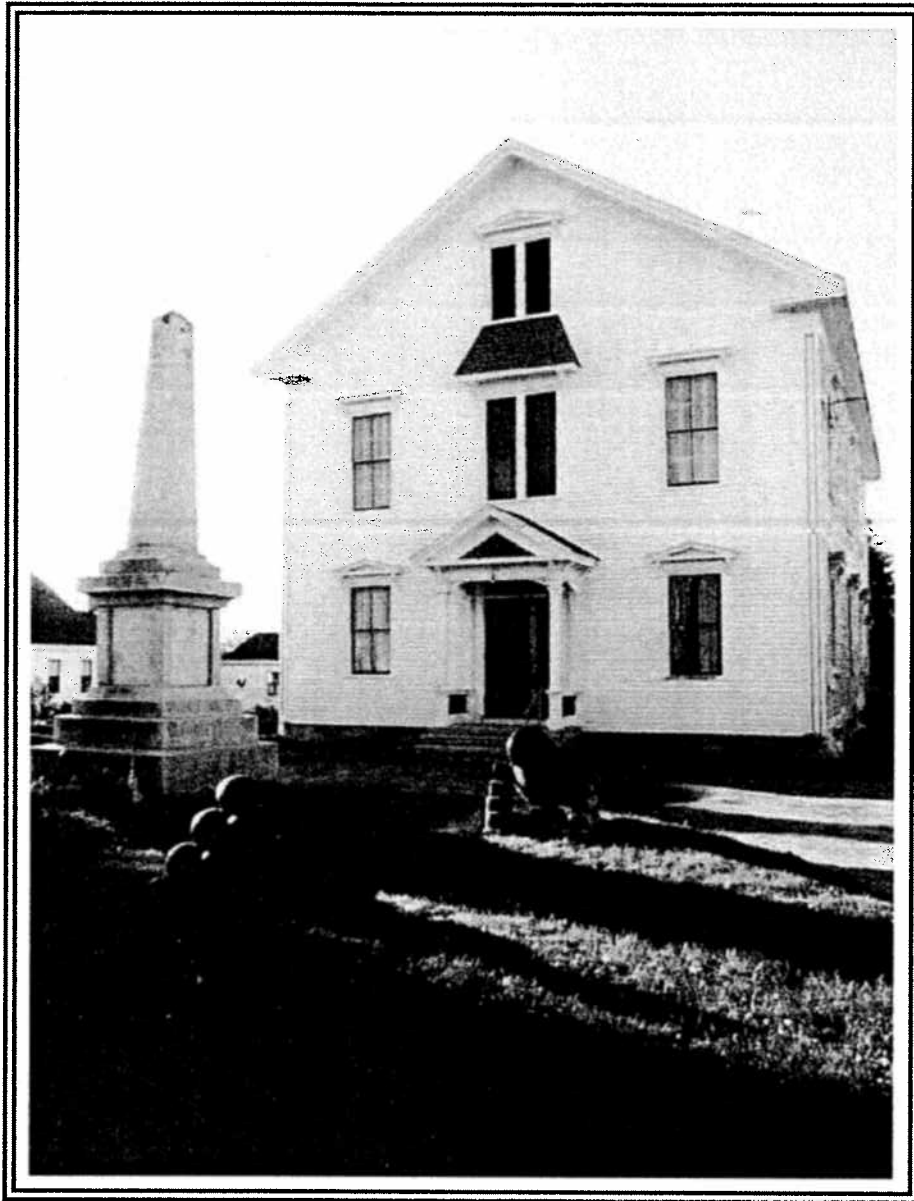


Searsport 2002



Comprehensive Plan

Charlene Knox Farris, 2001

HISTORY

Searsport is a town of twenty-eight square miles located nearly at the head of Penobscot Bay on the western shore, six miles from Belfast. Searsport was one of the towns formed out of the Old Frankfort Plantation of 1760, composed of parts of Prospect and East Belfast. The present day Mill Pond marks the half way point and was then known as Half Way Creek.

The East Belfast section was settled first, in 1770, followed later by settlements in the eastern Harbor District and the Mt. Ephraim area. The first settler was John Davidson who settled on what is now Moose Point State Park land. Four other original settlers in the Moose Point area were William McLaughlin, John Gilmore, John Durham and Samuel Houston, Sr., all from Londonderry, New Hampshire, and all investors in the original incorporation of Belfast. Richard Stimpson, who was the first surveyor of what is now Route One from Thomaston to Stockton Springs, was the first to settle in the Mt. Ephraim area. Peleg Pendleton was the first settler in the Harbor District and James Nichols was the first to settle at the shore, present day Navy Street, where the village of Searsport has since risen.

At the time of the American Revolution there were 23 families, about 100 people, in this area. With the closing of the British Fort Pownall, provisions were scarce. In 1779, rather than take the oath of allegiance to the King of England, most people left the area and went to stay with relatives in other parts of Maine or in New Hampshire. Some young men, like Samuel Houston, Jr., went to join the Continental Army at Cambridge. Houston was chosen to be a member of General George Washington's Life Guard and served with Washington at most of the major battles of the war, attaining the rank of captain.

After the war, some of the original settlers returned to find their homes burned by the British. Samuel Houston, Sr., was the first to rebuild his home, circa 1783. Located on the north side of Route one, one half mile west of Moose Point, it stands today, Searsport's oldest house.

With the growth of shipbuilding and trade, the village of West Prospect began to grow. By the 1840's there was talk of organizing a new town. Accordingly the people of West Prospect and East Belfast petitioned the Maine Legislature to be set off as a separate town. As a result, the Legislature incorporated the town of Searsport with a population of 2,208, on February 13, 1845.

The first town meeting was held on March 3, 1845, in the vestry of the Methodist Church with John Pendleton as moderator and the Rev. Stephen Thurston as chaplain. The selectmen included Andrew Leach, Shepard Blanchard and Otis Black. Although the

name Maineport had been originally suggested for the new town, the citizens requested that their community be named in honor of David Sears. Sears was a wealthy Boston China merchant and owner of Brigadiers Island, now Sears Island. The citizens had hoped to establish a relationship with Sears that would prove profitable to the town in the future and Sears, in consideration of the compliment, sent the new town \$1,000 to construct a town hall.

The building was built of brick on the hill near the Congregational Church. Serving as a town meeting place until 1905, it later became a jail, housed recruits during the Civil War and is presently part of the Penobscot Marine Museum. Unfortunately, David Sears was not pleased with the building. "Powder-house" he snorted after inspecting it and strode away, never giving the town another cent of his money.

Actual records of the early days of Searsport are scarce, mostly found in ships' logs. Early industry in the town included an iron foundry, several brickyards, a spool mill and a sash and blind factory. Between 1810-1890, Searsport entered its glory days, attaining a population of 2,533 by 1860, boasting 11 shipyards and producing more than 200 ships of different rigs. Related industries such as sail making, lumbering, black smithing and carpentry flourished. Cooper shops became a major industry producing barrel containers for ship cargoes and later for the fertilizer produced in the local fertilizer companies. Searsport became the home of more than one-tenth of the deep-water captains in the U.S. Merchant Marine. It actually produced more shipmasters than any other town of its size in the world, nearly 300, many becoming masters at the age of 21. Searsport ships were built and mastered by Searsport men who "rounded the Horn" and sailed the Southern Seas to India and China. They built many large, fine homes and furnished them with treasures from foreign lands. Today many of these homes are Bed and Breakfast Inns and the treasures are on display in the town's Penobscot Marine Museum, a facility presently numbering 13 buildings that was incorporated in 1936.

Sears Island, situated south east of the town and providing a sheltered harbor, was once called Brigadiers Island for General Samuel Waldo who was in possession of much of this area following the French and Indian War in 1760. The Sears family purchased the island from Waldo's granddaughter, Mrs. General Henry Knox, and built a mansion there in 1853 that burned in 1893. Later a stand of farm buildings was erected on the same site. No buildings have stood on the island for many years.

At low water a natural causeway (sandbar) connected the island to the main land. In 1988 a permanent causeway was constructed at this site with an eye to future island development of a cargo port which, as of this time, has not occurred. Currently Sears Island is under the control of the State of Maine Department of Transportation.

From the early 1800's to the 1920's, the Boston and Bangor Division of the Eastern

Steamship Lines, Inc., maintained and staffed docking facilities at the end of Steamboat Avenue, carrying passengers and freight. The "Boston Boats" exerted a profound influence over the development of Searsport. Calling twice daily, the old side wheelers were a familiar sight until around 1920 when the service to Searsport was cut to twice weekly and then discontinued.

In 1903 an agent for the Bangor and Aroostook Railroad began buying small farms and land on the harbor side of Route One in Stockton Springs and Searsport. A charter was granted and the B & A extended its line from LaGrange to Searsport in 1905. The Bangor Investment Company bought Sears Island and acquired all the shorefront.

With the advent of the railroad, the Penobscot Coal and Wharf Company established one of the largest and best-equipped coal pockets and dock facilities this side of New York. It handled a quarter of a million tons of coal yearly and, as the C.H. Sprague and Sons Company deal in coal and oil, has continued to flourish.

In 1907 the American Agricultural Chemical Company built a large fertilizer plant and pier in Searsport. In 1909 the Hubbard Fertilizer Company (later Armour) was established. It was razed in 1960. The Summers Fertilizer Company erected a plant in 1919 on Kidder's Point. Northern Chemical Industries built a large plant in 1944 and added the anhydrous ammonia plant in 1956, taken over by General Alum and Chemical Corporation in 1994. In 1960 the Checkerboard Company built a bulk feed distributing warehouse on the site of the old AAC plant which was razed in 1956. In 1925 a new B & A pier was built and the shipping of potatoes, newsprint and many other commodities boosted the economy and made Searsport one of the most important ports on the east coast.

The Shell Oil Company established a marine terminal with the construction of seven storage tanks in 1951. In 1952 the U.S. Government opened a large military petroleum storage facility from which pipelines serviced Limestone and Bangor's Dow Air Force bases.

At the time of town incorporation in 1845 there were two rows of frame buildings consisting of shops and homes in Searsport village. The first of the "brick blocks", known as the Leach Block, was built in 1836 to the right of Mt. Ephraim Road. On the south side of Main Street the Merithew Block was built in 1847 and at one time housed Searsport's first bank. In 1853 the three-story Smart Building was built on the westerly corner of Mt. Ephraim Road and Main. During the next three decades most of the other brick structures in town were erected. The last was the Old Merrill Trust Bank, which, in 1891, replaced the Ellis grocery and dry goods shop on the easterly corner of Mosman and Main Streets.

Most imposing in downtown, perhaps, was the Searsport House on the Westerly corner of Main and Water Streets where today stands the Searsport Drug Store. Built in the spring of 1831 by William Ritchie as a dwelling, the building was sold a few years later to John Beals who opened it as an inn called the Beals' Tavern. Successive owners altered and enlarged the structure until in 1873 it was three stories tall, the largest hotel ever in Searsport and one of the finest summer hotels in the state. The Searsport House burned on October 21, 1893, and was rebuilt in 1895. Operated until the late 1930's, it became unoccupied and was torn down in 1943.

The Mosman Memorial Park Association was formed in 1922 and purchased by subscription from the Mosman heirs. The park stands on a plot of land on the shore front lying between Mosman Avenue and Water Street. It was dedicated in 1923 to the memory of the veterans of World War I. The Memorial Rock for the park plaque was brought from Swan Lake. *the oceanfront park property*

Into the early thirties, two trains ran daily from Northern Maine Junction to Searsport carrying passengers, mail and freight. Penobscot Park was developed as a recreation center on the point near Sears Island and enjoyed ten years of prosperity, the B & A, running excursion trains from Bangor and points north to accommodate the crowds who wanted to enjoy the cool ocean breezes and sea food. A bandstand, large dance pavilion and dining hall were among the buildings erected. Today none of these buildings remain.

The New England Telephone and Telegraph Company came into Searsport in 1900 with 16 subscribers from a total town population of 1,349. The system went "Dial" in 1957 with 329 subscribers.

The source of the Searsport water supply for many years was Half Moon Pond about seven miles from the town's village in North Searsport. In 1906 the Searsport Water Company was formed and water was purchased from the Stockton Springs Water Company, running by gravity feed to a reservoir on Prospect Street. With increased demand for water, pumping stations were added. In 1948 a Water District was formed and Searsport bought the existing lines. In 1995 the town converted to a ground water supply on the town line between Stockton Springs and Prospect. Some 350-400,000 gallons of water are used daily. Half Moon Pond has become an alternate back up source.

In 1988 the town of Searsport built a plant and put in a sewer collection system known as the Searsport Waste Water Division. The system extends from Savage Road to Navy Street (Irving Mainway Restaurant) and has 6.9 miles of collection pipes.

The first church building in Searsport was built in the Harbor District, now known as the Second Congregational Church, in 1819. The second, now called the First Congregational Church, was built in the village in 1834. The third church in town was the Methodist built in 1842. Around 1850 a Baptist Chapel was built at the easterly

corner of Main and Water Streets. It was in use for more than twenty-five years, converted to a garage and finally razed. The Full Gospel Church began early in this century and acquired its present home in the three-story building once occupied by the Lane and Nickerson store and Masonic Lodge. During World War II the cupola on the roof was used as an observation post for civil defense. In 1964 this building underwent extensive repairs and the top floor and cupola were removed. The Searsport Baptist Church was built in 1988 on Prospect Street.

The early school system was made up of many rural one-room schools including two in the North Searsport area. The Nichols District had a two story brick building, later replaced by a one story wooden building in 1919 which was razed in 1964. Searsport had a girls academy in 1882. An early school was housed in the Harbor Church. Crowded conditions in the 1920's caused classes to be held upstairs in the firehouse as well as on the first floor of the Union Hall. The Harbor School was the last rural school to close (in 1951). The Brick School on Mt. Ephraim Road was built in 1865 and used for elementary through high school classes at first. In 1930 the Central School was built on Mortland Road for primary classes.

The High School was built in 1952 with a brick addition nearly doubling the existing space in 1964. The former Searsport Elementary School, now the Middle School, and the Memorial Gymnasium were built in 1961. The present Searsport Elementary School was built in 1991.

The Civil War Soldiers' Monument was erected in 1870 on a triangle of land at a point just north of Main Street where Mt. Ephraim and Goodell Streets came together. In 1896, the monument was dismantled and moved down town to be placed in front of the new lodge hall built by the Masons and the Odd Fellows which had a memorial room on the first floor for the local G.A.R. (Grand Army of the Republic), a Civil War Veterans' group. At that time the two marble tablets inscribed with the names of 17 Searsport soldiers who died in the Civil War were turned inward and the monument reassembled. Local legend says that this was done because one of the tablets had accidentally been engraved with the name of a living man. That man had paid a volunteer to fight in his place and the volunteer had been killed; yet the living man's name had been put on the marble tablet. This error caused so much embarrassment, says the legend, that it was decided to hide all names from view for one hundred years, or until no living person would remember which was the offending name. On July 4, 1990, thanks to a community effort spearheaded by a local teacher, Charlene Knox Farris, and Masonic officer, Stanley Schofield, the Soldiers' Monument was rededicated and the marble tablets once more reversed so that the names of the Civil War dead could again be seen.

The first public library was on the second floor of the brick building known as the Pendleton Block on Main Street, the second building east of Mt. Ephraim Road. It opened in 1871 with a collection of books left to the town by David Sears. In 1909 the Carver

Memorial Library was built by the family of Captain George Carver in his memory from field stones taken from the Carver Farm on U.S. Route One, the same land on which Moose Point State Park now stands. In 1999 an addition was completed giving the library much needed space and handicapped accessibility.

The first town post office was in West Prospect in 1819 and was moved to Searsport village in 1846. A post office was established in the Harbor District (called Park from the families of that name) in 1896 and was discontinued in 1914.

The village post office was located in the Merithew Block, now the home of the Searsport Historical Society, until it was moved to its present site on Water Street in 1961.

The old Searsport National Bank was chartered in 1853, and under the existing state banking law of that time was permitted to issue its own currency which was accepted locally and in nearby towns. In 1891 the Searsport National Bank moved to its new location on the easterly corner of Mosman Street. It closed following the stock market crash of 1929. The Merrill Trust Company of Bangor took over the assets of the old bank and opened in the spring of 1931. In 1976 Heritage Bank, now Peoples, opened on the easterly corner of Pike Avenue and in 1979 the Merrill Trust Company, then Fleet, and now Bangor Savings Bank, opened a new office on the corner of Water Street.

In 1854, the town of Searsport organized the Penobscot Engine Company Number 1. In 1933 it was reorganized as the Barney Hose Company in honor of W.O. Barney, one of its early members. A fire station was built on Reservoir Street in 1877 and one in North Searsport in 1956. In 1998 the town opened its new Public Safety Building which houses the town ambulance, police and fire departments. The building was dedicated to the memory of Daniel C. Rich, a long time and well-respected Searsport volunteer firefighter and fire chief.

Union Hall, built in 1863, served as a community building, school and gymnasium until 1961. In 1964 the downstairs was remodeled into town offices which included the Water District Office, conference room, storage and polling space.

Currently the town is involved in renovations to Union Hall including the theater on the second floor and handicapped accessibility.

Throughout its history, the town of Searsport has always been connected to the sea, building ships, sailing ships and receiving ship's cargo. Today Searsport's deep-water harbor allows large freighters to come in and out on a weekly basis. And even though David Sears, for whom the town was named, may not have become the generous patron that our founding fathers hoped, the name has served us well, being, as far as anyone knows, the only town named Searsport in the entire world.