakes, but their weight limited overland portability. The social organization of this era likely revolved around family bands who moved seasonally to hunt, fish, and gather, establishing camps at the inlets and outlets of major lakes and along river valleys.

One of the most fascinating and, for a long time, enigmatic cultures of this period is what became known as the "Red Paint People," due to their distinctive burial practices. Now more accurately understood by archaeologists as the Moorehead Phase or part of a broader Maritime Archaic tradition, these people flourished from roughly 6,000 to 4,000 years ago (c. 4000 to 2000 BCE). They were a maritime-focused culture, skilled seafarers who hunted for swordfish in the Gulf of Maine, a dangerous and impressive feat even by modern standards. Their burial sites, found from Brunswick to the St. John River, are marked by the lavish use of powdered red ocher, a form of iron oxide, which covered the graves and the finely crafted tools and ornaments interred with the dead. The discovery of these cemeteries, sometimes by 19th-century farmers who described the ground as "bleeding" when struck by a plow, sparked decades of speculation about a mysterious lost race. Research has since demonstrated that they were not a separate people but were indeed Native Americans whose unique spiritual traditions have left a brilliantly colored, if still not fully understood, mark on the archaeological record.

The next great technological and cultural shift began around 3,000 years ago, ushering in what archaeologists call the Woodland Period, also known as the Ceramic Period. This era is defined by two revolutionary innovations: the introduction of pottery and the adoption of the bow and arrow. Fired-clay ceramic pots allowed for more efficient cooking and food storage, while the bow and arrow, which appeared around 2,000 to 1,500 years ago, was a significant advancement in hunting technology over the older spear-thrower, or atlatl.

Perhaps the most transformative invention of this era, however, was the birchbark

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canoe. While its exact origins are unknown, its adoption in Maine between 3,500 and 2,500 years ago fundamentally changed how people could interact with the landscape. Unlike the heavy dugouts, the birchbark canoe was lightweight and portable. This innovation opened up the vast interior of Maine, allowing people to travel up smaller streams and to portage between different river systems. The archaeological record reflects this, with sites from this period appearing in a much more dispersed pattern around smaller lakes and streams. This mastery of water travel, combined with the use of snowshoes and toboggans in winter, allowed for a highly effective and mobile way of life, enabling people to move to resources or move resources to their villages.

By the time the first Europeans made contact, the descendants of these ancient peoples had developed into the complex societies of the Wabanaki, a name that translates to "People of the Dawnland." The Wabanaki were not a single, monolithic tribe but a confederacy of several distinct but related Algonquian-speaking nations. In the territory that would become Maine and the Canadian Maritimes, the principal groups were the Mi'kmaq, Maliseet, Passamaquoddy, Penobscot, and the broader groups of the Abenaki. These nations occupied distinct, though sometimes overlapping, territories. The Passamaquoddy homeland, for example, centered on Passamaquoddy Bay and the St. Croix River. The Maliseet, or *Wolastoqiyik* ("People of the Beautiful River"), traditionally occupied the Saint John River valley and its tributaries, including the Meduxnekeag. The Penobscot's heartland was the Penobscot River basin, while various Abenaki bands, such as the Kennebec and Androscoggin, lived along the rivers that bear their names.

Wabanaki society was organized around the seasons. For many, life was a cyclical migration between the coast and the interior. In the summer, many groups gathered in villages along the coast or on islands, where they could fish, operate tidal weirs, and harvest the abundant clams, lobsters, and other marine life. The shell heaps, or middens, that dot the Maine coast are the accumulated remnants of these summer feasts, providing archaeologists with invaluable information about ancient diets and lifeways. With the coming of autumn, many families would travel inland via the rivers in their birchbark canoes to hunt moose, deer, and bear in the great North Woods. Winter was a time for hunting on snowshoes, ice fishing, and living in smaller, more dispersed camps.

This seasonal pattern was not universal. In southern and central Maine, particularly along the fertile river valleys of the Saco, Androscoggin, and Kennebec, some groups practiced agriculture. Corn, beans, and squash, the "three sisters" of Native American agriculture, were cultivated in small gardens, supplementing the food acquired through hunting, fishing, and gathering. Groups like the Almouchiquois of the Casco Bay region were known for their farming, which distinguished them from their more hunter-gatherer neighbors to the east.

Life was organized around extended family kinship groups. Fluid social structures

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allowed for easy migration and the merging or division of bands based on circumstances. Political leadership often resided with a *sakom*, or chief, a position that was typically earned through skill, wisdom, and the ability to build consensus rather than inherited power. Wabanaki spirituality was woven into every aspect of life, a worldview rich with stories of Glooscap, the culture hero who was said to have created the landscape and taught the people how to live.

Long before the arrival of Europeans, the Wabanaki were part of a vast and ancient network of trade that crisscrossed the continent. Waterways served as the highways for this commerce. Copper artifacts from the Great Lakes region have been found in Maine, and distinctive stone tools made from chert quarried at Munsungun Lake in northern Maine have been discovered far from their source. Coastal peoples might trade dried fish and shellfish for the furs and moose hides of interior groups. This was more than just economic exchange; it was a system of social and political reciprocity that built alliances and maintained peace. This network connected the Wabanaki to the Iroquois to their west, the Innu to their north, and tribes far beyond.

By 1600, just before sustained European contact would irrevocably alter their world, an estimated 25,000 to 40,000 people lived in what is now Maine. They were the inheritors of a 13,000-year-old legacy of adaptation and resilience. They had witnessed the retreat of the glaciers and the birth of the forests. They had perfected the tools and skills necessary to thrive in a challenging environment, creating a rich and stable way of life. They had developed a complex social world governed by kinship, tradition, and a deep spiritual connection to the Dawnland. This was the world that existed for millennia, the essential first chapter of Maine's human story, upon which all subsequent history would be built.

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