

A History of the Orland River and its Fisheries

1600 The lower Penobscot River and Bay region is home to the Wabanaki people. Extensive red ochre burial sites around the shores of Alamoosook Lake testify to the area's importance to the ancient Wabanaki, for whom Alamoosook provided fishing grounds, as well as passage to inland ponds and flowages, and to the ocean via Blue Hill. No dams existed at this time.

1773 Calvin Turner built the first saw and grist mills at Lower Falls; Robert Treat built a saw mill at Upper Falls the next year.¹ Mills likely required some type of dam structure.

1790 At town meeting, three men were elected to serve on a fish committee to supervise the harvesting of alewives during their spring "run" up Eastern [Orland] River.²

1792 John Gross, Thomas Partridge, and Joseph Viles voted into fish committee.³

1805 At annual meeting, a committee was voted to petition the General Court for the grant for shad and alewives in Orland be a town privilege, the proceeds going to the schools.⁴

1816 Eastern River Lock & Sluice Co. incorporated. Locks at lower falls constructed sometime shortly afterwards [by at least 1825, judging by petitions]. The impoundment behind the dam was one factor in determining the layout of roads and bridges, and subsequently the placement of houses, mills, stores and churches.

1825 Orland residents were heavily involved in fishing the Grand Banks for cod. For a time Orland, Bucksport, and Castine were leaders in the Banks fisheries.⁵

1826 Orland residents petitioned the legislature to pass an act authorizing fishways to be opened through all obstructions on Eastern (Orland) River and its branches.

1835 John Burnham, Isaac Perry and 60 other Orland residents petitioned in favor of An Act in Addition to an Act for the Preservation of Salmon, Shad and Alewives in the Penobscot River and Bay and their Tributary Waters. [IMG 0925]

The undersigned citizens of Orland County of Hancock, State of Maine respectfully represent that the privilege of taking fish in Penobscot Eastern River is rapidly diminishing on account of the fish being prevented from ascending said river by mill dams across the same, through which there are no suitable fish ways. In 1825 a law was passed making the Lock-Sluice at the Great Works Mills (so called) on tide waters on said river, a fish way - At that time, and for some years after it served a tolerable purpose - but the lumber business has so ineffectually on the P. River that the Lock-Sluice is nearly the whole time employed when the tide is up and the water flows through it (which is but a small part of the time) with boats, gondolas, or rafts passing either up or down through the ? lock-Sluice -? the fish - principally alewives, which were formerly taken in great abundance above said dam are prevented from ascending-At another dam and block of mills at the upper falls, so called, there is no fish way, and it would be ? to have one made while the fish prevented from passing the dam first mentioned. We therefore pray your honorable body to repeal the law which makes the ? lock-sluice at the Great Works mills (so

called) in ? a fish way and grant us the same privilege that others have on the Penobscot River and its tributary waters –

Three more printed petitions were submitted in 1836, one signed by John Burnham and 25 others of Orland; one by Henry Partridge and 29 others of Orland; another by Isaac Perry and 17 others, said that [image 0915] {also hand written IMG 0959]

the 1835 act For the preservation of Salmon, Shad, and Alewives in Penobscot Bay and River, and their tributary waters, does not accomplish the object for which it was intended. Many Mill Owners on the said waters, refuse or neglect to open fish ways through their dams and other obstructions, and threaten the County Fish Wardens with a suit at law if they proceed to open them...Believing as we do, that this section of the State could not have been settled and brought forward as it has, had it not been for the primitive blessing of taking fish in Penobscot Bay, river and tributary waters -- and also believing that steam power will soon in a great measure supply the place of water power for moving machinery -- and knowing as we do, that there is an ample sufficiency of water in Penobscot river and its tributary streams, for moving all necessary machinery, and for the preservation of fish; we earnestly pray your honorable body, to give the subject your candid and unprejudiced consideration, and pass an Act which shall ensure the preservation of Salmon, Shad, and Alewives in the aforesaid waters, as long as 'Old Penobscot rolls his current on.'

1838 S.A. Sanders, John Burnham, Isaac Perry, and 18 other citizens of Orland again petition the legislature. [IMG 0969]

...the fisheries of the Penobscot River and its tributary waters have formerly been a great benefit to all the inhabitants in this section of the State – But for some years just the Salmon, Shad and Alewives, which were formerly abundant, have greatly diminished already, and unless a remedy is provided by law the benefit derived from the said fisheries must be entirely lost – And many poor people in consequence be deprived of a great part of the means of their support. We therefore pray your Honorable Bodies to give this subject, (which to the people in this vicinity is of vast importance) your impartial consideration and pass a law which will preserve salmon, shad and alewives in the said river & tributary waters.

1839 James Stubbs, fish warden for Hancock County, pressured the Eastern River Lock and Sluice Company to install a fishway, as the lock sluice previously deemed adequate was not allowing sufficient passage. Folsom refused.

1844 Orland residents pleaded for enforcement of fish passage laws, and asked that fishway requirements be extended to Eastern [Orland] River and its tributary streams.

1846 Alonzo Perry and other Orland residents again petition the legislature. [IMG 0933]

the fishing business on Eastern River is greatly injured by the taking of fish in the fishway, and after they have entered the fresh water for the purpose of spawning–We therefore respectfully request your Honorable bodies to enact a law to prevent all fishing above the lower falls on Eastern River (so called). –and to prevent all fishing below the falls,

during the days of Saturday and Sunday of each week, and that the locks (the present fishway) be properly tended for the free passage of fish, and that the taking of fish in the locks, at either the upper or lower falls, be made a penal offence.

Another petition from Orland and Bucksport residents in support of the proposed law: [IMG 0942]

We the undersigned inhabitants of Orland and Bucksport, residing at and near the upper falls on Penobscot Eastern River, in said Orland, respectfully represent that formerly a vast quantity of alewives were taken at the said falls—But since the fish laws were so far repealed and modeled anew in 1840, they have so far lost their force, at least on this river...about three miles (by the river) from the upper falls, down river, is the head of ship navigation, called the lower falls. There is a block of mills, a lock for the purpose of the passage of boats — rafts— At the upper falls there is also a dam, with a block of mills — and two locks — and at a small distance above this there is another dam, with a lock, which opens into a pool of calm water at the foot of a large pond — where the alewives deposit their spawn...

1854 Fish processing activity increased, from Richard Hopkins' two sets of fish wharves and stores in 1838 to 15 people operating fish stores and flakes.

1868 The Eastern river is obstructed by four dams. There are no fishways, and the fish are carried past the dams by locking them through. Only alewives, however, will enter the locks.⁶

1869 Alewives are principally caught on the east side of the bay, and in Eastern river and thoroughfare. They are supposed by some close observers to breed only in the ponds on Eastern River; we certainly know of no other breeding ground open to them, unless a few can surmount the dams or find some suitable spot below them, on the main river... The people of Orland are anxious about the constant decrease of the alewives, and desire to have some effective measures taken to secure an increase. The general opinion is that the imperfect means of passing the dams are mainly to blame for the decline of the fish... Before the present stone dam was built they used to be dipped in large quantities in a pool, but now there is no good place to dip and few are taken at these falls... 12-14 weirs in the tidewater portion take about 30,000 alewives apiece (400,000 annually)... Of those taken at the upper falls in Orland we cannot speak confidently, but some believe as many are caught there as in the 14 weirs.⁷

Orland was also important for marine fisheries, and fish were laid out to dry on village shores. Between the 1850s and 1870s, 26 vessels were launched at local shipyards, most built for and by townspeople for fishing the Banks and the coastal trade. Cooper shops assembled barrels, mainly for fish storage.

1871 Salmon hatchery established at Craig Brook/Alamoosook Lake. It became the first federal fish hatchery in the United States. Live salmon were transported from fishing weirs at Verona up the Orland River.

1880 Orland had six schooners engaged in the Grand Bank cod fisheries. During the same season Bucksport had six large vessels fishing on Grand Banks, and two smaller ones engaged in the

shore fisheries. About 150 men were employed in the vessel fisheries of the two towns, usually hired at wages varying from \$120 to \$150 for the season. The vessels, as a rule, made but one trip during the summer, starting late in the spring and returning in the fall. Nearly all landed their catch at Orland, where the fish are cured before being shipped to Boston and other places. In 1880 there were six curing-stands in the vicinity [of Bucksport and Orland]. These had an aggregate value of \$3,000, and furnished employment to 27 men for two months. The quantity of fish cured was 13,200 quintals, all but 400 of which were cod.⁸

1887 Of the lower tributaries [of the Penobscot River] 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...[the alewife fishery] centers at Orland on Eastern River above the ordinary range of salmon. From early times the alewife fishery was far better on the east than on the west side of the bay and river, a fact which may be taken to indicate that the eastern tributaries originally contained more extensive or more favorable breeding grounds than those on the west...the lakes and ponds in Orland have been the principal breeding places of the alewife...The implements of the alewife fishery are the weirs, mainly the same engaged in the salmon fishery. "Those built especially for alewives in Eastern River have no important peculiarities" although some had a "brush hook" extending 50 feet downstream of the weir. There were 17 people employed in salmon fishing in Orland in 1895, and 22 in 1896; 78 salmon were caught in 1895, and 122 in 1896. Others, about 30 people, dip-netted alewives as they ascended the dam (392,000 alewives). In the winter of 1879-80 there were 15 bag-nets in use [for smelt] in Orland.⁹

1907 Two fish curers (Fred Gross and O.P. Harriman) and one wholesale fish merchant (A.R. Soper) operated in town, with another 12 Orland residents were employed in fishing. Three vessels called Orland their home port, with fish included in the cargo.¹⁰

1900s "Fishing was undoubtedly the oldest industry in Hardscrabble [South Orland] and involved a good many families in the community. Tommy cods, flounder, and mackerel were fished for home consumption; alewives and Atlantic salmon were fished commercially. The alewives were sold fresh and smoked, and the salmon was sold fresh. They were both caught in the same weirs. The fish weir was quite a contraption, but was very efficient. The materials of construction could be found on any farm: spruce or fir stakes, gray birch brush, a few boards and some nails. Neighbor helped neighbor build a weir... No one ever got rich, but for the times, those families who had a weir made a good living in early summer. One of the advantages was the saving of a salmon for the Fourth of July dinner. Almost everyone who had a weir had an ice house, ice packed in a huge pile of sawdust, and about a week before the fourth a salmon was saved and packed between two cakes of ice until the morning of the fourth, when it was dug out and prepared for the Fourth of July dinner. Now one family could not use a whole fish weighing eight to ten pounds, so it was divided up and given to friends who did not have a weir."¹¹

1936 A few weirs were built to catch the spring run of alewives and a small number of salmon...Even alewives were considered very palatable table food. During the spring run they were eaten fresh or smoked along with dandelion greens and hot biscuits. In winter alewives which had been canned in vinegar and spices became a common menu item."¹²

1940s Avery “Bud” Bowden, son of Eathrow Darling Bowden, lived on Route 174 four miles south of Orland Village. He was “the last person to weir fish on the river.” Bowden, 79, was interviewed by David Taylor of the Maine Folklife Center in March 1974. He talked about weir fishing and life on the Penobscot in the early twentieth century. Salmon and alewives were caught in weirs during the spring and early summer, but it was never a sole occupation. Bowden said, like others, he was a “jack of all trades.”

“I’ve done most everything,” including lobstering, cutting wood, and working in a sardine factory.” His uncle Wes Bowden fished the Grand Banks, and his father caught salmon and alewives in the weir, which he salted and smoked himself, or sold fresh. 15,000 alewives could be caught in one haul; weirs also trapped tomcod, sturgeon, and harbor pollock, which were thrown back into the water. Weirs caught skates, squid, hake, haddock, mackerel, dogfish, eels, shiners, blueback herring – seals would take fish from weirs. “We caught every fish here you could think of. You name it, we caught ‘em here.” They’d catch between one and twenty salmon in a tide. Salmon were shipped to Bangor. Alewives were smoked, or salted (pickled) and packed into barrels, and sold to Tom Nickerson, who shipped them to Haiti. “They served them in bar rooms when you ordered a beer,” according to Bowden. Decatur Bridges was known as the Alewife King. He’d go to Bangor every day in a “big powerboat” and sell “thousands and thousands and thousands” of smoked alewives and also salmon.

On the Orland Dam, Bowden said “The fish went through there years ago, they don’t now.” The fishermen blamed declining populations on a lack of access to upstream habitat. Pollution, too, was having an effect in the 1970s. Bowden also said how his uncle used to fish for smelt. “So much pollution going into it now, ain’t no smelts in there.”

Bowden mentioned other fishermen in Orland: Mel Leach, Willie Marks, Frank Collins, Elijah Heath (“Lijah”), Ed Heath, Norris Heath, Billy Cummins (their father?), George Grindle, Wes Bowden (Avery’s uncle), Fred Bowden, Will Dean, Frank Webster, Del Cummins, Decatur Bridges, Ed Stover, Kyle Leach, Rob Gray, Harold Leach, Will Leach, Willis Gibbs, Barns.¹³

1943 “The Orland River has an excellent alewife run which passes over two fishways into Alamoosook Lake. The fishway at the tidewater dam is at present so short that it can be ascended by the fishes only during the higher stages of the tide. The size of the run might be increased, if this ladder were lengthened and redesigned...”¹⁴

1953 Orland was the only Penobscot River community to maintain a commercial harvest of alewives.¹⁵

1956 The Orland River drainage is best known for its production of a thriving alewife fishery. In reviewing Alamoosook Lake, fisheries biologist Keith Havey recommended that “the existing alewife run should be maintained, for young alewives provide an excellent forage fish for bass and large white perch.”¹⁶

1976 The last smelt net in the lower Penobscot River was hung up to dry. Shad were long gone. Alewives continued to arrive every spring and were trapped in the town weir just below the dam in the village. Gradually over the years weir fishing in the river disappeared with the exception

of one set just off Fish Point. For a number of years alewives were caught in this trap to be smoked (an Orland delicacy for many, many years).¹⁷

1982 Orland had the third largest alewife fishery in the state, with 436,021 fish annually.¹⁸

1993 With declining numbers, the alewife fishery closed, and reopened in 1999. Since that time, the harvest and sale of alewives has generated between \$1,000 and \$18,000 annually, depending on the size of the fish run.

¹ Mitchell, Daggett, Walton and Lawton. 1907. *The Town Register Bucksport, Orland, Orrington, Verona*. Brunswick, ME: The H.E. Mitchell Co.

² Ames, P.J., and S. Bray, editors. 2000. *Best Remembered: Orland, Maine, 1800-2000: history and recollected stories to celebrate our bicentennial*. Orland, ME: Town of Orland.

³ Sawyer, G.R. "Orland Deep Sea Fisheries" in *Best Remembered*.

⁴ Sawyer, G.R. "Orland Deep Sea Fisheries" in *Best Remembered*.

⁵ Sawyer, G.R. "Orland Deep Sea Fisheries" in *Best Remembered*.

⁶ Foster, N.W., and C.G. Atkins. 1868. Report of Commission on Fisheries, in Senate Document No. 7, 47th Legislature. Augusta, ME: Stevens & Sayward.

⁷ Foster, N.W., and C.G. Atkins. 1869. Second Report of the Commissioners of Fisheries State of Maine 1868. Augusta, ME: Owen & Nash.

⁸ Goode, G.B. 1887. The Fisheries and Fisheries Industries of the United States, Section II. United States Commission of Fish and Fisheries. Washington DC: Government Printing Office.

⁹ Atkins, C.G. 1887. The River Fisheries of Maine, pp. 673-728 in *The Fisheries and Fishery Industries of the United States*, V, I. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office; Smith, H.M. 1898. The Salmon Fishery of Penobscot Bay and River in 1895 and 1896. *U.S. Fish Commission Bulletin* 17:113-124.

¹⁰ Mitchell et al. 1907. *The Town Register*.

¹¹ Bowden, D. and M. Bowden. 1992. *Hardscrabble*. University of Maine Fogler Library Special Collections.

¹² Davis, V. S. "Making a living" in *Best Remembered*.

¹³ Taylor, D.L. 1974. Penobscot River Commercial Fisheries Project. Orono, ME: Maine Folklife Center.

¹⁴ Rounsefell, G.A., and L.D. Stringer. 1943. Restoration and management of the New England alewife fisheries with special reference to Maine. U.S. Department of the Interior Fish and Wildlife Service Fishery Leaflet 42. Chicago, IL.

¹⁵ Baird, F.T. 1953. The status of the alewife fishery in Maine, Fisheries Circular No. 13, A Bulletin of the Department of Sea and Shore Fisheries, Augusta, ME.

¹⁶ Havey, K.A. 1956. Orland River Drainage Fish Management and Resotation. Augusta, ME: Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Game.

¹⁷ Sawyer, George R., "Orland Deep Sea Fisheries" in *Best Remembered*.

¹⁸ DIFW, DMR, ASRSC. 1982. State of Maine Statewide River Fisheries Management Plan. Augusta, ME.

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