

FISHERIES HISTORY OF THE BAGADUCE RIVER

“The Bagaduce River defined each of the communities which flourished along its banks. Its unique geography, the depth of its waters, and the effects of the tide all contributed to the unique ways in which the river was used...No one community held the full expression of the river. The river provided opportunities for all, and each community depended upon the others to fulfill its unique role. The river was a maritime community.”

--Mark Honey, *Penobscot, Maine 1761-2011*

“At one time the most important fishing district of eastern Maine.” – George Brown Goode, *US Fish Commission*

Dozens of clam shell heaps along the shores of the lower Bagaduce mark places where ancestors of the Wabanaki people lived and gathered food. They steamed, roasted, and dried clams, and ventured out on the water to hunt for other fish. Within the shells are pottery fragments, tools of stone and bone, fish hooks and harpoon points.

The name *Bagaduce* derives from the native place-name for “big tideway river,” or, in some sources, “place where there is no safe harbor,” a reference to the numerous falls and complex currents. The native people did, however, frequent the river to fish for smelt, alewives, salmon, sturgeon, tomcod, eel, and shellfish. The Bagaduce was part of a major canoe route (*Minnewokun* or “many directions route”) that avoided the rough seas around Cape Rosier via a portage into Walker Pond at the “Punchbowl” on Eggemoggin Reach. Many of the roads in the area follow historic Indian pathways, and the landscape is featured in several Wabanaki creation stories.

By 1600, the Wabanaki community headed by Chief Asticou extended from the Bagaduce to the Mount Desert Island area, part of a larger political, inter-tribal confederacy that encompassed all of Penobscot River and Bay. Pentagoet (Castine) was the traditional tribal rendezvous site, strategically located at the mouth of the Bagaduce. From about 1615 onward, this site became the location of a major fur trading post and later a fortified European battleground. The Bagaduce watershed, of great importance to the Wabanaki, became the site of centuries of violence, devastation, and conflict associated with European colonization.

1630s Fish sustained the French after they established Fort Pentagoet, cut the forests, and built a tidal grist mill near the outlet of Frenchmen’s Farm Creek [Winslow Stream]. Archaeological excavations of the fort uncovered ceramic pilchard (pickled herring) jars, although other remains suggest local food fish (including cod, striped bass, and sturgeon) were eaten fresh. Dried cod was also a staple. The French traded with the Wabanaki.

1670 Wabanaki chieftain Madockawando had his seasonal headquarters at Archimagam, a fortified lodge strategically situated near the portage between the head of the Bagaduce (Walker Pond) and Eggemoggin Reach. Madockawando’s people, including his own

descendants, lived in the area into the nineteenth century. Wabanaki people continue to live in the area today.

1762 English colonists requested land from Governor Bernard for a township east of the Penobscot, for 'settling other good families' and 'to carry on the fishery.'

1770 Elijah Winslow secured 400 acres on either side of Frenchmen's Farm Creek and moved there with a family of 10. It was a cold winter that year, and by February the bay froze solid. Provisions grew short ("not one drop of rum and but little store of any kind") forcing people to eat clams every other day.

1787-88 Elijah Winslow and Samuel Fairfield built a sawmill and gristmill on what is now called Winslow's Stream (formerly known as Frenchmen's Farm Stream). Elijah sold land north of the stream to son John Winslow in 1803.

By 1801, Captain Peletiah Leach has a grist mill in operation on Mill Creek [outlet of Pierce Pond].

1810 A dam is built in Brooksville at outlet of Walker Pond, John Walker purchased carding mills "at head of south branch of Bagaduce." Goose Falls on Cape Rosier was the site of a grist and saw mill throughout the 1800s.

1830s Salt fish was being dried on flat areas of Nautilus Island. Salt was stored in buildings along shore. 'Castine is said to have been the most important salt storage port north of Boston; in the spring nearly five hundred fishing vessels would be in the harbor waiting for salt to take to the fishing grounds.'

1847 There was a dam and mill at the third narrows, with a toll bridge erected. The head of navigation was Brooksville center, where three roads met at the outlet of Walker Pond, although the stream silted in and marshes grew. Walker Pond was 'one of the best alewife fish pastures in the country.'

1850 At Castine, boats loaded with fish and lumber were bound for the Caribbean, part of the global trade network that include African and native American slaves. A letter to the Bangor *Whig and Courier* reported nearly 300 sail vessels, employing 2,000 men and boys, were at Castine, where they purchased necessities for a fishing voyage, such as glazed hats, oil clothes, fishing boots, rope, and salt. More than 1,500 barrels of mackerel worth \$10,000 were shipped to New Orleans, with "a vast quantity of cod and other fish" also traded. Clams were pickled and used for bait; fish was salted and dried at Joseph Farnham's fish yard. William Leach operated a fish house and half a wharf on the narrows (below Wardwell's point), and also had farm acreage and schooner shares. Groundfishing continued into the later part of the century. At Castine, the J.W. Dresser Company made cod and mackerel fishing line in a long building called a "rope walk," one of the largest line factories in the country. Thousands of tons of European salt was imported and sold. Between 1792 and 1887, 121 ships were built in Castine. There were shipyards at Winslow's Cove and along the shore of Northern Bay including Mill Creek.

Other late 1800s industry included copper mining, brickmaking, and manufacturing fish barrels.

Wabanaki continued their relationship with the area, traveling from Old Town and portaging canoes at Wadsworth Cove and camping at Winslow's Point and Back Cove. They fished, gathered sweetgrass, and practiced other cultural traditions.

1856 James Littlefield transfers to Charles Leach, Milton Wardwell, and John Leach a gang of mills (saw mill, grist mill, and shingle mill and lumber house) on the outlet of Pierce's Pond.

1867 At one time a total of 92 weirs operated along the Penobscot River shoreline between Castine and Bucksport. A map of salmon weirs shows three weirs off Castine's south-facing shore, and four former pound nets on the south side of Cape Rosier. A weir off Dyce's Head once held the record for an annual catch of more than 1,600 pounds of salmon.

1871 Cannery built in Castine to pack lobster, mackerel, clams, berries and other fruit. Employed 50 people. Castine Packing Company operated on Sea Street ~1875-1900, canning lobster and mackerel. Castine Bay Company sardines, C-B Brand Maine Clams (Wasson has two canneries in Castine in 1878; Doudiet has two canning factories, Tilden and Sons and Jones and Co. In 1873 Jones canned 60,000 lbs of lobster in two days. Jones also canned salmon and herring.) Wasson's survey of Hancock County noted that the demand for the "luxurious flesh" of lobsters had soared by 1878, and numerous canning factories had been established.

1875 "Porgie" wharf and canning factory erected on western shore of Bucks Harbor. "For ten or fifteen years processing porgies (menhaden) was an important business. The fish were caught in large numbers by means of nets or seines, oil was extracted and the refuse or chum used for sheep food and fertilizer."

1878 Wasson reported: "The season of smelt-fishing begins as soon as the ice is sufficiently firm to carry the catchers. Each has a 'seven by nine' cotton cloth covered fish-house, with a floor and a stove. An average day's catch nets the fisher \$2.50. Hundreds of these snow-white fish houses speck the icescape..." The Maine Mining & Industrial Journal noted in 1886 that "Large quantities of smelts are being shipped to Boston, New York and other ports...the fish come from Castine, Brooksville, and vicinity." Wasson described alewives in Walker's Pond.

Concerning salmon, Wasson noted: "Until a comparatively recent period, the rivers of this country fairly swarmed with them," but "salmon fishing is now confined to the Penobscot and Bagaduce rivers." Weirs yielded anywhere from 50 to 1,600 pounds of salmon per year. The Acadian Hotel menu served boiled salmon with egg sauce (1876).

1880 Federal fish commissioners reported "Of the lower tributaries [of the Penobscot] there are but two which are now accessible to anadromous fishes, the Bagaduce in

Castine and Brooksville and the Eastern River in Orland, and even in these, especially in the former, there are serious hindrances to the ascent of the alewife, the only species that visits them...Fishing for smelts with hook and line is regularly employed only in Belfast Harbor and in Bagaduce River. In the latter locality it is followed by nearly one hundred persons. The fishing ground extends from Johnson's Narrows upward about 5 miles. The smelts are at hand in the fall, and in November the fishermen sometimes fish for them from rafts. But it is not until December that the river freezes up and the regular fishing begins, in little cloth huts on the ice. The first of the season only the ice above the toll-bridge at North Brooksville is strong enough to bear, but later operations extend down to the vicinity of the narrows. The fishing is followed at any time of tide, but only by day. The catch in 1880 amounted to about 61,000 pounds."

Sedgwick was home to two shore fishing vessels, three small boat fishermen, and 38 clammers. Brooksville had "extensive smelt fisheries," one shore fisherman, 13 lobsterman, 7 clammers, 7 longliners, and 75 mackerel fishermen (who sold to the cannery at Castine). Penobscot also had "extensive smelt fisheries," and one business curing cod. A few residents occasionally went to the outer islands to fish for cod and mackerel for home supply.

US Customs Castine District included 300 lobster fishermen catching nearly three million pounds. Also, "the clamming interests [of the district] are quite important, a large number of men finding employment on the mud-flats during the winter months, when there is little else to occupy their attention. Nearly 60,000 bushels of soft clam are dug annually, three fourths of them being shucked and salted to be used for bait in the vessel-fisheries. Nearly half of the remainder are sold to the canneries...Ten men were engaged for a number of weeks in the shore mackerel fishery, selling their catch to the cannery at the village. All of these 'clam' to a greater or less extent in the winter, and four of them fish for lobsters from April to August."

1889 Hugh Smith's map of scallop beds show multiple beds along the lower portion of the river and around Castine. Smith suggested it was a recent fishery (exports began in 1884) but still employed several hundred people and yielded "large quantities of highly esteemed and valuable food product." S.D. Gray of Cape Rosier and J. M. Vogell of Castine provided information to Smith, such as noting that scallops did move around and the beds changed from year to year. "The existence of giant scallops [as large as nine inches across] in the vicinity of Castine has long been known. Men are still alive who remember to have taken scallops as many as forty or sixty years ago. The town has had a more or less regular local supply for about forty years...About 1876, the Castine Packing Company undertook to put scallops on the market in a canned condition, as is now so commonly done with clams in many localities on the coast of Maine...it was found that by previously frying the meats they could be canned without difficulty, but the method was considered too costly and was not put to much practical use; and the fishery, which would otherwise have been maintained by home demand, was diverted to supply distant markets."

1893 ‘Twenty-two fishing tents on the ice in the channel fishing for smelts. They catch from five to thirty pounds daily. The smelts are sent to New York and turn the catchers from five to ten cents a pound.’ Until the twentieth century these houses were unpainted white canvas, later they were painted various colors and “made a gay pattern on the ice.”

“In the first quarter of the [20th] century there were numerous herring weirs in the area, two in the Nautilus cove, one on its southeast shore, two on the west side of Indian bar and many others. The herring were caught in the weirs, collected in a purse seine, and kept for the schooners which took them to canning factories in Machias and Eastport where they became ‘sardines.’ There was also, at times, a canning factory at Castine. Dories, which can be tipped without upsetting, were used about the weirs; they were so made that ‘awash with herring they contained sixty bushels.’ In one month in 1910 a total of 2,078 bushels of herring, worth \$1736.45, were taken from the weirs at Nautilus.”

1907 *Bangor Daily News* reported: “It has been announced that after a long course of deliberation and study of the matter that Castine will have a canning factory, and stock company organized by W. A. Ricker and Horatio Crie for the purpose of preparing and packing sardines and clams... The wharf property at the foot of Green Street, owned by W.H. Hooper, has been secured and work will begin at once toward fitting it up and establishing the plant which will soon be put into running order as soon as possible. This will give Castine a much needed stimulus and will furnish employment.” Crie built a herring weir to supply the cannery, which in 1908 was visited by a seven-foot shark. Another cannery under the name A.H. Mayo operated on Sea Street from 1910-1920; the Castine Sardine Factory on Sargent’s Wharf operated from 1919-1939.

1911 Lydia Perkins received permission from the state to construct a fish weir in Wadsworth Cove; according to the *Industrial Journal*, there were 60 herring weirs in Bagaduce waters. There was a wharf and weir at Nautilus Island. That year, 2,200 tons of fish shipments were recorded by the U.S. Customs House in Castine, which reported 3,250 steam vessels and 1,500 sail vessels arriving and departing.

In 1923, historian George Wheeler wrote that “cod, cunner, cusk, haddock, hake, tomcod, common eel, conger eel, lamprey eel, flounder, pollock, lumpfish, skate, sculpin, squid, alewife, smelt, mackerel, and salmon are abundant...Mussels, clams, lobsters, crabs, and snails are to be found in abundance.” He also noted that “razor shell fish” were becoming rare and scallops were “quite abundant.”

1935 The Maine Legislature passed emergency legislation limiting the taking of alewives from Walker Pond stream and granting harvest rights to the town of Brooksville.

1940, fish commissioners reported on the status of alewives: “Pierce Pond Stream, with 111 acres of lake, has no run. Although there are no permanent obstructions other than large boulders in the stream, the gradient is sufficiently steep to make it doubtful if alewives can accomplish the ascent. Winslow Stream, with 125 acres of lake, has a poor run of alewives, which ascends about one and one-half miles to a 6-foot timber dam at the mouth of Wight Pond. The mill is built directly over the stream and mill waste chokes

the stream bed below. A side stream from a wing dam enters the main stream about one hundred yards below the mill. A fishway was reported, but our inspection disclosed no evidence of it. It is recommended that a fishway be installed on the side stream and that the main stream be barricaded where the side stream enters it to guide the alewives into the fishway. Walker Pond stream formerly supported a heavy run of alewives.”

Alewives persisted into the second half of the twentieth century, with populations of “dwarf anadromous alewives” described from ponds in the Bagaduce River. “Two of these runs no longer exist. Walker Pond still has a population of dwarf alewives and their life history does vary from those of typical anadromous alewives in that the juveniles remain in nursery habitat for 16 months compare to the typical 4 months. Flagg (1977) noted commercially exploitable alewife runs in Penobscot.

1947 The state closed scallop fishing in the Bagaduce River to the mouth from Dice’s Head through southern tip of Nautilus Island to the Brooksville Shore, from April 1 to December 31.

References

Atkins, C. 1887. The River Fisheries of Maine, in *The Fisheries and Fishery Industries of the United States. V. History and Methods of the Fisheries, Volume I.* Washington: Government Printing Office.

Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission. 2012. River Herring Benchmark Stock Assessment V.

The Castine Historical Society. 1996. Castine. Dover, NH: Arcadia Publishing Society.

The Castine Historical Society. 2017. Vertical file “fisheries”. Castine, ME.

Doudiet, E.W. 1978. *Majabigwaduce: Castine, Penobscot, Brooksville.* Castine Scientific Society.

Eckstorm, F. *Indian Place-Names of the Maine Coast.* Orono: University of Maine.

Flagg, L.N. 1977. *The alewife fishery of Maine.* Augusta, ME: Department of Marine Resources, 5 pp.

Faulkner, A., and G.F. Faulkner. 1987. *The French at Pentagoet, 1635-1674: An Archaeological Portrait of the Acadian Frontier.* New Brunswick Museum.

Honey, M.E. *Penobscot, Maine 1761-2011.* Snowman Printing.

Maine Legislature. 1947. *Acts and Resolves as Passed by the Ninety-Second and Ninety-Third Legislatures of the State of Maine from April 22, 1945 to May 14, 1947.* Augusta: Reviser of Statutes, Kennebec Journal.

Moorehead, W.K. 1922. *A Report on the Archaeology of Maine.* Andover, MA: The Andover Press.

Prins, H.E.L, and B. McBride. 2007. *Asticou's Island Domain: Wabanaki Peoples at Mount Desert Island 1500-2000.*

Rounsefell, G.A., and L.D. Stringer. 1943. *Restoration and management of the New England alewife fisheries with special reference to Maine.* *Transactions of the American Fisheries Society* 393-424.

Smith, H.M. 1889. The giant scallop fishery of Maine. Bulletin of the U.S. Fish Commission 9:312-335.

Wasson, S. 1878. Survey of Hancock County, Maine. Augusta: Sprague, Owen & Nash, 1878.

Wheeler, G.A. 1896. Castine, Past and Present. Boston: Rockwell and Churchill Press.

Wheeler, G.A. History of Castine, Penobscot and Brooksville, Maine. Cornwall, NY: The Cornwall Press, 1923.

Compiled by Catherine Schmitt, Maine Sea Grant, September 2017

Send corrections or additions to catherine.schmitt@maine.edu

Draft