

War and the Rise of the Cannery

Maine is the only one-syllable state in the country—but where did the name come from?

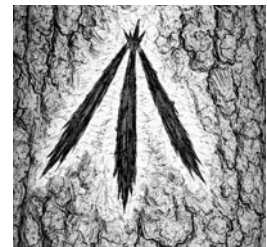
Historians believe the name "Maine" came from the word main, or mainland, used to distinguish the large landmass from the state's thousands of coastal islands. The term "mainland" is still used today by island residents to describe traveling to the larger interior landmass for goods, services, and access to the rest of the state. No one knows exactly why King Charles I of England called it the "Province of Mayne" when he granted the land to Sir Ferdinando Gorges. The grant created conflict because the land had already been claimed by King James I of England and granted to the Plymouth Company (later the Council for New England). This was just one example in a long history of disputed land ownership, including ownership of the blueberry barrens.



Mt. Desert Island's largest town is Bar Harbor, Maine.

As people immigrated to the province of Maine and towns grew, the land itself began to change. At the time of the Revolutionary War, Maine was considered the northern territory of the Massachusetts colony and quickly joined in the fight for independence from Great Britain. Mainers held a long list of grievances with the British, and near the top of the list was British control of Maine's towering white pines, called the King's Pines.

In the eyes of the English, Maine's greatest resource was its vast old-growth pine forests. These towering trees were essential for shipbuilding, providing the long, straight masts needed for naval vessels. England depended on these towering trees to supply masts for one of the world's most powerful navies. This led King William III (William of Orange) of England to officially begin a policy in 1691 that reserved all white pines greater than 24 inches in diameter for the Crown. Surveyors were sent into Maine forests to mark these trees with the "King's Broad Arrow," a symbol cut into the bark with an axe. Once marked, it became illegal for colonists to cut, sell, or use these trees without permission.



"The King's Broad Arrow"



The carved, gilded, pinecone atop the Massachusetts State House symbolizes the value of the Maine forests.

When tension erupted into violence at Lexington and Concord, outrage spread quickly. In Machias, Maine, tensions rose when Localist merchant, Captain Ichabod Jones, accompanied by the British armed schooner "Margaretta," arrived to obtain lumber for British forces occupying Boston. The people of Machias refused to trade their lumber, even when offered much-needed supplies or money. To the British, this defiance was unacceptable. Before the British could react, Machias resident Jeremiah O'Brien gathered fellow townspeople at Burnham Tavern to plan their response. There he gathered a crew of townspeople who commandeered Jones's merchant ship, "Unity," and used another vessel, "Falmouth Packet," to attack the British schooner "Margaretta," killing its captain, Lt. James Moore. Once the battle was over, townspeople outfitted "Unity" with seized weapons and renamed her, "Machias Liberty." The Burnham Tavern still stands today as a National Historic Site for its significance to the American Revolutionary War, and the Battle of Machias is recognized as the war's first naval battle.



The Battle of Machias. This marked the first naval battle of the Revolutionary War.

Image from Naval History and Heritage Command.

Wild blueberries did not play a major military role during the Revolutionary War due to the limitations of both harvesting and storage. Fresh wild blueberries have a very short shelf life, making them difficult to preserve, transport, or supply to troops in a meaningful way. Food harvesting and preservation technology had to improve in order to elevate the status of the blueberry from a seasonal, locally consumed food to a commodity that could be stored, transported, and eventually sold in wider markets. However, that was soon about to change.



Napoleon with His Troops at the Battle of Borodino, 1812
Robert Alexander Hillingford

French military commander and later Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte made the famous quote, "An army marches on its stomach." As one of the great military commanders he understood that a military force depends on efficient food supply lines and proper nutrition. In 1795 Napoleon offered 12,000 francs to anyone who could improve existing food preservation methods to make food easily transportable and suitable for sustaining large quantities of French troops both on land and at sea. It took more than 14 years of experimentation for Nicolas Appert to rise to the challenge, publishing a book in 1810 that would revolutionize food storage with his invention of the canning process. He learned

that if food was put into jars, heated, and sealed, it would keep food from spoiling. Appert's original "jars," which looked more like bottles, worked even though he did not fully understand why. The scientific explanation of his process would come about 50 years later through the work of Louis Pasteur, the mind behind the pasteurization process, whose discoveries in microbiology showed that heating food kills the microorganisms that cause spoilage.



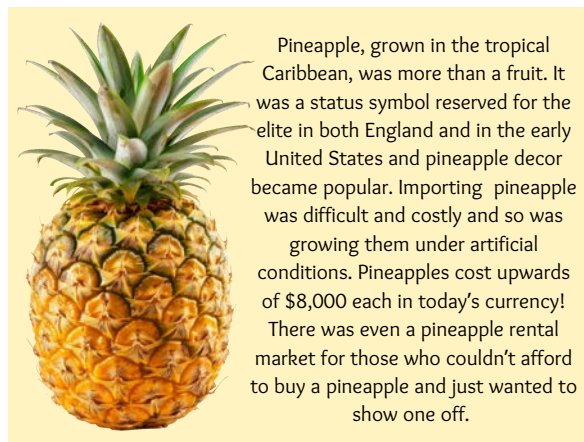
Appert's bottle and Durand's tin "canister"

Improving on Appert's method was Englishman Peter Durand, who in 1810 patented the invention of the tin-coated iron can. He found that by using tinplate, the food inside would not react with the iron, helping prevent spoilage and off-flavors while keeping the contents safe for longer periods of time. While still using Appert's heat and vacuum process, Durand's stronger and easier to transport design made canned foods more durable and transportable which was very helpful for military application. As the canning preservation process spread, it began to expand the foodscape, setting the stage for industrialization.

It didn't take long before canning technology made it to American shores. In 1812 Robert Ayers opened the first cannery in New York City. It's unclear who operated the first cannery in Maine, but corn and lobster were some of the first commercially canned products starting around the 1840s.

When Maine became a state in 1820, it was clear that the ideological and moral issue of slavery was reaching a critical point. Maine's statehood came as part of the Missouri Compromise, a pact designed to maintain a balance between free states in the North and slave states in the South. In the years that followed, tensions over slavery, states' rights, and the expansion of slavery into new territories continued to grow, until they ultimately erupted into the American Civil War, which became a pivotal moment in the history of the blueberry industry.

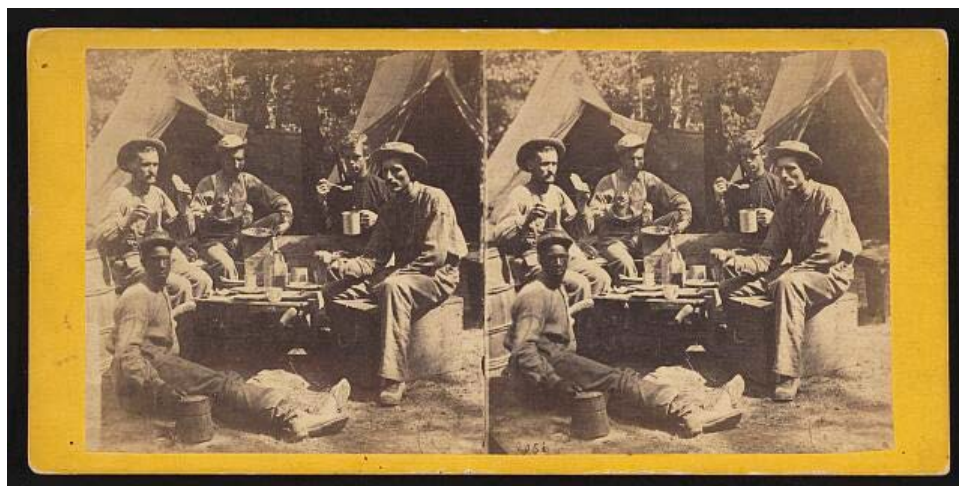
In modern society we take for granted how easy it is to eat a balanced diet. Going to the grocery store to buy fruits or vegetables that traveled hundreds or even thousands of miles is a recent development in the annals of human history. It was not always easy to get the vitamins and minerals the human body needed. One condition, scurvy, is caused by a vitamin C deficiency. The treatment for scurvy is relatively simple - eat more fruit. However, some people, such as sailors and soldiers, often lacked access to fresh fruits and vegetables.



Just as Napoleon Bonaparte had recognized decades earlier, feeding an army was as critical as training one and this proved true during the Civil War. Advances in food preservation, including canning, made it possible to supply troops with reliable, transportable, long-lasting food. However, just because canning technology existed doesn't mean it was ready to mobilize to feed an army.

The majority of food consumed by soldiers during the Civil War was basic and bland. Union soldiers were typically fed boiled and salted meats, hardtack- a type of dried biscuit, coffee, sugar, salt, vinegar, and occasionally fruits and vegetables when they could get them. Scurvy was common during the Civil War, especially among Confederate troops who lacked strong supply systems, but it was still a concern for Union troops.

As canning was still in its infancy, there was a great deal of experimentation about what could be put in cans. Putting fruit in cans was still a relatively new idea during the Civil War, though it was becoming more common. Maine's wild blueberries, rich in nutrients and vitamin C, had the potential to support soldiers' diets and prevent scurvy. While not many blueberries were sent to the front, those that were helped introduce the fruit to a wider audience. Most importantly, canned blueberries tasted good! This moment, where technological innovation met a growing need, helped launch the wild blueberry industry onto the national stage. Blueberries were much more tasty than the typical fare used to treat scurvy, some of which tasted so poorly that instead of calling this mixture of turnips, cabbage, and potatoes by the government name of desiccated (meaning dried) vegetables soldiers mockingly called them desecrated (meaning violated) vegetables. Eating canned blueberries was an enjoyable experience and when the war ended, soldiers found themselves looking to eat these now familiar foods. This helped create a growing demand for canned blueberries beyond the battlefield.



Army of the Potomac Union soldiers cooking dinner in camp
(Library of Congress)



Civil War Recruiting Poster, Houlton, Maine 1862
Maine Memory Network