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Early Logging in the Southern Maine Woods

The woods produced shoe blocks, spruce gum, and more

William Geller



THE SOUTHEASTERN VIEW FROM THE LOOKOUT ON LITTLE BOARDMAN Mountain rolls over acres of trees and down the broad valley of the East Branch of the Pleasant River. At the end of the valley, the river flows between Cedar Mountain on the north and Big Wilkie on the south as it spills into the valley running north from Brownville to Upper Jo-Mary Lake. If I'd been standing here on October 8, 1825, I would have witnessed an uncontrollable inferno that blackened 832,000 acres of forest. The fire started 65 miles south, at Guilford, Maine, where the Piscataquis River bends east. Strong winds fanned the multiple land-clearing fires of local farmers into a single conflagration. It burned east 40 miles to the Penobscot River and beyond, and north in the eastern shadow of the Borestone, Barren–Chairback, White Cap, and Boardman mountain ranges, jumping the West Branch of the Penobscot River at what then became known as Burnt Land Rips (now East Millinocket), 95 miles from its starting point. The fire influenced the logging in the Piscataquis watershed east of the mountains for the next 100 years.

I have only recently begun to appreciate what that fire meant and how its aftermath played out. For more than five years, I have been searching Maine's North Woods for traces of its logging history and writing about it in *Appalachia*. The land looks wild today, but as early as 1830 roadless watersheds south of Katahdin were filled with the noise of the timber industry and the shouts of the workers sending the logs downstream. This story begins piecing together what I have found along the East Branch of the Pleasant River. This area starts at Upper Ebeemee Lake, 12 miles due north of Brownville, and heads northwest into the great valley between where I'm standing on Little Boardman Mountain and White Cap Mountain, the north end of the southern half of the 100-Mile Wilderness and the Piscataquis watershed.

In December 1824, Berry Brown and Nathan Mayhew, loggers from the town of Milo, came 25 miles up the East Branch from Brownville, passing through previously cut areas to log on the river 4 miles below where I now stand. Others had been cutting pine along the edges of the lower portion of the river for twenty years. Some of them worked without oxen and used simple skids to move their logs off the river's banks and into the water. In

A hunter crosses the West Branch of the Pleasant River in the late 1880s by riding in a box-like structure suspended by cables. The contraption was William P. Dean's "aerial ferry." WILLIAM P. DEAN/UNIVERSITY OF MAINE FOGLER LIBRARY SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

1806, someone built the first dam and sawmill in Brownville. From there, men rafted milled lumber downriver.

The northwestern edge of the 1825 fire burned east of the area Brown and Mayhew cut in 1824, and loggers continued on upriver in subsequent years. The river was so rocky that in some low-water springs, like 1827, loggers were unable to drive their selectively cut pine logs. Undeterred, they continued moving upriver for they knew of the vast wealth of pine in the river's headwaters in the valley below me.

I dropped into the valley on the Appalachian Trail and left my pack at the East Branch Lean-to. I walked to the riverbank and the remains of the old log-driving dam. In 1853, lumbermen started making river improvements and building dams; 53 years later, twenty dam sites remained. The uppermost dam prevented water from flowing west into the Kennebec River watershed.

One of the difficult spots 12 miles downriver was at Gauntlet Falls. Sometime around 1860, in the spring, Joe Levesque and Charles Cole were working the drive at the Jim Thistle Dam guiding one large log at a time into the sluice built to bypass the 20-foot Gauntlet Falls and chasm. Levesque's pick pole became stuck in a log that shifted and pulled him into the water and then into the sluice. Cole tried to save Levesque, but Cole, too, was pulled in. Somehow both men grabbed onto a log and rode through the sluice without getting crushed up against its sides. Other drivers quickly gathered near the end of the sluice and along the river below and extended long poles for Levesque and Cole to grab. Levesque missed, went under, and was never seen again. Cole made the grab.

I camped away from the shelter near soothing noises of the woods, but I knew that if I had been here at any time between roughly 1800 and 1950, I would have heard the steady sounds of a log industry that defined this area. I would have heard ax blows and, eventually, the zipping sound of crosscut saws. I would have heard the booming and shouting of the log drivers, the building and repair of dams that increased the flow of the East Branch so logs would easily move downriver, and the hum of steam-driven sawmills. Between 1832 and about 1884, I would have awakened to horses snorting and jingling their harnesses while the teamsters called out on their journeys north from Bangor to Chamberlain Lake on the Chamberlain Lake Tote Road. Endless loads of long logs left this area, and the first loads of shorter logs bound for paper mills (called pulpwood) went downriver in 1882.



The Hollingsworth and Whitney Logging Camp No. 1 stood on the west side of White Cap Mountain. COURTESY OF ERIC STIRLING AND FAMILY/FIRST WEST BRANCH POND SPORTING CAMPS

Between 1927 and 1934, a dry sluice made of boards funneled logs down Boardman Mountain. The noise reverberated through the valley. The Great Northern Paper Company used gas-powered Lombard log haulers to move the wood over to Upper Jo-Mary Lake, from where the loggers could drive them to their mills in the town of Millinocket.

These Lombards operated continuously, day and night, hauling at least 26,000 cords of wood per season over a specially built road to the lake's ice. Once these loggers left, other lumbermen resumed driving the East Branch until the mid-1950s.

The industry defined this land. Now, it's mostly memories.

THE SUN ROSE, AND I LEFT THE EAST BRANCH LEAN-TO. I THOUGHT OF Charles Cole, who had survived the sluice ride and went on to live the rest of his life in this area. I headed up the Appalachian Trail to White Cap Mountain, remembering that 40 years after his ride, Cole's grandchildren had

listened to his story of almost dying in the sluice, told as he sat on his porch four miles downriver from here.

Cole also told his family about Juliana Philbrook who in 1833, with her husband, Weld, had run Cole's house as the Philbrook Shanty, an overnight way station for teamsters toting logging supplies to the wilderness logging operations. Weld Philbrook negotiated with the Massachusetts state land agent for 80 to 90 acres of land on which he would make improvements and pay a dollar an acre, as he was able. In 1833, the family moved to the site and began raising crops and hay for themselves, loggers, and teamsters. During the logging season, Juliana was usually cooking for 10 to 40 men a day. After Weld's death in 1838, Juliana continued to educate her three children (Weld, Sarah, and Rufus) and operated the farm with their help and that of a hired man, Bert Rankins. She overcame her husband's \$441 debt, and on February 26, 1845, she gained ownership to the land (100 acres), her log home, and her stables through a petition to the Massachusetts state land agent. In her petition, she wrote that her husband had paid for the land, was in the process of seeking the deed, but became ill and then died. She noted that the dollar per acre he paid was three times the value of area lands with no improvements, that they had improved about 40 acres, and that her farm served a valuable function, being a public service as a tavern for loggers. Joining in support of Juliana were ten prominent Brownville men, who filed a letter on January 29, 1845. The land agent recommended 100 acres at no cost, and the legislature and governor approved. Juliana's daughter and sons continued to support her and the shanty. Apparently, Juliana hired someone to run the shanty beginning about 1853, and the whole family moved to a farm they purchased closer to Brownville. It was not until 1862 that she sold the shanty, which continued to provide services for the next 30 years.

Juliana Philbrook was a perfect example of the incredibly capable and unacknowledged women who worked in the wilderness, many as logging camp cooks in the old days. Every day they cooked four meals for up to 50 men. These women's words were law in the dining area. I thought about this as I climbed White Cap. From the summit, I looked down at Silver Lake, home of another incredible woman, Sara Green. She lived down there from 1890 until 1968, the year before her death. Her husband died in a freak Katahdin Iron Works sawmill accident in 1929, but she stayed right there logging, farming, running a boarding house, driving a horse team (later a jeep and a kind of bus known as a jitney) and—

I'll bet—guiding hikers to where I climbed. Sara Green was known as “the mayor of Katahdin Iron Works,” and her three children—Pauline, Audrey, and Harry—worked with her. She was so admired and respected by the loggers and driving crews that the lumber company gave her 10 acres and the Hermitage, a sporting camp at the foot of Gulf Hags. She operated the camp for years and donated it to The Nature Conservancy shortly before her death.

From the White Cap summit, I could only imagine the structures of the iron works, a village with a train station, eleven charcoal kilns, and a furnace. What a coincidence that two of the three key iron production ingredients—hardwood and ore—were found in one spot. The available hardwood was in part a result of the 1825 forest fire that burned through the trees growing immediately east of the lake. From 1841 to 1889, the forest provided as many as 10,000 cords of hardwood per year, as cut during the winter by 300 men. Seven years after the iron works closed in 1890, Perkins & Danforth Spoolwood Company moved in and cut only birch, another product of the 1825 fire, until the company exhausted the supply in 1913.

At the foot of White Cap, I forded the West Branch of the Pleasant River. If I had been crossing in the late 1880s and early 1900s, I'd have used William P. Dean's suspension bridge or his replacement “the aerial ferry” as the locals called it or—as the river drivers named it—“Dean's roller coaster.” Not far upriver is the sculpted rock mouth of Gulf Hags, where the current spit out logs like toothpicks. Until the early 1800s no logger had been known to harvest above the gulf, but in 1843, a group of men, lured by the vast wealth of pine there, formed the Pleasant River Company with plans to dam and drive the river. They either never followed through or failed. Nine years later, the West Branch Pleasant River Company built the first dam, a 40-foot high, 825-foot-long dam at the head of the gulf, and a logger known to us only as D. Morrison directed the difficult drive in spring 1853. But the challenges of the gulf continued to deter most lumbermen. J.W. Palmer and Sons took up the challenge in about 1880, when they blasted an 8-foot-wide section of the waterway's opening to 25 feet wide. In spring 1882 a 250-person crew drove 9.5 million board feet through the gulf. Other loggers followed.

As the loggers moved upriver and into its tributaries over the next three and a half decades, they built another dam in the area near Little Lyford Ponds, then one a few miles above that and then one at the outlets at Big Lyford and First and Second West Branch Ponds. Even though loggers did

not cut every year, these dams were key in driving as many as 350,000 logs a season. By 1897, loggers were driving pulpwood, which they continued until 1941 (with one more cleanup drive in 1942).

I wondered what Morrison faced inside that two-mile-long throat. After Bob Pederson and I had made an unsuccessful attempt to climb through the mouth, we returned the next August with single-person inflatable dinghies, in which we floated through the throat starting below Billings Falls. At low water, the current runs very slowly. Anyplace the river drops creates small falls easily descended by foot on open rocks. I was surprised how little evidence of blasted rock lay about. My only conclusion was the narrowness Palmer blasted open was only at the top edge of the gulf, but that narrowness had prevented other lumbermen from seeing what was transpiring below.

I lay back in my dinghy and looked up to the rim, 130 feet above. I felt as if Mother Earth had put me at the bottom of an upside-down funnel. Here, cross logs had once spanned these narrow sections of the river, and log drivers had lowered each other on tethers into the abyss. They had nothing to hold on to; their only steadying surface was the logjam onto which they rested their feet. I imagined how loggers must have felt dangling above the ferociousness of the spring runoff, then shooting into a narrow channel as if pumped through a fire hose. Although after 1879 they unlocked jams with dynamite, before that loggers picked the jams apart by hand. The dam at the head of Gulf Hags could temporarily slow the water and maybe shift the jam or release enough water to force the jam apart.

After I crossed the river, I climbed to the open rock ledges of Chairback Mountain. I looked back across the valley to White Cap and its seven surrounding peaks. Here, men had picked spruce gum that was sold between the late 1800s and 1948. Those pickers also collected the gum from the higher elevations of the ridgeline south of me to Barren Ledges. These heights once contained the last of the old-growth spruce.

In the mid-1890s, Dave Hutchinson, a picker, lived in a cabin on the shoulder of a mountain immediately east of White Cap. The peak was then called Saddlerock, but on maps today it is one of several mountains in Maine known as Saddleback (different from the Saddleback Mountain on the Appalachian Trail near Rangeley Lake). Here's how Hutchinson harvested spruce gum: In the spring before the sap began to flow, he scored the red spruce bark with an ax so that the sap would bleed. Over the ensuing months, the sap oozed out and formed nodules. He could collect 10 to 15 pounds of the nodules each day. At the time, Monson's Harry Davis, the self-proclaimed

“spruce gum king,” paid about 100 pickers 50 cents a pound. For nearly 42 years, Davis’s operation bought and processed roughly twelve tons of this gum a year. By about 1925, only about twelve to fifteen pickers were working for \$2.50 to \$4 a pound. When Davis closed in 1948, newspapers wrote that it was because he could not sell the gum at a profit. What they did not state was that he could not compete with loggers who had started cutting the high-elevation forest from White Cap and Saddlerock south to Barren Mountain in the mid-1940s. Scattered small clusters of spruce still stand. I passed through a few of them as I hiked the AT nine more miles south along the top of the ridge. From the Barren fire tower site, I looked at the top of the sluice that carried logs down to Lake Onawa.

In the saddle on the south side of Third Mountain, I turned onto a side trail that descended to Indian Pond on the north side of a great oval-shaped valley, five miles long and nearly three miles wide, where I knew an unusual logging practice had gone on for five years, from 1912 to 1917. Before that time, loggers and river drivers in this watershed had built dams, cut softwood in the winter, and driven logs down the waterway in the spring. In 1912, lumberman Joseph Ray abandoned the waterway and constructed a six-plus-mile-long rail line from the Canadian Pacific tracks into the depths of this valley. He built a hardwood mill and a softwood mill, a boarding house, twenty houses, and a school on the railroad line near the south edge of the bowl. The train was necessary because, after the 1825 fire, the logs were mainly birch, which did not float and so could not be driven on a waterway to market. In October 1916, the mills burned, and a lack of remaining merchantable timber caused the investors to soon abandon the operation. Following the abandonment, the American Thread Company moved in to cut the birch, which teamsters hauled down the old rail bed to the Canadian Pacific tracks.

AFTER A NIGHT AT THE POND, I HIKE BACK TO THE SADDLE AND continued on to Barren Ledges, where I looked down across Lake Onawa to Sebec Lake. Here, loggers had found hardwood. Behind me on Long Pond Stream and Long Pond, they found softwood. I was now 20 miles due north of where the great fire of 1825 had started in Guilford. The fire passed between Onawa and Sebec Lakes and jumped Sebec Lake in places as it raced north. Over the next 55 years, that birch grew back, and by 1880 the forest had rejuvenated enough for three major hardwood logging operations, thread spools, shoe blocks, and ships’ knees and ribs.

The Willimantic Linen Company of Connecticut opened a spool mill in 1879 at the head of Sebec Lake. Their loggers cut on a tract between the two lakes and depleted its birch by 1902 but kept cutting to the east for the next 30 years. Below where I stood, on Lake Onawa, the great canoes of the shoe block loggers had passed back and forth from logging camp to landing carrying supplies going out and hardwood bolts coming back. Other loggers were cutting yellow birch in such a way as to preserve the curve in the log where the tree worked into the root system. They called these “ships’ knees” because they were made into ships’ prows. These loggers also harvested the maple for ships’ ribs. Loggers rafted these unfloatable hardwood logs with pine and floated them through Sebec Lake to Bangor.

I now climbed out of the Long Pond Stream valley, where the log drives had begun in the 1830s, reached the top of the ridge, crossed a freight railroad line (which has been there since 1889) and dropped down the hillside to Big Wilson Stream. Its placidness belies what is upstream. Elliot Vaughn arrived at the stream three miles below me in 1828 and erected a sawmill and a grist-mill. The mill cut clapboards and floated them down the gentle Big Wilson Stream and through Sebec Lake and on to the Bangor market. Upstream from my crossing, the steep valley sidewalls extended seven miles to the Wilson ponds and made access for logging and driving the valley exceedingly difficult. Attesting to this, no lumberman sought a dam charter for the stream above me until 1893, suggesting that, at best, only small quantities of logs traveled down this stream. The last long log drive on the Big Wilson was in 1921.

I followed the AT over the next ridge and down to the stream on the floor of Little Wilson Stream valley. At the crossing, I looked upstream into the mouth of an intimidating gorge. Extending for nearly 1,800 feet behind the 10-foot-wide mouth were steep sidewalls I could not climb nor walk under unless I wished to swim and scale waterfalls to reach the 60-foot waterfall at the head of the gorge. What possessed Nelson Savage in 1823 to build a dam and sawmill above this waterfall and drive clapboard-length logs? Many of the logs split, but somehow the workers were able to break the jams at the foot of the falls and in the gorge. Poor farmland above the falls and in the general area meant the farm owners cut all the merchantable trees and abandoned the area by 1848. The forests grew back, and by 1883, loggers were again clearing, widening, damming, and driving Little Wilson Stream. Drives on the stream ended by 1921. I wish I knew how they broke the jams in the gorge.

Over my last few miles on the AT into Monson, I remade my list of questions about what I'd seen and wanted to investigate, and of places for future explorations along or near the AT. Still on my list is an ancient mystery. The American Indian tribes from Down East Maine camped regularly at the head of Lake Onawa on their way to and from Moosehead Lake and Mount Kineo, their source of flint. As bullets began to replace arrows, the Indians had another reason to use the site. They supposedly discovered a source of lead on the back side of Barren Mountain but never revealed its location. Perhaps I'll find it someday on a bushwhack, but if you find it first, I'd be pleased to have a few hints on the exact location. I'm going to find it.

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