

A HISTORIC LOOK AT LONG REACH

Centuries ago, the Abenaki Indians, among the first inhabitants in present-day Bath, gave the Kennebec River its name — “Kennebec” meaning “long level water.” Later, in the 17th century, sailors called this area of the river “Long Reach,” named for a three-mile stretch of the river that provided the sailors deep anchorage and good landing sites, and allowed them to sail the stretch of the river without tacking their sails.

In 1605, Samuel de Champlain led the first recorded expedition up the Kennebec River, to the area that is now the city of Bath. Two years later, Sir John Popham of England planned a voyage to the region with the intention of forming an English colony. On August 16, 1607, two ships carrying 120 settlers, equipment and supplies arrived at the mouth of the Kennebec River. A fort was quickly erected on the west side of the river entrance.

However, the colony was abandoned in September 1608, following an extremely trying year that included a severely harsh winter, strained relations with the Indians, and Popham’s death. The entire company sailed back to England on a supply ship and a vessel they had built, the 30-ton pinnace Virginia. This was the first vessel built by Englishmen in America. Though settled before Jamestown, the colony did not last and therefore can not claim the oldest settlement in America. **However, the event did allow Bath to claim the title “Birthplace of American Shipbuilding,” and in the year 2008, Bath will celebrate 400 years of shipbuilding.**

Fishing and trade eventually brought settlers back to the region. In 1762, William Swanton opened the first commercial shipyard in present-day Bath. The shipyard was located at the foot of Summer Street (in what is now our parking lot). It is said one ship a year was constructed until 1776, the last being an 18-gun privateer.

The area known as Long Reach was incorporated as the town of Bath in 1781 — the first town incorporated under the constitution of the state of Massachusetts.

From the beginning, the Long Reach area on the Kennebec has been marked for shipbuilding. Its natural anchorage, the harbor dredged almost exclusively by its own currents, year-round accessibility for deep drawing vessels, and valuable supply of timber — strong oak frames and tall pine masts. The channels of the Kennebec, Androscoggin, and Sasanoa and their tributaries are an extraordinary net of natural waterways with all ways crossing at Long Reach, making Bath a natural commercial center.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, Bath had become a focal point of commercial activity, reaching out into seaports around the world. Bath-built ships exported Maine timber and Kennebec ice, and cotton and coal were common imports to the region.

As the region grew, ferry service from Bath to Woolwich began in 1837. The ferry left from what is now the Waterfront Park and arrived at the ferry landing in Woolwich, directly across the river from the Kennebec Tavern. By 1923, the ferry could not keep up with the growing economy. It was carrying 337,188 passengers, 88,000 automobiles, and 9,136 horse-drawn vehicles annually. An enormous traffic problem existed, particularly prominent in the summer months. On occasion, the waiting line for a ferry reached a half of a mile in length. In response to the problem, the Carlton Bridge was completed in 1927. The bridge was initially a toll bridge to pay off the \$3,000,000 price tag. The enormous traffic problem returned, so

73 years later the new Sagadahoc bridge has been completed, this time carrying a price tag of \$74,000,000. Sagadahoc comes from an Indian name given to the stretch of the river from Merrymeeting bay to the ocean meaning “mouth of the river”. The train tracks on the lower level of the Carlton Bridge will continue to be used.

The building known for many years as the Long Reach Building was opened as the Kennebec Tavern on February 4, 1997. Gene & Kristi Nygaard have owned and

operated the restaurant since its opening. The skill and pride of Bath shipbuilding remains today as an inspiration wherever fine ships are known and appreciated, and we at the Kennebec Tavern are committed to follow in the tradition with other Bath businesses to deliver quality to our customers.

Special thanks to the Bath Historical society, authors of The Sesquicentennial of Bath, Maine 1847 - 1997