

The Pattens of Bath Maine – A Scots Irish Seagoing Dynasty

In the 1720's four Patten brothers emigrated from the City of Londonderry to Boston Massachusetts. A decade later the eldest of the brothers – Matthew travelled north of Boston to the Saco district of Maine where the land was plentiful and inexpensive. In 1738 two of his brothers – Actor (Hector) and Robert joined him in Saco. The fourth brother William stayed in Boston where he became a successful merchant.

In the early 18th century the district of Maine as it was termed was then part of Massachusetts and was truly the frontier, “between aggressive British empire builders and the defensive reactive French”. The Native Americans were caught in the middle and took sides according to that which best served their own personal interests – sometimes one way, sometimes the other. Families such as the Pattens lived in constant fear of attack and loss of property. Not until 1763 when the British defeated the French and their ‘Indian’ allies did the region become safe and secure. In 1775 when the American Revolution erupted the settlers of Maine including the Pattens faced considerable difficulty because neither the Boston authorities nor the Continental Congress were in a strong enough position to be able to defend them. Many settlers left the area and others didn't live to see their pioneering efforts bear fruit. The Pattens stayed and were able to make a real success of their lives in Maine. Their initial occupation was farming but soon they were able to exploit the region's rich timber resources (Maine remains to this day the most wooded State in the Union) and tidal streams in two interlinked ways – (i) building small sailing vessels and (ii) drawing lumber and firewood to Boston and other ports along the coast.

The Pattens began a seafaring tradition there in Maine at the end of the eighteenth century. The earliest records of the family show one of Matthew's sons – John as a captain of homebuilt vessels and eventually dying in a shipwreck in 1783. Another son Robert who continued to live in the Saco region is described as a Mariner and a shipbuilder right up until the time of his death in 1819 and we know that this branch of the family continued in shipbuilding for another generation.

Meanwhile Actor Patten moved east of Penobscot Bay to Surry with a group of Saco residents who found the confines of approaching civilization too restrictive. He died there during the American Revolution when the British were still in control of the region.

The true progenitor of the Patten maritime clan was Actor's son John who had been born in Ulster and accompanied his parents to America at age 10 and then moved to Saco with them. In 1749 John moved to the Topsham/Bowdoinham area of Maine and purchased there the rights to 661 acres on Cathance Point near Merrymeeting Bay. This is a broad tidal bay formed by the confluence of the Androscoggin, Cathance, Muddy, Abagadasset, Eastern and Kennebec rivers. As such it provided an ideal spot for shipbuilding given the potential to build ships with plenty of space and the ability to penetrate into the State of Maine in terms of timber and other produce. John cleared the land with the help of his brother William and his wife Mary's brother Thomas Means who also came from a prominent Maine Scots Irish family. John and Mary had 14 children. Early Maine historians George and Henry Wheeler have described the pioneer John Patten in this way, “a farmer (who) had also the trade of a blacksmith He also engaged in the lumber business ..., and was a proprietor in the Cathance Mill ... and of

one – sixteenth of the saw mill and stream. He was somewhat engaged, also, in shipbuilding and navigation, and he, with John Fulton, Adam Hunter, and William Patten, built the first vessel ever launched above the ‘chops’ and the second built upon the Kennebec, above Bath.”

The first vessel was launched in 1768 and was a 90 ton coasting sloop called the ‘Merrymeeting’. The launch was a big event in the Cathance backwater. Most of John Patten’s adult male neighbours were engaged in building the ship and the launch was an extended family Scots Irish affair with the Pattens providing dinner for all. William Patten the Merrymeeting’s skipper, loaded the ship with firewood which he sold in Boston on favourable terms and he also carried timber on subsequent voyages.

Another sloop ‘Defiance’ was built soon after and in 1772 John Patten and his partners launched the schooner ‘Industry’ which was the region’s first vessel designed for the West Indies trade. This was extremely lucrative and locally sawn boards, shingles and masts fetched huge prices in the Caribbean. On the return journey the ship brought back rum, molasses and sugar which were in great demand. The American revolution interrupted this trade however and the British forces harassed the citizens of the Maine coast - including the Patten family.

In August 1775 a party of Cathance farmers including John Pattern’s sons John and William and his son-in-law Robert Fulton set off on a ‘haying’ expedition. British forces captured them and took them to British territory – probable Nova Scotia. They were imprisoned and William Pattern and Robert Fulton died during their incarceration. The rest were eventually set free but young John died shortly after his homecoming in 1780. This was a blow to the little tightly knit Scots Irish community along the Cathance shores.

Trade patterns shifted away from the Caribbean and in November 1824 the ‘Catherine’ set out on her maiden voyage carrying pine boards and shooks to Cuba. In January 1825 the same ship was on the way back from Havana and stopped to load on cotton in New Orleans before proceeding to Liverpool where she arrived in April. Interestingly the ship arrived back from the British Isles to New York on 17th May 1825 loaded with emigrant passengers from Londonderry. Thereafter the increase in ship’s tonnage was calibrated in the ships built to match the rise of the cotton trade. By 1839 the fleet consisted of a schooner, a brig and six ships – ‘Cotton was King’.

The family succeeded as a result of timing, a ‘tribal’ spirit of cooperation, and as a result of having fire in their belly. They were anxious to be seen as being successful as their sense of public charity and civic leadership later demonstrated. This included the building of the Patten Free Public Library in Bath Maine.

In 1913 Frank Patten, the last of the seagoing dynasty, retired from shipbuilding in Bath and moved to South Byfield Massachusetts where he started a chicken farm. He died of a severe cold within weeks of making the move.



The Dock at Bath, Maine



Bath City Hall Building Resembles a Ship
Bath, Maine