

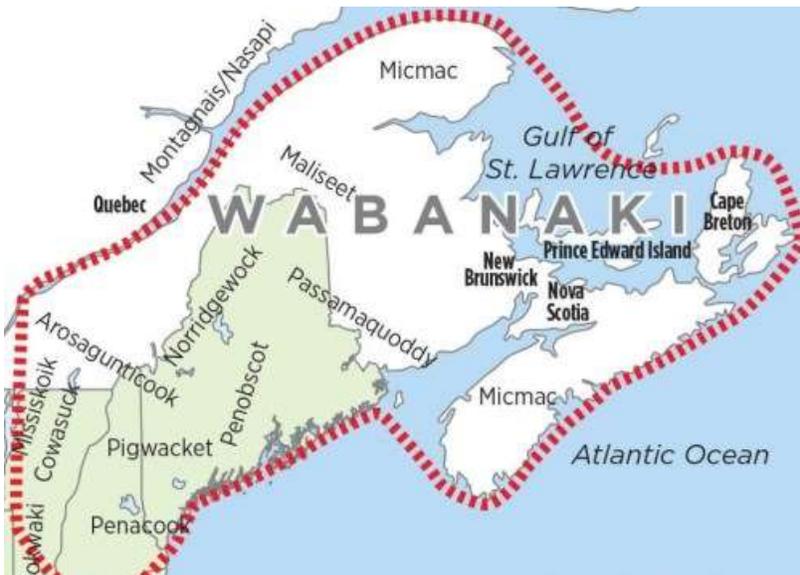
Popham Colony

Long before the arrival of Europeans, the land which is now Maine was the home of the Wabanaki (translates to “People of the Dawn”). The Wabanaki are made up of several Algonquin-speaking tribal nations. The five current tribes are the Mik’kmaq, Maliseet, Passamaquoddy, Abenaki, and Penobscot, but there were others historically.

The Wabanaki lands include what are now the states of Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont, and the provinces of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and the eastern part of Quebec. This is a land with a long coastline due to the many bays and islands. Inland there are many rivers and lakes, and some high mountains.

Wabanaki is the name used to describe these people as it is the preferred collective name. However, most of these people would have known themselves as members of a tribe, village, and family rather than the larger collective.

The Wabanaki did not always live in peace and both fought wars and made alliances among the various tribes. The Wabanaki also faced incursions from outside such as from the Iroquois to the west.



The waters and marshes were full of fish, clams, oysters, and lobsters. There were also seals and birds to hunt. The Wabanaki also harvested plants and hunted moose, deer, and beaver on the land. Rather than living in a single location, they followed the food seasonally, carrying their houses with them.

In the spring, the migration of fish from the oceans to fresh water provided a large bounty; salmon, herring, and smelt migrated each year. Huge sturgeon roamed the larger rivers and estuaries.

In the southern and western areas, including some near the Kennebec River but mostly farther south, the Wabanaki also planted corn, beans, and squash as well as hunting. In the northern and eastern areas, the Wabanaki were almost fully dependent on hunting and gathering.

That does not mean they were passive hunters. The Wabanaki actively altered the environment by cutting undergrowth and starting controlled fires to provide a habitat for the animals they hunted and the plants they harvested.

When the Europeans arrived, they found lush stands of fruits and nuts along the coasts and waterways, but more dense forest inland. Although the Wabanaki lived within the natural world, they also made significant modifications to it.

The Wabanaki had little to no metallurgy technology and used stone tools. They were efficient hunters and gatherers. The Europeans sometimes referred to them as lazy as they had a significant amount of free time after providing for food and shelter.

The land of the Wabanaki was originally named Norumbega by the French, and later referred to as France Nouvelle (New France) or Acadia. The easternmost peninsula was called New Scotland, a name it still maintains as Nova Scotia.

It is estimated that there were about 75 thousand people in this area in 1500 with about 30 thousand of them in what is now Maine. Even by 1600, the population had declined, most likely due to European diseases for which the Wabanaki had no immunity.

The Popham colonists saw Wabanaki everywhere they went, but the 17th century would see a large drop in the population with a 90% reduction in many places due to both death and displacement. Entire tribes were driven to extinction. (Maine before the Popham Colony, Maine's First Ship)

Popham Colony

The French had a colony on an island in the St. Croix River, between Maine and New Brunswick, in 1604. (Maine Encyclopedia)

On May 31, 1607, about 100 men and boys set sail on two ships for the northerly destination. Discharged soldiers made up most of the colonists' ranks, but shipwrights, coopers, carpenters and a smattering of "gentlemen of quality" rounded them out. (Beckenstein, Smithsonian)

In late August 1607, a small band of English colonists landed at the mouth of the Kennebec River in Maine to establish the first English colony in New England. (Brain) They also returned a native, Skidwarres, who had been captured by George Weymouth in 1605.

Known as the Popham Colony, it was sister colony to Jamestown and was intended as the northern branch of a coordinated geopolitical effort by England to claim that part of North America lying between Spanish Florida and French Canada. (Brain)

The Popham Colony is named after Sir John Popham, the chief financial investor in the venture, and George Popham, the first president of the colony and Sir John's nephew. Accompanying George to Virginia was his nephew, Edward Popham, Sir John's great nephew.



On August 18th, after exploring portions of the Kennebec River, then called the Sagadahoc, the colonists chose Sabino Head at the mouth of the river for their settlement in what is now the town of Phippsburg. They immediately began construction of Fort St. George and, within it, a storehouse for their supplies.

It was founded about 20 years after Sir Walter Raleigh's North Carolina colony disappeared in the 1580s, when, as the economic race with France and Spain heated up, England made another attempt to plant its flag in the New World.

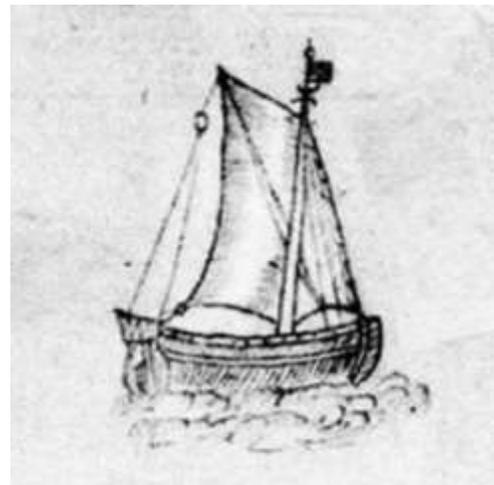
In 1606, James I granted a charter to a joint stock company to establish two colonies, one, Jamestown, on the southern Atlantic Coast, and the other, Popham, on the northern. (Beckenstein, Smithsonian)

Both colonies were sent out by the Virginia Company - Virginia being the name applied to this entire coast by the English since the days of Sir Walter Raleigh - and were intended to be the initial beachheads of English domination.

As such, they were primarily military outposts designed to defend against attack from both local native inhabitants as well as European antagonists. Once defense had been established, the mandate of the colonists was to explore the new country for exploitable resources and also find the long-sought northwest passage through the continent to the Pacific Ocean.

Both colonies were similar in size and composition, consisting of just over 100 men the majority of whom were soldiers, and were comparably equipped. Both sailed forth in high hopes, confident that they possessed the best human and technological resources that England could muster for the challenge.

The first ocean-going English ship built in the Americas, the Virginia, was constructed there in 1607. It was a shallow draft, decked vessel, with a rounded bow and square stern. This type of boat was designed to sail or row.



The Popham Colony, however, failed; in December, with winter coming and food scarce, half of the colonists returned to England. The next fall [1608], after erecting several buildings, the remaining 45 sailed home.

Unlike Jamestown, which just managed to survive after horrible trials and thus became the first permanent English colony in America, the Popham Colony has become a mere footnote, its place in history taken by the Pilgrims thirteen years later.

The most important historical legacy of the Popham Colony is a picture/map of their fort that was drawn on-site by one of the colonists, John Hunt.

The map, The Draught of St Georges fort Erected by Captayne George Popham Esquier one the entry of the famous River of Sagadahock [Kennebec] in virginia taken out by John Hunt the viii day of October in the yeare of our Lorde 1607, is the only detailed plan of an initial English colony in the Americas that is known to have survived.

The general accuracy of the map was confirmed when the remains of Fort St. George were discovered on Sabino Head through archaeological exploration. Excavations in 1994-2005 revealed not only that the overall plan is precisely as drawn by Hunt but that the buildings within the fort were drawn to scale and placed in exact relationship to each other. (Brain)

Archaeologists are still not sure how many of the map's structures were actually built, but so far, in addition to the storehouse, they've located parts of the trench wall and the "Admirals howse," and they have leads on the buttery, a storehouse for wine and liquor.

In the digging process, they unearthed an inch-long piece of decorated stoneware (part of a Bellarmine jug, a German-made container used throughout Europe to store liquor in the 16th and 17th centuries). Likewise, a wedge of Bellarmine was assembled from other fragments found before. The inch-long piece slid easily into a gap of the assembled fragments to reveal a medallion motif. The jug's embossed seal reads: '1599.' (Beckenstein, Smithsonian)

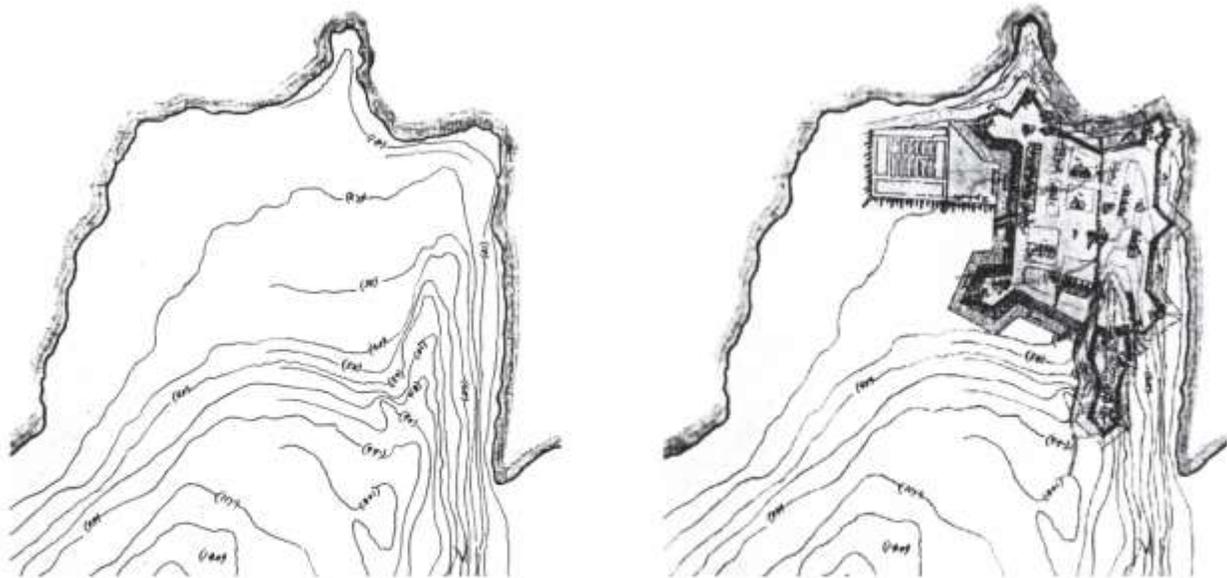
In addition to Bellarmine, the site has yielded other ceramics, clay tobacco pipes, glass trading beads, bullets and tools, including a caulking iron, used in shipbuilding. The Popham settlers did succeed in constructing the Virginia, a small but durable vessel that would take them back to England and later make other transatlantic voyages.

At the admiral's house, the archaeological team turned up shards of delftware, more Bellarmine, fancy buttons, bits of etched wine glasses and jet beads—all reflecting the occupants' upper-class rank.

A theory as to the main reason for abandoning the colony was a loss of leadership. Only one member of the group, George Popham, is known to have died at Fort St. George. (Jamestown lost more than half of its 120 settlers the first year.)

He was the colony's president, and on February 5, 1608, Raleigh Gilbert took command. Just 25, Gilbert was, according to one investor, “desirous of supremasy,” “a loose life,” with “litle zeale in Religion.”

Six months later, a resupply ship brought Gilbert news that he had inherited a title and an estate back in England. When Gilbert decided to return to England to collect, the others headed back with him.



U. S. Army Corps of Engineers 1865 contour map of Sabino Head (National Archives RG 77, DR 9, SH24) (left) and same with John Hunt's 1607 picture map of Fort St. George superimposed on it at the same scale (right). The fit of the Hunt plan on this particular piece of land amply demonstrates that Fort St. George was designed to take advantage of the local topographic features. Especially to be noted is the placement of the garden area on the flat terrace to the west and the southern citadel extension on the high rock ledge.

“They were headless, so to speak,” archaeologist Jeffrey Brain says. “English society was very stratified; people needed leaders.” Bad relations with the Indians, the fear of another severe winter and the area's lack of easily exploitable resources, such as gold or other precious metals, also affected the decision to abandon Popham. (Beckenstein, Smithsonian)

After making changes to meet the challenges of deep sea sailing, and accompanied by Mary and John, Virginia made her first Atlantic crossing.

In May 1609, carrying “sixteen proper men more,” the Virginia left England, joining a supply convoy headed to Jamestown. She completed her second Atlantic crossing in September. Although she is rumored to have made more crossings, no documentation has been found.

Most of the returned settlers disappeared into history; a few crossed the Atlantic again to try their hand at Jamestown. The Pilgrims who arrived 12 years later, landing at Plymouth, had obviously learned some lessons from Popham.

“They settled farther south in a milder climate that was more familiar to them and more conducive to agriculture,” says Brain. “They tried harder to work with the Indians. They also brought women and children.

“Luck had a lot to do with these early ventures,” Brain adds, explaining that Jamestown, too, almost failed. Hit hard by disease and starvation, the 50 or so remaining settlers abandoned the colony in the spring of 1610 and were sailing home when they encountered a relief fleet and a new governor, who ordered them back to Jamestown. (Beckenstein, Smithsonian)

A lot of the information here is from Beckenstein, Smithsonian Magazine; Brain; Maine before the Popham Colony, Maine's First Ship; Jeffrey Brain, The John Hunt Map of the First English Colony In New England

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the Mayflower, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young