

October 1999

Final Period

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Recommended Citation

Collins, Stephen (1999) "Final Period," *Colby Magazine*: Vol. 88: Iss. 4, Article 15.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol88/iss4/15>

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A Watershed Breakthrough

Dammed since 1837, the Kennebec runs freely from Waterville south

By Stephen Collins '74

An old Ethiopian saying goes, "Beware of stagnant water and calm people."

Twenty years ago, the first time I launched a canoe on the Kennebec between Waterville and Augusta, I endured both: passive companions who let me plan the trip and then carped quietly about the utter lack of current and a pesky headwind that turned our Saturday idyll into an all-day slog-a-thon. Back then the river hadn't fully recovered from more than a century of service as a sewer and dump. As Mark Twain said of the Mississippi: "Too thick to drink and too thin to plow."

Returning to the scene of the grime this fall with Steve Brooke '67, the man who led the fight to remove Edwards Dam and let the river run free, I found plenty of evidence that the clean water legislation of the 1970s has helped. And instead of calm people and stagnant water I enjoyed dynamic companions and a brisk current with frequent riffles and rips.

For 162 years Edwards Dam backed the river up from Augusta north to Waterville. When the dam was breached on July 1st the event was a national news story. The order to remove Edwards Dam marked the first time the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission told an unwilling dam owner "tough luck"—that the public's interests and the welfare of salmon and striped bass count more than



On July 1, water smashes through a breach (at left) in Edwards Dam on the Kennebec River, setting a national precedent for river restoration.

a company's ability to make a few megawatts and a few bucks.

For environmentalists it was an unprecedented triumph. On an old crib from the log drives, Brooke's Trout Unlimited buddies had posted a "Welcome Back" sign for stripers, salmon, and sturgeon, and as we paddled I watched him eye pools and eddies as only a fly-fisherman can. In 25 years canoeing Maine rivers I never welcomed a standing wave over the bow and into my lap until September, when the Kennebec summoned its long-subdued energy to splash into my Mad River Explorer.

Not everyone shares our enthusiasm though. For those with different visions for a watershed, the Edwards decision was a Waterloo that set a troublesome precedent. Power companies circled the wagons. Bass fishermen with outboards lament the steep gravel banks, the shallow water and a boat ramp that stops 20 feet from the water. One river dweller who planned to repair seaplanes in his retirement is plain out of luck.

And then there are the beavers, who weren't consulted.

The day after the dam was breached I spotted high on the west bank a big beaver lodge that

for 162 years would have been partially underwater. As I approached, a panicky beaver charged out, dived for where the water used to be and tumbled down the 12-foot bank, flat tail over teakettle. Before I was done laughing a second beaver leaped headfirst onto a log. A third rolled down, equally undignified.

Now, almost three months later, new lodges have been built in eddies that didn't exist before. A fat beaver cavorting in front of my canoe smacked the water in the traditional way—with its tail this time. Life is getting back to normal.

But normal is a relative term. The victory at Edwards Dam freed 15 miles of the river from industrial bondage. But there are 10 more dams on the 100-plus miles up the Kennebec to its headwaters at Moosehead Lake.

The 17th-century English poet John Milton wrote, "If the waters of truth flow not in a perpetual progression, they sicken into a muddy pool of conformity and tradition." Steve Brooke and his allies went 15 rounds against the conformity-and-tradition tag team to get the lower Kennebec to flow freely again. He tells me striped bass already have been spotted rolling at the foot of the dam in Waterville—the first time since Colby founder Jeremiah Chaplin's lifetime. "Now what?" I imagine them asking.