



Exploring Belfast's Waterfront

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Belfast Historical Society & Museum

Photographing Belfast's Waterfront: Then & Now

The pronunciation of Passagassawakeag is PAS-SAG'-AS -SA-WAU'-KEAG. It is a Penobscot Indian word meaning "Sturgeon-His Place" or the more descriptive version, "the place for spearing sturgeon by torchlight."

Fred Burns Technicolor House

Excerpted from *All Their Own- People and the Places They Build* by Jan Wampler, published in 1977: "Fred Burns was born in Maine eighty-seven years ago. He has been a hunter, trapper and guide and served in World War I. He has lived for the last thirty-six years on the Harbor below the chicken factory which provides him with a steady supply of chickens for Fred and his dogs. He has ten dogs. He built his home from materials he found on the beach and painted it with left-over paint."

STEAMBOAT LANDING:

Eastern Steamship Company

The Eastern Steamship Company was one of the most successful shipping lines operating along America's Atlantic coast before the World War I. The company was founded at the beginning of the century by Charles Wyman Morse, from Bath Maine. Morse was responsible for building the first five fast turbine-driven steamships on this side of Atlantic.

The Eastern Steamship Company Wharf at the foot of Commercial Street underwent changes to its size and use over the years. In 1949, Leo Lucky, Belfast entrepreneur, refurbished the old steamship wharf building and opened an

entertainment center for concerts, dances and roller skating. After being damaged in the 1957 hurricane, the wharf was condemned by the city and burned.

Steamship *Belfast*

Built at Bath Iron Works, the majestic steamship *Belfast* pulled into the Eastern Steamship Company dock for the first time on June 22, 1909. The 335-foot, triple-screw steamship was the largest and the last of the company's "great white fliers." She provided passenger and freight service between Penobscot Bay and Boston until December 1935. Overnight accommodations included an elegant dining room and 204 staterooms, with 222 more berths below the main deck.

Belfast Common and Steamboat Landing Parks

When Penobscot Poultry Company, one of Belfast's industrial giants and largest employer, closed for good in 1988 it left the shell of its processing plant on Cross and Miller streets. Deemed an eyesore by many, the abandoned factory sat vacant on the waterfront for close to ten years before being purchased in 1996 by MBNA (Maryland Bank National Association). Not only did the banking company donate the funds to the City to purchase the buildings and 1.5 acres, they also donated the cost of removing the buildings, a total of nearly \$300,000.

Harbor Activity: Shipyards & Boat Works

Belfast grew along the shores of the Passagassawakeag River at the upper corner of Penobscot Bay. As with all Eastern Seaboard towns, and many islands off our Atlantic Coast, its history and development have always been connected to the waterfront.

In 1799 the first wharf was built at the foot of Main Street by merchant James Nesmith. In less than half a dozen years three more wharves followed, beginning the shipbuilding era for Belfast. By 1834 the Belfast Marine Railway Company was formed and a railway capable of handling ships weighing 300 tons was constructed by James P. White and others. Belfast's shipbuilding was in full swing with the launchings being the culmination of work at the wharves.

The mid-1800s were hectic for Belfast Harbor. Launchings varied from huge affairs for the more celebrated ships that lasted all day, to basic efforts of just

getting the vessel to water, loaded, and working. Ships were launched with champagne, wine, ginger ale, Poland Spring Water, flowers of all kinds. Sometimes the bottles were unadorned, sometimes adorned with flowers, satin ribbons, and long streamers. One wonderful launching had white roses thrown against the vessel as a flock of white pigeons was released.

1840 to 1860 was the heyday of boatbuilding in Belfast, mainly for the coastal trade and to the West Indies. Hay was shipped to Jacksonville, Florida with a return stop in Virginia for soft coal. Wood products and grain were shipped in large quantities as well. By the 1880s and 90s the land around Belfast was stripped barren of trees and no tall pines for masts were available. One third of local men were employed as sailors or shipwrights.

With abundant lumber, steam-powered sawmills, and stretches of wide, flat beach, Belfast became a shipbuilding center, with shipyards lining the waterfront. Known for their speed, beauty, and excellent construction, several hundred vessels were produced by local shipyards. Columbia P. Carter owned the largest of these, turning out over 100 vessels. Ship launchings were popular social events as townspeople, owners, and investors gathered to watch the keel move down the slipway and into the harbor.

Twenty-four wharves were active on Belfast's waterfront in 1875. With shipyards stretching along the entire distance of the waterfront, one could step from shipyard to shipyard. By the early twentieth century there were few shipyards left. The railroad industry, the beginning of the automobile industry, and the steel steamships led commercial shipping via sail, away. The last schooner built here was the *Blanche C. Pendleton*, she launched the end of May 1920.

Maplewood Poultry and Macleod Poultry:

The poultry industry in Belfast began in the depths of the Depression. In 1934 members of the Mendelson family of Malden, Mass. began trucking live chickens to markets in Boston and New York for Waldo County farmers. Their company incorporated as Maplewood Poultry Company in 1938 and in 1946 began processing in outbuildings located on the former Coe-Mortimer fertilizer factory site.

By 1970 Maplewood Poultry employed over 1200 persons, had over 200 farms raising broiler chickens, had an annual payroll of \$7,500,000 and were processing 25 million Broilers, Fryers and Roasting Chickens.

About the same time as Maplewood Poultry, Wendell Macleod, a young man from Lincolnville, began buying and processing poultry for local restaurants, first in his family's barn, and later in an old creamery building located at the foot of Main Street. Fire destroyed this processing facility in late 1944. Mr. Macleod built the first automated plant in Maine in 1945 on Cross Street. Improved technology allowed the company to process 5,000 birds per day.

As the poultry industry grew, so did the problems. Markets outside of the New England area were highly competitive and raising and shipping became more expensive. Pollution of the harbor and bay was another problem. Much of the waste, consisting of feathers, innards and the blood, was pumped into the bay. Even after a specialized treatment plants went on-line in the late 1960s, pollution continued. A 1972 Newsweek article referred to Belfast as "Schmaltzport," an allusion to the German word for chicken fat.

Maplewood filed for bankruptcy and shut down in 1980. Not only were hundreds of employees without jobs, but a third of the city-owned railroad's revenue was suddenly lost. Talk of railroad bankruptcy followed, but with re-organization profits generated by grain shipments to Penobscot Poultry kept it in business.

Mathews Brothers

The Mathews Brothers mill was founded in 1854 by brothers Noah M. and Spencer W. Mathews. A third brother, Sanford, joined the family business in 1860. It was originally a window sash and millworks company, but by 1872 the brothers expanded the product line to include doors, blinds, shutters, and window and door frames. In later years the company expanded again to build coffins, spiral staircases, apple boxes, furniture and, briefly, became an automobile dealer. In 1919, the company built a ship-the *Jennie Flood Kreger*.

In 1988 the company relocated to a former shoe factory on the Perkins Road and the old facility on Cross Street was razed in 1997. The site is now the Belfast Common. Mathews Brothers is the oldest continuously operating manufacturing company in Maine and the oldest window manufacturer in the US.

Penobscot Poultry

The Penobscot Poultry Company opened its new, state-of-the-art processing plant on the waterfront in 1956. Belfast's two poultry processors dominated the industry in Maine. Both plants, which employed thousands of workers, growers and truckers were closed by 1988. This industry had kept the railroad in business as well, hauling grain and shipping chickens throughout the United States.

The plant then stood idle until 1997, when funds from MBNA made the demolition and removal of it and the adjacent Mathews Brothers factory possible. The Belfast Common now occupies this site.

MBNA announced in January 1997, that they had entered into an agreement to purchase the former Mathews Brothers mill and 3.42 acres, located on an adjacent waterfront parcel of the former Penobscot Poultry Company. The company's plan was to remove some of the buildings, landscape and develop the property to suit their needs. In 1999, MBNA announced the gift of the improved waterfront parcel of 2.4 acres, 800 feet of ocean frontage and a 4,000 square-foot building. That building has been renamed "The Boat House" and serves as a public venue run by the Belfast Parks and Recreation Department.

The gifts to the City of Belfast of these two properties created a new waterfront city park. The lower waterfront section, with its gazebo and building now referred to as The Boathouse was named Steamboat Landing. The upper hillside section, formerly Penobscot Poultry Company was named The Belfast Common.

Poultry Company Feed Mill

The Maplewood Poultry Company grain mill was built in 1965. Grain was transported by the railroad and uploaded into the mixing area where growth hormones and vitamin supplements were added. The finished poultry feed was then loaded onto trucks and delivered to the many poultry growing businesses scattered throughout Waldo County. Its removal in February 1984 hastened the re-vitalization of the Belfast waterfront.

City Public Landing

What is now reserved for pleasure craft and cruise ships was once a heavily industrialized zone. In 1917, at the foot of Main Street, was the Pejepscot Paper Company's pulp mill yard, storing thousands of cords of wood, awaiting shipping. Most recently, a huge grain mill dominated this site and many agree that its removal in February of 1984, led the way for the revitalization of the waterfront. Grants and loans, totaling more than 1.3 million dollars were put to use building the breakwater, the Public Landing, sewer and storm water systems and the rehabilitation of Main Street.

Elephants at the City Boat Landing: Richard Norton photograph

On a hot day in July 1986, Richard Norton, a local newspaper photographer, was on hand when circus elephants took a cool dip at the Public Landing. The circus set up their tents and side-shows in the shopping plaza on Belmont Avenue. The parade of four of their elephants heading down Main Street to the waterfront drew great crowds and news cameramen.

Tugboats

Originally founded by Clyde Holmes Sr. as the Eastern Maine Towage Company of Belfast, Maine, his business was increasingly successful and by the mid-1930s his tugs transported his holdings of coal, hay and wood.

The company was later acquired by Captain Arthur J. Fournier. Founded in 1988, as Maineport Towboat Incorporated. The company's beginnings stem from when Captain Fournier decided to expand his operations into Portland, Maine with the Portland Tugboat and Shipdocking Company.

Capt. Fournier decided to sell the company to two of his employees Duke Tomlin and John Worth.

In 2005, Captain Fournier along with two of his sons Douglas Fournier and Patrick Fournier reacquired Maineport Towboat Incorporated. And, in 2009 the company became the Fournier Towing and Ship Service of Belfast, Maine. The Fournier Towing and Ship Service Incorporated operates towing vessels in the ports of Bucksport, Searsport and Belfast, Maine.

The company maintains offices in Belfast Maine. Captain Arthur J. Fournier passed away in 2013. However, his sons Douglas and Patrick continue to operate the company.

The Belfast & Moosehead Lake Railroad

World War I Deployment: The departure of the first contingent of Waldo County soldiers from the Belfast train station on September 19, 1917, was photographed and appeared on postcards. Their march through town to the station was accompanied by the Belfast Band, local Boy Scouts and hundreds of fellow citizens. At the station a special car was ready to take them to Fort Devens. Factory whistles blew and many waved flags as the train pulled out.

Pre- World War II Deployment: Every summer during the 1930s Belfast's Company K soldiers went by train to upper New York state for two weeks of training. This National Guard unit consisted of men who had joined up before the war to make a little spending money during their weekly drills, to do their part in the nation's preparations for joining the Allies. They were called up in 1941 for military training at Camp Blanding in Florida before shipping out to the South Pacific.

The Belfast & Moosehead Lake Railroad

Chartered in 1867 and completed in 1870, 33 miles of railroad track connected Belfast, City Point, Waldo, Brooks, Knox, Thorndike, Unity, Winnecook, and Burnham Junction in Waldo County. The Belfast and Moosehead Lake Railroad connected with the national rail network via the Maine Central at Burnham Junction. Leased by the Maine Central from 1871 to the end of 1925, the railroad never came within 100 miles of Moosehead Lake, despite its name.

For decades, the railroad carried local agricultural products, canned sardines, shoes, fertilizer, and other locally processed or manufactured products bound for markets beyond Waldo County. Large shipments of timber and chicken feed traveled to Belfast by train as did passengers going to shop and do business. Passenger trains carried also carried fresh milk and the daily mail. In 1926, the first year of independent operation, the railroad carried 12,000 tons of freight and 43,000 passengers.

Diesel locomotives replaced steam locomotives in 1946, and regular passenger service ended in 1960. The passenger station was torn down that year to make way for a grain storage facility for the poultry industry. Freight traffic business from the

poultry industry became the mainstay of the railroad until the late 1980s. Most of the trains since 1989 were passenger excursions.

In 1991 the city council voted to sell its shares in the railroad to private investors, a unique deal which allowed the city to retain the land on which the tracks ran.

Following years of management changes and contested lease agreements between the city and the railroad owners, the railroad ceased running in 2005 after 135 years of service.

Puddle Dock

The Puddle Dock, Dock Square, Sandy Beach are all names used through the years to describe the harbor front land just south of the lower bridge. It was originally used for dockage purposes for smaller sailing ships, the water flowing in and out with the tides. In the mid-1870s the railroad tracks crossed the open water on trestles which were later backfilled in with rock and earth which allowed the tide to flow through openings in the earthen berm. The area was eventually filled in and used as the city dump during the 1930s and 40s. The dump was cleaned up during a scrap metal drive during World War II.

Puddle Dock remained a gritty, poor, industrial zone even into the 1980s. In 2011, this area went through a dramatic change- the Front Street Shipyard now covers most of this land.

Marshall Wharf:

Marshall Wharf, once an active flour, feed, and hay storage facility, is now home to a brewery and brewpub named in its honor. It was described in a 1888 Republican Journal: A new storehouse. Mr. W C Marshall has bought Haraden's wharf in this city and will erect thereon a large storehouse for his corn and shipping business. The building will be 30 by 60 feet on the floor, twenty-five feet posts and capable of holding 20,000 bushels of corn in the second story.

Harbor Improvements:

Keeping the harbor and commercial wharves safe and sound for vessels was a constant enterprise. Extensive repairs and building new piers to the bridges which crossed the river often required immediate action to provide a safe and suitable highway. Ice and floods were the cause of most repairs. Luckily for us, one of the

crews manning a piledriver upriver paused long enough to have their photograph taken.

Sardine Packing Plant:

In 1911, the Lubec Canning Company built a sardine packing plant on the waterfront just south of the lower bridge. The cannery kept several hundred people employed on a seasonal basis for nearly 100 years. In the early years' productions were marketed under many well-known name brands at the time, such as "Federal, the "Centennial," the "Bob White," and the "Toga." During World War II 55% of the factory's total output was going to the United States Government for the armed forces. In 1945 the cannery was awarded an "A" Agricultural Award from the U. S. Department of Agriculture for their outstanding performance in the processing of food.

Stinson Seafood was the last company packing fish. In 1991, 200 plant workers were turning out up to 200,000 cans per day. They exported to 20 foreign countries, with Australia, Canada and the Caribbean islands being the top three markets. When the plant closed for good in 2001, it was one of the last sardine canneries left in Maine.

Several re-development ideas which included condos, retail shops and marinas were floated before the City, but none were able to find financial backing and development stalled. By late 2009, the property was becoming increasingly derelict and concerns about safety issues were raised.

Waldo County Memorial Bridge Now Armistice Bridge

The first bridge to span the Passagassawakeag River at this site was built by private investors in 1806. Known as the Lower Bridge and made of wood, it featured a drawbridge which allowed schooners to travel up the river as far as the wharves at City Point. In June 1920, three days before construction was to begin on a new concrete and granite bridge, a truck carrying movie films broke through the draw. The new bridge, known as the Waldo County Memorial Bridge, was dedicated on October 8, 1921, by Gov. Percival Baxter to those killed in WWI.

Veterans Memorial Bridge

In May of 1961 construction began for the Veterans Memorial Bridge and Route 1 bypass around the city limits. Ellis C. Snodgrass, Inc. of Portland was general

contractor, and the steel was provided by Bancroft & Martin Rolling Mills Company. The finished bridge- 1,620 feet long, with eleven concrete piers rose seventy-five feet above the water. The total project cost was \$3.9 million, to be shared with the Federal Government. The largest piece of steel to be shipped by rail arrived by Belfast and Moosehead Lake Railroad in March 1962.

The new bridge was dedicated by Gov. John Reed and city officials on September 3, 1963.

The Coe-Mortimer Fertilizer Company

was built in 1909 on the waterfront just above the lower bridge. By 1914, 110 employees processed limestone and phosphate rock which arrived by boat, into fertilizer which was then shipped by truck or by rail. The company closed in the mid-1930s, and the plant was torn down in 1938. Maplewood Poultry Company built on the site in 1946 and operated until 1980. Penobscot Frozen Foods purchased the plant in 1982 for the processing of potato products and are still in operation today (2021) as Penobscot-McCrum.

New Uses for the Harbor

During the mid-20th century, the harbor remained as a commercial fishing center, and home to the Belfast Boatyard and other small watercraft building operations. The tugboat fleet remains a reminder of our working waterfront.

The Belfast Maskers community theater group converted the former railroad freight building and offices into a 200-seat theater in January of 1993.

In 1996, the newest addition to the waterfront was the establishment of French and Webb, Inc. Their boatbuilding company settled in part of what was commonly known as the Diamond Match Company property. French & Webb builds wooden boats using modern methods in combination with traditional craftsmanship.

In December of 2010, a new entity, Front Street Shipyard, purchased the property and the troubled building was demolished in 42 days.

Construction of the shipyard began in January 2011 and by July the shipyard welcomed the community to tour the facilities. In its first six years of operation, Front Street Shipyard reached \$14 million in yearly revenues and created 100 jobs.

Its marina's 46 slips sell out every year and the shipyard's refitting and repair capabilities bring in vessels from all over the world.

The Harbor Walk, built on the old railroad line, opened in 2013. The Rail Trail, a two mile stretch along the river, also was built on the old trail bed. Walkers, bike riders, and skiers can travel from Belfast to City Point in all seasons.

In late October 2019, the *USS Sequoia*, a yacht used by former presidents that is sometimes known as the "floating White House," arrived by barge from the D. C. area to begin restoration work at French & Webb boat builders. The *Sequoia*, designated as a National Historic Landmark, was designed by John Trumpy, a noted wooden yacht designer and built for Emily Roebling Cadwalader in 1925. It is expected the restoration will take four to five years to complete.

One addition to the harbor businesses in the last few years a new marina with over 90 slips, docks, and floats. The marina also features bathroom facilities and water and electricity hookups. Hamlin's Marine opened their boat dealership on Front Street in March 2021.

This growing economic cluster represents the continued growth of a heritage industry for Belfast.

Belfast City Park

Belfast City Park opened to the public on September 9, 1906. The Village Improvement Society, a group of influential women, spearheaded the movement to provide free public access to the shore front. The City purchased 15 acres for \$3000, and soon workers were creating roads, planting gardens, and establishing an arboretum. The pavilion provided picnickers with a sheltered place to enjoy the beach, ocean breezes, and panoramic views of Belfast Bay. In the early years, the Belfast Band gave weekly Sunday concerts.

"Broiler Capital of the World"

Belfast's national leadership in the broiler industry was recognized every July, when Maine Broiler Day, later the Broiler Festival attracted thousands of visitors to

City Park. Begun in 1948 on short notice, Broiler Day provided an opportunity for poultry leaders from across the country to discuss their production methods- and for hungry fairgoers to taste the results. Broiler Day festivities included a two-mile long parade, games, musical acts, and the crowning of The Broiler Queen. Following the close of the processing plants, the annual festival was renamed as the Bay Festival and a midway, rides, and fireworks were added to the entertainments. In later years, it was once again renamed and with a new theme- the Maine Celtic Festival.

Belfast now hosts summer music festivals, arts and theater events and harbor/maritime themed festivals in the waterfront parks.

Monument at Steele's Ledge

The first navigational aid placed at Steele's Ledge was a wooden base topped with an old mast topped with a wooden barrel. In 1826, this was situated at the mouth of the harbor to alert boats to pass between the ledges and the west side of the harbor. In 1833, a violent south-east storm washed out the ballast; and the whole structure went sailing up the harbor.

In 1835, a stone beacon replaced the wooden one. That one remained in place until 1859, when it was destroyed by ice in the harbor. It was rebuilt but destroyed once again by the pressure of the ice in 1888.

A stronger and redesigned beacon was erected soon after 1888 at a cost of \$1,660.00. This new design proved to be sufficient, and the Monument can still be seen in the harbor today.

It is hard to imagine Belfast harbor and Penobscot Bay frozen out to Islesboro and Castine. Luckily for us, photographers made the effort to capture activities on the ice. Treks across the ice by skate, sleighs, and foot out to the Monument were commonplace into the mid-20th century. The last real harbor freeze was in 1996.

Ice in the Harbor & Bay

The winter of 1904-05 in upper Penobscot Bay was known for the ice in the bay and the harbor. When that happened, people strapped on their skates or hitched up their sleighs and headed out to the Monument in the harbor or went to Islesboro. That winter most of Penobscot Bay, the Penobscot River and all harbors froze up. The cutter Levi Woodbury and several other ice cutters were in constant service

trying to keep the ice broken up. Steamship travel came to a halt. Goods and heavy merchandise were being loaded onto sleighs or cars to be hauled to the islands. One person drove from Belfast to Islesboro, boring test holes in the ice along the way to measure the thickness. It averaged 8" to 15."

To learn more about Belfast history:

The Belfast Museum
10 Market Street, www.belfastmuseum.org

Penobscot Marine Museum
2 Church Street, Searsport
www.penobscotmarinemuseum.org

The History of Belfast in the 20th Century
By Jay Davis and Tim Hughes

Images of America-Belfast
Arcadia Publishing
Megan Pinette and Jane McLean