



2012

Bath, Maine: A City of Ships

Taylor Witkin
Colby College, tmwitkin@colby.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/heane>



Part of the [Environmental Sciences Commons](#), [Military History Commons](#), [Place and Environment Commons](#), [Terrestrial and Aquatic Ecology Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

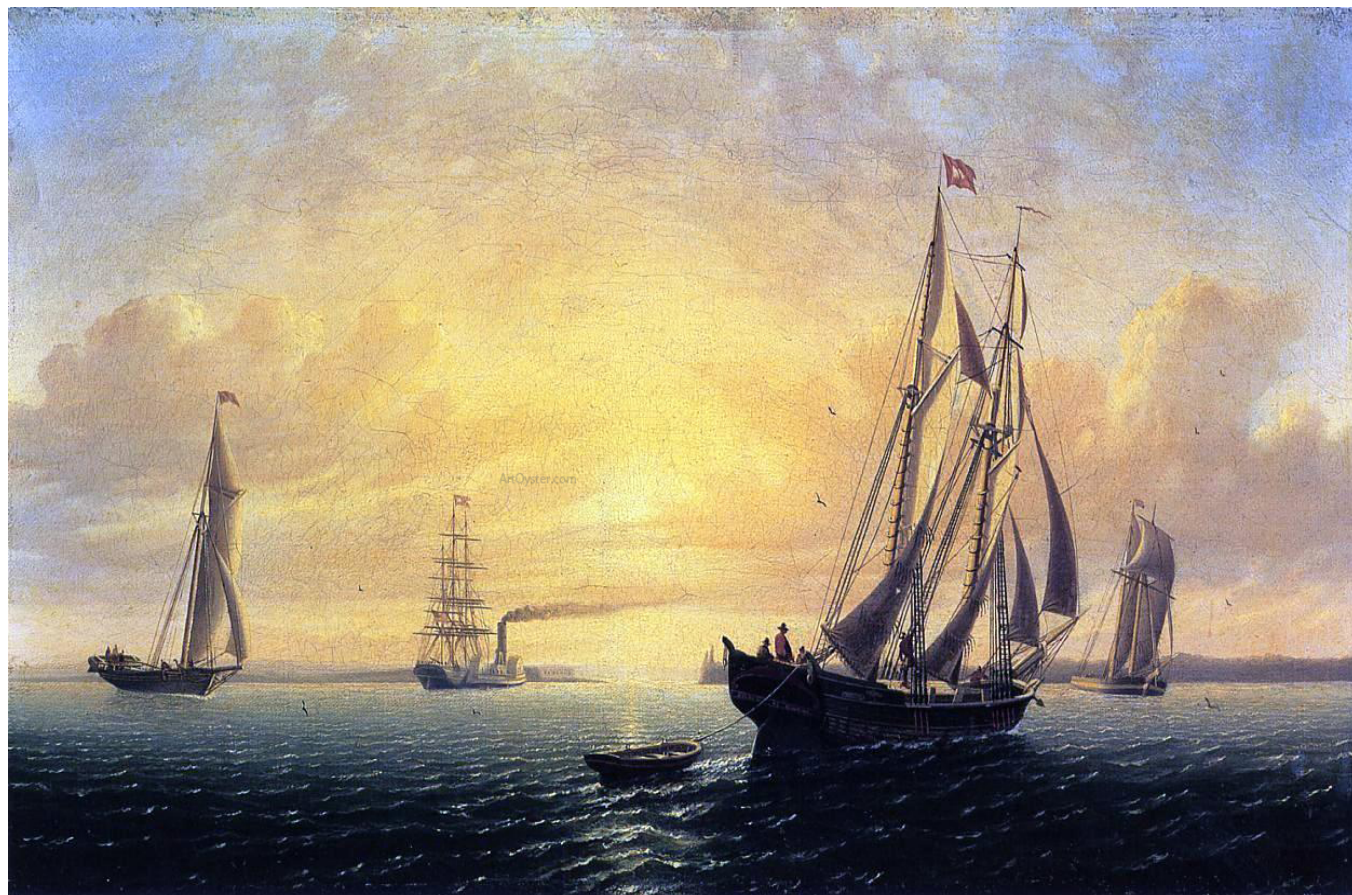
Witkin, Taylor, "Bath, Maine: A City of Ships" (2012). *Historical Ecology Atlas of New England*. 3.
<https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/heane/3>

This Presentation is brought to you for free and open access by the Environmental Studies Program at Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Historical Ecology Atlas of New England by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Colby.

Bath, Maine: A City of Ships

By Taylor Witkin

Known as Maine's city of ships, Bath sits on the shores of the Kennebec River, about 15 miles from the Gulf of Maine and 40 miles up the coast from Portland. Though small in population, Bath's impact on Maine, the rest of United States, and even on the world has been anything but small. Today Bath is known mostly for the Bath Iron Works, which supplies the US Navy with a large portion of its fleets, however, in Bath's early days it built large, wooden yachts and schooners mostly for trade, not war. The next few pages will explore Bath's history of shipbuilding as well as other changes to the town throughout the years; specifically Bath's impact on the people and land along the Kennebec River and the human and environmental the factors that have shaped Bath into the town that it is today.



The Schooner 'Jane' of Bath, Maine – 1857. An oil painting of a schooner built in Bath. (Painting by William Bradford reproduced from <http://www.museumsyndicate.com/item.php?item=14786>)

Shipbuilding's Early Days

Settled in 1607 by English colonists, the 'Long Reach,' juts up into Merrymeeting Bay and served as fishing, hunting, and trapping grounds for the Abenaki Indians.¹ Dealings between the Abenaki and the settlers were generally peaceful and land titles owned by European settlers date back to 1640. However, "by 1623 there were flourishing little towns at Saco, Biddeford, Pemaquid, Bath, and along Merrymeeting Bay."² The town of Bath, though, was not incorporated until 1781.

Although shipbuilding in Bath started in the late 1600s, it did not resemble the shipyards today, or even in the 1800s. Settlers of the Long Reach built small vessels with their families in the late 17th and early 18th century. Men and their sons would work on their watercrafts on the family farm by the water. It was not until 1760 that shipbuilding in Bath became an industry. Captain William Swanton arrived and recognized the Long Reach as a perfect place to build ships. His shipyard launched the *Earl of Brute*, in 1762. Swanton's yard continued to churn out a ship a year until the American Revolution, an impressive feat for the limited technology of the era. The productivity of shipbuilding in Swanton's era, however, did not match Bath's output in the mid-1800s.

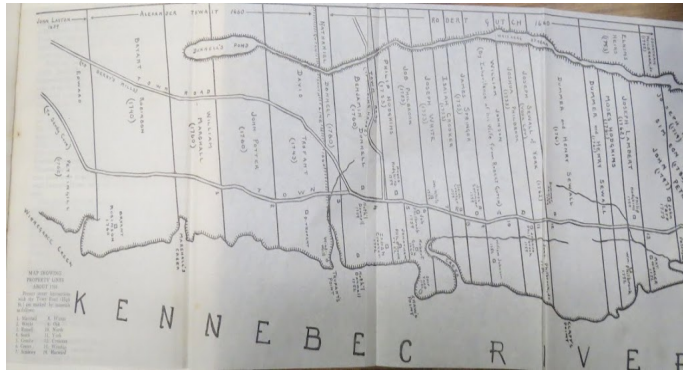
In 1825, Bath's shipyards, aided by the abundance of suitable wood and land along the Kennebec River, launched a combined 15 ships. Between 1831 and 1833, Bath launched 53 ships. By the 1840s, with its 17 shipyards, Bath had achieved a "position in the maritime world which placed her among the great ports of the country," and the world.³ Throughout the 1800s, Bath's shipyards constructed many of its ships for local owners involved in trade with France, Great Britain, and the West Indies, further increasing its stature among the world's ports.

In addition to an ideal location for shipbuilding, population growth also enhanced Bath's productivity. Though much lower than it is today, Bath's population increased from 3100 in 1822 to 3773 in 1830.⁴ An increase in the number of workers certainly helped Bath augment its efficiency and status. Unfortunately, Bath suffered a down turn in shipbuilding during the Civil War. Though the Kennebec region received little action other than harboring escaped slaves, the war did affect trade and the lives of the area's residents. Around 800 Bath residents served in the conflict, with over 100 dead and even more disabled by the end of the fighting.⁴ One reason that Bath produced fewer ships than previous years was that Mainer's had over-harvested the shipbuilding timber earlier that century. Shipbuilders also relied on oak and hard pine shipped up from the south on vessel often built in Bath. During the war the Confederacy cut off those supply chains and destroyed ships, reducing Bath's ability to build for vessels.

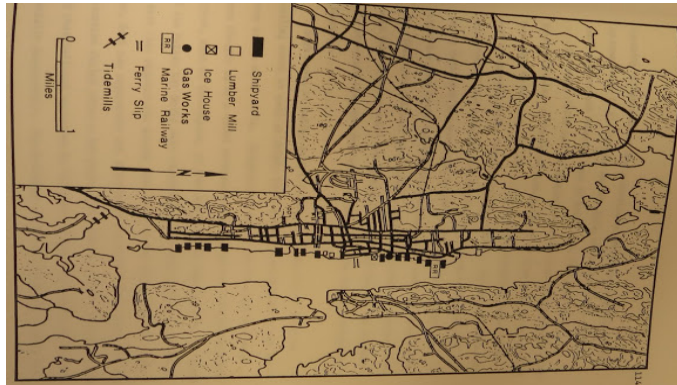
By 1870, Bath had reached its highest pre-Civil War production levels. Bath shipyards focused their efforts on building schooners, which aided the coastal trade that expanded after the Civil War.⁵ There was a growing, insatiable demand for lumber, some of which came from Maine, by the growing cities and towns. But since much of the hardwoods along in the Kennebec region had already been harvested, "some of the best of the oak and hard pine from the Southern states was brought north to Maine shipbuilders to be fashioned into new schooners to carry more lumber and other commodities to the growing cities."⁵ Other goods included bricks, case oil, gypsum, phosphates, sugar and sulfur. But Baker writes that the most important commodities were coal and ice. Ice harvesting was a way of life for Kennebeckers, however, with their "seemingly inexhaustible supplies of wood at hand they were slow to accept coal."⁵ However, coal soon became a necessity, as New England's streams were no longer powerful enough to power the growing mills and factories.

In 1890, shipbuilding in Bath took a drastic turn. Up until the late 1800s, Bath had been behind the other parts of the world in terms of the types of ships it produced. About 70 years after English shipbuilders completed the *Aaron Manby*, the world's first self-propelled iron vessel, Thomas Hyde and his Bath Iron Works (BIW) took over as Bath's premier shipyard. While other shipyards in Bath thrived during the first through years of BIW's existence, the Iron Works eventually monopolize shipbuilding in Bath, never having built a wooden ship.

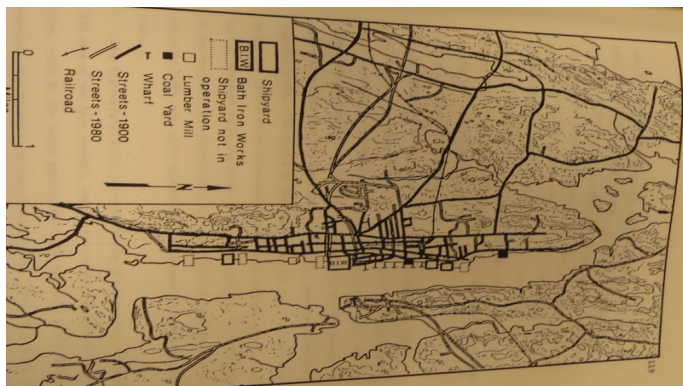
Maps of Bath



Map of Bath – 1750s. This map shows the landowners, property lines, and original roads of Bath, as well as the outline of the waterfront before the shipyards were established. (Map reproduced from Owen, H.W. (1936) *The Edward Clarence Plummer History of Bath, Maine.* The Times Company)



Map of Bath – 1870. This map of Bath shows the large presence of shipyards in that era. In 1870 there were 15 shipyards in Bath.. (Map reproduced from Marentette, D.B. (1983) *An Historical Geography of Bath, Maine: 1600-1920.* In Department of Geography, University of Oregon)



Map of Bath – 1900s. This map of Bath shows the expansion of Bath Iron Works in the early 1900s. It is the largest of the three shipyards in Bath. (Map reproduced from Marentette, D.B. (1983) *An Historical Geography of Bath, Maine: 1600-1920.* In Department of Geography, University of Oregon)



Map of Bath – 1858. This map of Bath shows all the wharves and docks of the many shipyards that existed in the 1800s. The wharves were silted and filled in after the shipyards closed. (Map created by J. Chase Jr.. Publisher, courtesy of David Allen and oldmaps.com)

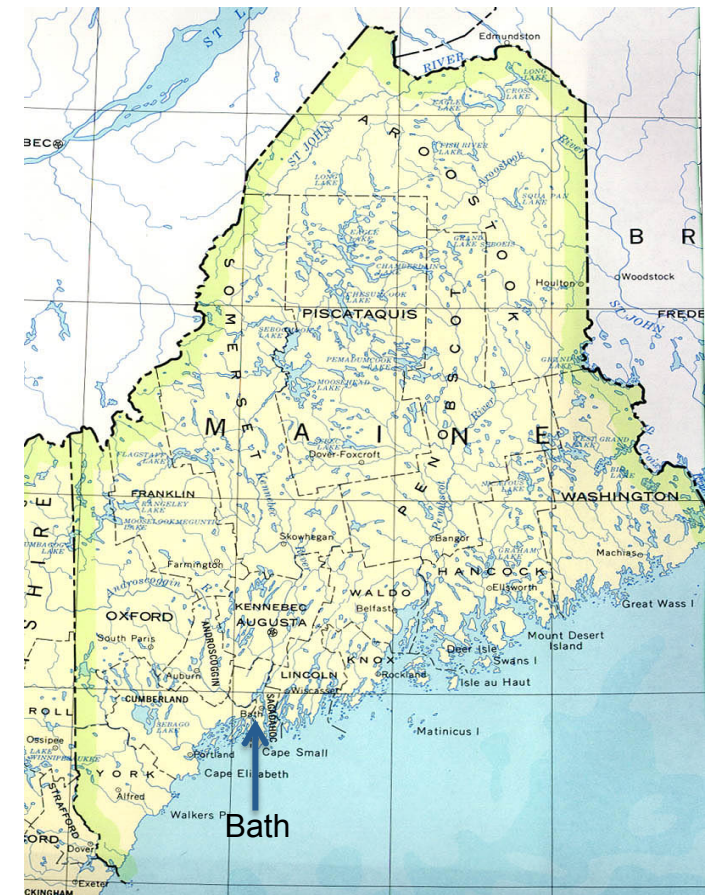
A Perfect Place for Shipbuilding

Situated on the western bank of the Kennebec River, Bath is a perfect place for shipbuilding. Its gently sloping shore meets the deep water of the Kennebec River that flows from Moosehead Lake into the Gulf of Maine. The sandy bottom of the river provides good holding for anchorage while absence of any cliffs or rocky outcroppings along the shore made it easier for families to start building ships in the 17th and 18th centuries.^{7,8} On the small family farms throughout Bath, “between the planting and haying and haying and harvesting, the men and boys of the family worked on the family sloop or ketch.”² That farming was a challenge, due to the stony acres along the Kennebec shores, made shipbuilding a viable option as a way of life. According to Louise Dickinson Rich, “more ships were built on the Long Reach than on any other three-mile stretch in the world.”² The only down side to Bath’s location is Maine’s harsh winter climate. The original settlers at the Popham Colony, about 15 miles south of Bath, left due to poor leadership and brutally cold winters.

The Kennebec’s forests also helped Bath establish itself as one of the most productive shipbuilding towns in America. Before the European settlers arrived on the Kennebec’s shores, white pines and red oaks dominated the forests. The 150 foot pines trees and the vast wilderness that they thrived in scared the first settlers. The colonists, however, recognized the Long Reach as an ideal place to develop the shipbuilding industry as they realized that both types of trees could serve as excellent building materials. In Maine, shipbuilders used the abundant and hard red oak for the keels, frames, and planking of ships while white pine, the softer of the two trees, went to the masts and beams of Bath’s vessels. As the population and shipbuilding industry in Bath grew, lumberjacks cleared more and more forest around Bath to make way for houses and farms. The shipyards then used the wood for their crafts, which continually grew in size and weight.

Because of the industry’s rapid expansion, “the famous Maine lumberjacks went farther and farther up the Kennebec...Gradually the pine forests that had seemed so endlessly inexhaustible were nibbled away until today only a few lonely giants rear their head above the surrounding fir and spruce on the ridges overlooking the upper river.”² Trees felled north of Bath travelled down the Kennebec in the regions log drives to the various mills and shipyards scattered along the river.

When all that was left of the Kennebec’s forests were fir and spruce, trees too soft for shipbuilding, Bath turned to southern timber, like white oak and yellow pine, for its ships. Vessels originally built in Bath would often transport timber from mid-Atlantic and southern states, primarily Georgia and Florida, up to Bath so a shipyard could turn it into another schooner, sloop, or square-rigger. Bath, however, did put its spruce and fir forests to use, using them to build factories and houses in the town. After 1890, however, when Bath’s shipyards started producing iron vessels, they no longer needed Maine’s wood.



Map of Maine. (Map reproduced from http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/united_states/maine_90.jpg)

Fire by the Water

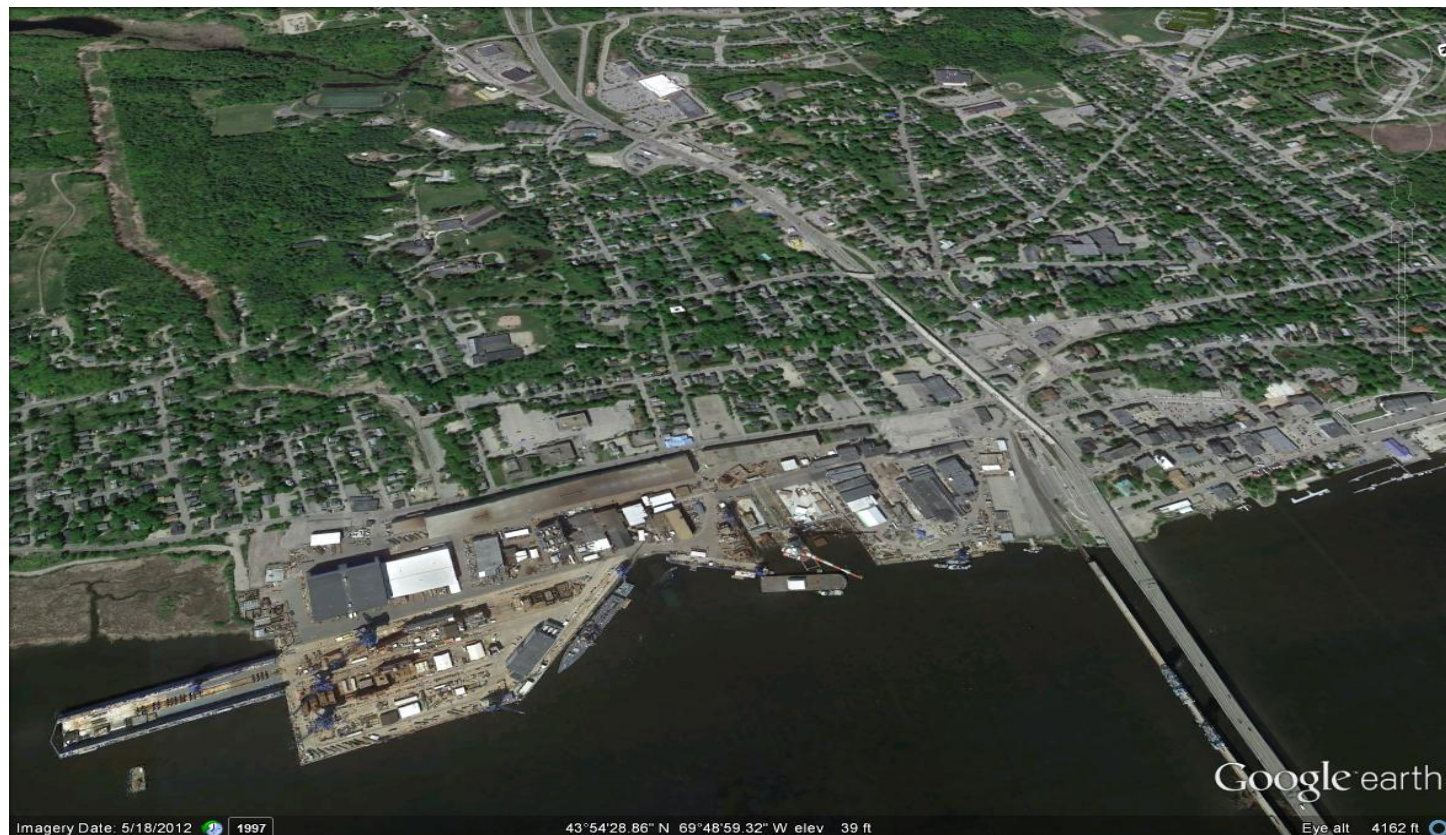
Though the world knows Bath for its shipbuilding, for its ties to the Kennebec and the oceans on which its ships sail, it also has a long history of fire. In fact, according to annual reports by the fire department, shown in Henry Wilson Owen's *History of Bath*, the town experienced at least one fire every year from 1829 until 1936. While fires, like the Front Street fire of 1837 that destroyed 30 buildings, were catastrophes, they did lead to Bath's growth as a town. The 1837 fire, along with a population that tripled between 1800 and 1830, "produced a new central business district of brick buildings beginning in the late 1830s."⁴

Fires not only affected the town of Bath, but also the shipyards, which until 1889 produced only wooden ships. On July 15, 1887, "the New England Shipbuilding Co. suffered a \$50,000 fire with no insurance, which for a time, threatened to wreck what was then the largest shipbuilding enterprise in the city."³ On February 13, 1894, a large fire that cost \$150,000 started "in the joiners shop of the Bath Iron Works and in a few hours a large portion of the works was destroyed."⁶

Immediately after the fire, The New York Times reported "the statement of Treasure [Thomas] Hyde of Bath Iron Works that the company will not rebuild at Bath." Shortly after the fire however, "Thomas Hyde decided...to stay in Bath and rebuild fireproof buildings" though "his anger at the situation nearly moved the entire business to New London, Connecticut."⁴ Though the fire caused thousands of dollars in damage, it gave the town an "opportunity to widen Front Street," "construct 'modern' buildings with large expanses of plate glass to entice the window shopper," and to present itself as an "up-to-date city, quick to recover from catastrophe."⁴ Bath has seen many smaller fires since the 1930s; however, none were as disastrous as the conflagrations in the 1700s and 1800s.



Aerial view of Bath – 1878. A birds eye view illustration of Bath. The ferry in the bottom right corner is headed to the ferry dock, located at what is now the ramp of the Sagadahoc Bridge. (Image reproduced from <http://mainmemory.net/artifact/28545/>)



Google Earth Image – 2012. An image from the same vantage point as the above picture. While the waterfronts in the two images are drastically different, the town and roads of Bath are similar. (Google Earth)



Photograph of downtown Bath – 1894. A fire broke out on front street, destroying the Sagadahoc House, Bath's largest hotel. The fire spread down Front Street, destroying many of the shops, almost destroying the town hall. (Courtesy of the Maine Maritime Museum archives)



Photograph. Bath residents look on as one of the foundries, where iron castings were made. (Courtesy of the Maine Maritime Museum archives)



Illustration of BIW – 1891. Illustration of Bath Iron Works . Three years after its establishment. *(Courtesy of the Maine Maritime Museum archives)*



Photograph of BIW – 2012. Photograph of the Bath Iron Works taken from the Sagadahoc Bridge. *(Courtesy of author)*



Photograph of BIW – 2012. Photograph of three of the cranes at BIW, taken from down river of the Iron Works. *(Courtesy of author)*



Photograph of BIW – mid-1900s. Photograph of two cranes at BIW taken down river of the Iron Works. *(Courtesy of the Maine Maritime Museum archives)*

Dennis Youland: Bath Iron Works Employee (1968-2012)



Photograph of Dennis Youland. *(Courtesy of Dennis Youland)*

When it comes to the Bath Iron Works, Dennis Youland has seen it all. In 1968, he went to the employment office to get a job. His persistence paid off in March and BIW hired him as a ship’s laborer for \$2.09 an hour, which put him “in hog heaven,” since \$2.09 an hour in 1968 was considered a lot of money. During his 44 years, 5 months, and 7 days of service at the Iron Works, Dennis rose through the ranks; he went from manually working on ships to, at one point, managing 2000 workers at the shipyard.⁹

Having worked on the Kennebec River for much of his life, Dennis, who lives on the Sasanoa River, has witnessed the drastic changes to both waterways. Back in the 1960s and 1970s, there were very few environmental regulations. Industries, like the paper mills up river as well as people dumping waste into the Kennebec and Sasanoa Rivers, along with the dams that changed the flow of the Kennebec dirtied the waters. BIW contributed to the rivers pollution, as workers dumped tons of black grit, used for sandblasting, and other chemicals used during the shipbuilding process straight into the river. In the early days of his employment at BIW, Dennis said, “you wouldn’t swim in the river because it was so polluted.” Today, increased environmental regulations and awareness have helped to clean up the Kennebec.

Dennis also spoke about changes to the land surrounding the Iron Works. In 1999, BIW planned expand to what it is today, including a dock that extended into the river. The staging ground for the construction was a swamp. To compensate for destroying the swamp, BIW turned it into a town park after completion. It further bought close to 100 acres of cow pasture in Woolwich and restored it to the tidal marsh that it once was.⁹

Dennis retired a week before I interviewed him, due to failing health – he has Parkinson’s disease, which made work difficult. Though he is retired from his work at BIW, he will continue his job as a tour guide, imparting his vast knowledge and excitement about everything from the shipyard’s history to how they build the Navy’s ships.

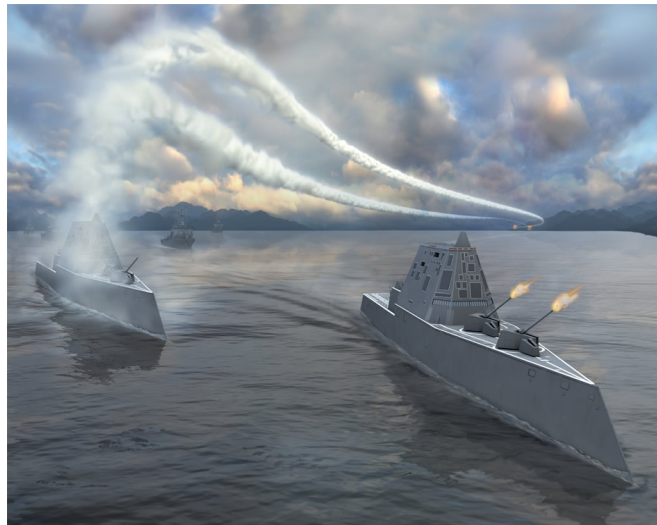
Bath Iron Works' Impact

Unlike Brunswick, Cooks Corner, and Wiscasset, towns that were once home to some of the shipyards of the Kennebec, Bath has never really embraced the tourism industry. While Front Street and Washington Street have long held quaint shops and restaurants, Bath is more of a working, industrial town than it is a tourist destination. Around noon during a workday, it is common to see to Bath Iron Works employees walking from the shipyard to lunch, still wearing their blue or white hard hats. When I visited Bath in early November, I was the only civilian eating lunch at the Starlight Café; all the other patrons worked at BIW.

In the early 1970s, Harry Ring, the city manager proposed an urban renewal, that would re-furbish the roads, storefronts, and sidewalks of downtown Bath, which was supposed to “become the bedroom community for the people assigned to the ships” made at the Iron Works.⁹ The business owners approved of the plan; however, a group of taxpayers opposed the renewal. The decision went to a citywide vote and the town ultimately decided not to go ahead with the plans. Many of the business either closed for good or moved to Cook’s Corner or Brunswick.⁹

Today, Bath Iron Works is an integral part of Bath as well as the surrounding area. Its roughly 5500 workers come from Bath as well as towns up the Kennebec River. In the early days of shipbuilding, workers lived close to Bath, but with the advent of automobiles, BIW’s influence on Maine grew. Like timber that came from further and further up the Kennebec River, some workers now commute from as far as Norridgewock. As Dennis said, “what happens at BIW affects the community immensely.”⁹

Throughout its history, shipbuilding in Bath has not just affected Bath and the greater Kennebec region. In the early days of shipbuilding, the clippers and square-riggers produced in Bath took part in trade with the West Indies and Europe.¹⁰ Since its foundation the Bath Iron Works has been one of the Navy’s main suppliers, building everything from gunboats in the 1890s to the modern day destroyers. In addition to its impact on the military, BIW produced steam yachts, ferries and tugboats in the early 1900s, trawlers for Massachusetts fishermen in the 1920s, and diesel trawlers for the French government in the late 1940s.¹¹ Bath, a town of only 8000 people, has touched the entire globe, from the forests along the Kennebec River to the world’s high seas.



Digital Image. The DDG 1000 Zumwalt class destroyer is scheduled to launch from BIW on July 4, 2013. It is designed for stealth and multiple combat scenario. Each ship costs \$3 billion. (Reproduced from from defenseindustrydaily.com)



Photograph of BIW – 2012. The dry dock of the Bath Iron Works, taken from down river of the shipyard. (Courtesy of author)

Resources

1. Calvert, Mary. Dawn over the Kennebec. Lewiston, ME: Twin City Printery, 1983.
2. Rich, L. D. 1967. The Kennebec River. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
3. Owen, H.W. (1936) *The Edward Clarence Plummer History of Bath, Maine*. The Times Company
4. Haynes, R. A. S., 2009, “Historical and Geographical Setting,” Chapter 3, Comprehensive Plan for the City of Bath.
5. Baker, W. A. 1973. A Maritime History of Bath, Maine and the Kennebec River Region. Marine Research Society of Bath, Bath, ME.
6. (1894) Bath Iron Works Destroyed. In *The New York Times*
7. Lipfert, Nathan. Personal Interview. November 1, 2012.
8. Marentette, D.B. (1983) An Historical Geography of Bath, Maine: 1600-1920. In *Department of Geography*, University of Oregon
9. Youland, Dennis. Personal Interview. November 1, 2012.
10. Reed, P. M. 1894. History of Bath and Environs. Lakeside Press, Printers, Portland, ME.
- 11.(2012) Ship List. Bath Iron Works <https://www.gdbiw.com/content/ship-list.html>