

The Colonists

While we may never know the first European to set foot on what would become Maine soil, we do know that Samuel de Champlain (French), Estevan Gomez (Portuguese, sailed for Spain), George Popham (English), George Weymouth (English), and others made their way along the Maine coast exploring and/or establishing the first European settlements. Settlement came at great cost, as European arrivals brought illnesses to which Native populations had no immunity. It was also common practice by early explorers to kidnap Natives as both specimens and slaves. Some captured individuals were made to work as interpreters and guides between Native communities and European settlers, often while still being held in slavery.

When the first colonists came to Maine, they did not set sail for "New England" because John Smith didn't coin the term until 1616. At that time, New England was referred to as "the northern parts of the Virginia Territory." It was a difficult area to settle as winters were harsh and the soil was thin, acidic, and rocky, which made farming challenging. In 1607, the same year as Jamestown, Popham colony was established by George Popham in the present-day town of Phippsburg, Maine. It was the first colony established in what would later become New England, but because it ultimately failed a little over a year later, it never gained the historic clout of Jamestown. While in Maine, colonists built the first English oceangoing ship in what would become the United States and named it "The Virginia of the Sagadahoc." It was created to show England the potential of shipbuilding in America, specifically in New England. The Popham Colony never gained the notoriety of the much more famous Plymouth Colony even though the Popham Colony was founded 13 years before the first pilgrim set foot on Plymouth Rock.



The drawing of "The Virginia" found on John Hunt's plan of Fort St. George. The settlement plan for Popham Colony.



Painting of Sir John Popham (artist unknown, 1602, collection of Harvard Law School)

Sir John Popham was Chief Justice of the King's Bench during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, the chief financier of the Popham Colony, and uncle to George Popham.



Plymouth Rock



Old Orchard Beach has been a tourist destination for more than 200 years.



As the earliest settlers came to Maine, they created settlements along the coast. Many of these settlements became landmarks for navigation. For example, in 1657 Thomas Rogers settled a beautiful stretch of land along a beach and planted, "A Garden by the Sea." Eventually he abandoned this settlement, but his orchard remained serving as a navigational landmark. This "old orchard" became the namesake for the Maine town of, "Old Orchard Beach."

During its earliest years, Maine was a frontier where colonists worked to survive in a harsh and unfamiliar environment. Success often depended on learning from the land and from Native peoples who had long understood how to live with its seasonal rhythms. Relations with the Wabanaki were complex, involving periods of trade and cooperation as well as periods of deadly conflict driven by differing views of land use, trade, European settlement, and wars between the French and English.



McIntire Garrison, York, Maine c. 1707

One of the oldest homes still standing in Maine, this home was built as a garrison with reinforced log walls to protect inhabitants from attack.

In this colonial period, life in Maine was based on a subsistence lifestyle. People grew what they needed to survive, often cooperating within their local communities. While trade did occur, it was limited, and most families relied on their own labor and the resources around them. Blueberries were a seasonal food source rather than a staple. During the colonial period blueberries were not yet seen as a valuable crop but rather as a natural resource that grew freely across the landscape. Blueberries thrived on open barrens, land that colonists often viewed as unclaimed or of little agricultural use and were available for anyone to gather who had the time to do so, as picking and preserving blueberries was a labor intensive task.

Often during this time period, blueberries were eaten simply. They were added to milk, sometimes sweetened, and sometimes spices were added. Blueberries were also used as a medicine to reduce fevers. In addition, the leaves and roots were boiled to make tea.

Much of the colonists' knowledge of wild blueberries was learned from the Wabanaki. Colonists learned many traditional Wabanaki ways of preparing blueberries and adapted them to their own cooking. Blueberries were added to some forms of pemmican, a preserved mixture of dried meat and fat. Pemmican is a nutrient-dense, lightweight food that can be stored for long periods of time. Colonists also made their own version of sautauthig, a pudding made with blueberries and cracked corn (cornmeal). Colonists added butter, sugar, and milk to the mash, and it is believed this mixture was served at early colonial harvest meals like the first Thanksgiving.



Sautauthig, a pudding made from cornmeal and blueberries