



Hauling a Mast Tree to the Water

## **WHITE PINES FOR THE ROYAL NAVY**

Much of the early history of this State which I shall comment upon today is unfamiliar to most people. Its vital importance to the development of New Hampshire is indeed worthy of being recalled. If your interest and curiosity in the struggles for survivorship, which took place here three centuries ago, can be stimulated ever so slightly, then my efforts will not have been in vain.

It has been said that the most neglected men of our day are-- Whistler's father, Grandpa Moses, and Lord Godiva. Possibly the 'King's Pines' with the "Broad Arrow" markings and Ben. Wentworth have slipped into the same category.

Longfellow in his *Evangeline* referred to "The Forest Primeval", a poetic description of an area now known as New Hampshire and lands just beyond its borders. This was indeed most accurate during the 68-year period from the first settlement (1623) around Portsmouth (Piscataqua) until 1691 when the Massachusetts Bay Charter became effective. It contained the famous (most of the colonists called it INFAMOUS) "Mast-Preservation" Clause which specified in part--

"... for better providing and furnishing of Masts for our Royal Navy wee do hereby reserve to us . . . ALL trees of the diameter of 24 inches and upward at 12 inches from the ground, growing upon any soils or tracts of land within our said Province or Territory not heretofore granted to any private person. We . . . forbid all persons whatsoever from felling, cutting or destroying any such trees without the royal license from us . . . upon penalty of 100 pounds... for every such tree so felled... without such license had, etc. etc ....  
"

Most of the early settlers in the New Hampshire area were hardy pioneers who came here direct from England. However, some came from Massachusetts after becoming dissatisfied with conditions there. All were struggling to make a living under difficult conditions, not the least of which was the Indian problem. A few had connections with merchants in the Old Country. All were ambitious to make money and trees were the one product ready for use, in all sizes and in great quantity. Sawmills became the prime necessity. The first one in all of New England began operating near Kennebunk, Maine, in 1623 (almost three and a half centuries ago). Ten years later as many as twenty sawmills were operating in the Strawberry Banke (Portsmouth) area on the Piscataqua River, which area by 1671 had become known throughout the colonies as the mast trade center. While the Piscataqua area was best known as a shipping point for masts, it appears that the Connecticut River was also an area where tall trees grew, and were cut and floated down the river to be shipped from Connecticut to England for the Royal Navy. We know that the town of Cornish was originally known as "Mast Camp" since it was the shipping point for that area.

The period prior to 1641 may be described as one of slow development from no provincial organization to a form of local self-government; this was followed by a union with Massachusetts Bay colony (1641 to 1679) mainly for protection and safety from attacks by Indians and also by the French; next came seven years of New Hampshire Provincial Government to 1686; then a try at New England government, followed promptly by more self rule; and then a return to Massachusetts Bay Colony control in 1690.

In 1691 the Massachusetts Bay Charter issued by King William and Queen Mary specifically named New Hampshire as a separate royal province. In 1691 a permanent provincial government was set up which finally freed New Hampshire from Massachusetts rule, and this continued to 1775.

From the earliest days, New Hampshire settlers recognized the great value of their tall white pine trees as lumber for building material, for construction of boats and of houses to live in, for exporting to other lands in exchange for needed commodities, and for tall masts for big ships. The Privy Council claimed all tall pines suitable for masts under existing trade agreements imposed on the colonies. However, it was often much less profitable to sell long trees for masts, due to cost of cutting, getting to boat for shipping, and the price paid for the delivered product, than to convert them into boards and plank, especially when shipped to places other than England. The Privy Council became convinced that thousands of excellent mast pines were being destroyed, and this feeling was undoubtedly well founded.

In 1674 one Edward Randolph was sent to see how the trade agreements and navigation acts were being

observed. He reported many and serious violations but stressed the vast timber trade possibilities. Also he reported that the pine for masts here were the "best in the world." This quickened the interest of the London trading community in New England. *Pinus Strobus* (white pine) must be protected in New England to advance the sea power of England. Scotch fir (*Pinus Sylvestris*), found in abundance in the north European forests, was inferior, less durable, more difficult to obtain and transport. These are some of the reasons and causes for the 1691 Massachusetts Bay Charter which reserved "ALL trees of the diameter of 24 inches and upward at 12 inches from the ground" for the Royal Navy in the mast-preservation clause (quoted above).

For the first few years after 1691 New England paid little attention to the preservation clause. Licenses were issued freely upon assurance that the King's trees would not be molested. Sawmills continued with even greater activity, and with a growing disregard for the protection of 'Broad Arrow' tall white pines. England got much of its naval supplies from the Baltic during this period. Strict policing of New England seemed unnecessary. Thus little effort was made to enforce the restriction. This laxity led to much unlicensed cutting of marked pines.

The Broad Arrow mark was made on the base of the tree by three blows with a marking hatchet. It was said to resemble a crow's track more than an arrow. Mast trade with England declined steadily. Surveyor-Generals and their agents were responsible for selecting, marking, policing, and enforcing. They became very unpopular and enforcement more difficult, as they stepped up the marking of more and more trees with the 'Broad Arrow'.

One such Surveyor-General was Jonathan Bridger, who hired three assistants (one of whom was Ezekial Wentworth, a likely ancestor of Lieutenant Governor John Wentworth, Governor Benning Wentworth, and Governor John Wentworth (nephew, not son of Benning Wentworth)).

To be a successful merchant in the mast business required much cash or financial backing. Most of them lived in England with agents in New England--Benning Wentworth was the outstanding exception. He was appointed Surveyor-General of the woods and also served as Governor of New Hampshire for twenty-five years (1741-1766)

The mast business was carried on in an unusual manner. First, the Navy Board would place an order for an entire year's requirements. This Board usually dealt with a "select few" contractors. Once a mast contractor got an order from the Navy Board, he sent a copy to his agent on the first vessel westbound for New England. The agent hired crews, prepared equipment, and selected the cutting area.

Also the contractor had to obtain a royal license from the Privy Council. This often involved much delay. Then the Surveyor-General was notified of each contract by the Navy Board. It was his duty to assist the agent, compare terms of contract with terms of license, approve selection of trees, watch the roasting teams to assure that only trees covered by license were felled.

A brief description of details observed in cutting an "approved tree" (Broad Arrow) indicates the care and

precaution necessary to fell a tall pine and avoid damage to it when it fell to ground. A path was cleared from the base of the tree in the direction it was to be felled, for the same distance as the height of the tree. The ground had to be nearly level. All the large branches were cut from the Broad Arrow tree before it was felled. Also, all nearby trees were cut to prevent damage to the mast tree as it fell. The small branches were left on to help reduce the force of the fall. If there was snow on the ground, the path of the fall was thoroughly probed to discover hidden rocks and stumps. One of these under the tree as it fell might break it, especially in the upper part, which had the longest fall and hit the ground with the greatest force. Frequently snow and brush were brought in to smooth out the area where the mast tree was to fall. Every reasonable precaution was taken to see that damage to the tree would be avoided. When the tree was on the ground, the task was less than half done. It had to be trimmed of all branches and transported to a port for shipment to England. Great pines weighed many tons and usually could not be dragged. When possible they were floated down rivers but with great care to avoid rapids and falls. If moved overland, they were laced on several pair of wheels. and pulled by many yoke of oxen at the front and along each side of the mast log.

It has been estimated that around 4500 masts were shipped to the Royal Navy between 1694-1775. This was only one percent of the trees reserved for Navy use. After 1722 the cutting of white pine trees of over eight-inch diameter was forbidden unless a contract and license was obtained from the Royal Navy. Every attempt to enforce this restrictive policy resulted in ill feeling and real trouble between the Colonies and the Royal Navy (England).

In general there were three size groups for masts:

1. Small, 8-12 inches in diameter.
2. Middling, 12-18 inches in diameter.
3. Great. 18 inches and over in diameter. Most New England mast logs were of the "great" variety.

Prices paid for trees delivered in England varied. Some examples of actual contracts:

24-inch diameter at base, 27 yards long--35 pounds.

36-inch diameter at base, 35 yards long --135 pounds.

36-inch diameter at base, 36 yards long --153 pounds.

It appears that the diameter in inches about equalled the height of the tree in yards.

Baltic masts rarely exceeded 30" in diameter and were not considered as durable as New England trees.

From 1691 when the Massachusetts Charter was made with its offensive 'Mast-Preservation Clause' to

the War of the Revolution in 1775, bitterness between New England and the Old Country was steadily increasing. Among the real causes for the revolt by the Colonies was their resentment against the unpopular restriction on their right to cut tall pines (marked Broad Arrow), and against the efforts made by authorities to preserve them for exclusive use of the Crown. Thus, we may see the incredible influence of mast trees on the development of this state and nation, and its contribution in precipitating the armed conflict in 1775.

No name dominates the early history of New Hampshire more than that of "Wentworth." William Wentworth was among the first settlers in Exeter (1639). His grandson, John Wentworth, Sr., became Lieutenant Governor (1717) and served until his death in 1730. He was also "Surveyor-General of Woods." He had fourteen children, one of whom was Benning Wentworth, who became "Surveyor-General of Woods" after the death of his father. Benning Wentworth became Governor of New Hampshire in 1741 and served for twenty-five years until 1766, the longest term of any New Hampshire governor. Before he became governor, Benning Wentworth was a merchant with little resources. Some say he was almost bankrupt when he became governor. In twenty-five years he distributed to his friends and various groups nearly 200 grants of large tracts of land, mostly as Town Charters, and reserved 500 acres to himself in most of them.

An example of this is four towns in my area. Newbury and Ryegate in Vermont, and Bath and Haverhill in New Hampshire, each had 500 acres reserved to Benning Wentworth in their charters, and all joined to make a 2000-acre square tract with the Connecticut River flowing through it. Each of these charters contained this reservation--"all white pine and other pine trees within the township fit for masting our royal Navy be carefully preserved." He also received a fee for most of these grants which depended upon "ability to pay." One town in Grafton County bears his name but was actually granted in 1766 by his nephew and successor Governor John Wentworth 1766-1775 in Benning Wentworth's honor. John Wentworth was the last provincial governor of this State. His father, Mark Hunking Wentworth (a brother of Benning Wentworth), had become wealthy trading with West Indies and selling masts and spars to the British Navy. In 1763 John Wentworth went to England as agent for his father. He found out that his uncle Benning Wentworth was in trouble there because of his greed in distribution of public lands and for his careless administration as Surveyor-General of His Majesty's Woods. This finally brought about the commission of John Wentworth as Governor of New Hampshire. Through his efforts Benning Wentworth was allowed to resign, to protect his good name!!!

Much can be said about the chicanery of both Benning Wentworth and John Wentworth as Surveyor-General. Benning Wentworth was far less interested in protecting trees for the Crown than holding them for himself and his fellow landowners, especially his brother, Mark H. Wentworth. The lumber market, especially to France, grew to a point where the demand exceeded the supply. Staves and hogsheads were needed for British West Indian possessions. White pine was also used for staves for barrels. Benning Wentworth did little or nothing to prevent this; however, he reported to London on the difficulty he had to protect pine, of his orders to all military leaders when fighting Indians to inspect the trees which they used to hide behind, to see if they were suitable for masts, and of the strict orders he had issued for their preservation. He also reported that his duties as Surveyor-General of Woods had become very "difficult and hazardous", that many sawmills were being built outside the settled areas, that it was very difficult to

inspect them, and when he was inspecting one, others were cutting white pine, and when he visited another, the word had been passed--making his job "little better than playing Bo-Peep." Actually he and his brother Mark dominated the lucrative lumber and mast trade for many years. His abuses and exaggerations finally became known in England, and were responsible for his loss of favor there.

When Benning Wentworth resigned (some say retired) he owned or controlled nearly 100,000 acres of land scattered over New Hampshire and Vermont. He and his brother Mark were rich from lumber and mast trade. Benning Wentworth also did well financially on fees from land grants. One Vermont grant-Bennington (near New York border)-was named for Benning Wentworth. It was protested by New York Governor Clinton, both here and in courts of England for many years. Eventually (1764) the Council of England fixed the boundary of New Hampshire at the west bank of the Connecticut River. This decision was later (1925) used as evidence before the United States Supreme Court which established the low-water mark of the west bank of the Connecticut River as the official boundary between New Hampshire and Vermont.

In fairness to Benning Wentworth, it must be said he was a real New Hampshire man, the first to be its governor. He created an era of good feeling in the Colony which had never before existed. He was able to furnish many soldiers for the British Army to aid in various wars and uprisings in Canada and in the Colonies. This also kept him in the good graces of authorities overseas.

At one time he proposed and sold the idea to the Board of Trade in England that a large acreage be reserved as a "nursery" for mast trees to meet future requirements of the Royal Navy. For this he received a 200-pound increase in his salary as Surveyor-General. He actually did nothing further about the "nursery" unless to hope his own land holdings might sometime be requested for this purpose. Later he reported to the Board of Trade that he planned to visit Nova Scotia and reserve 200,000 acres there as a "nursery" for the Crown-this was obviously more of his sweet talk to continue as Surveyor-General, a position which he was using to aid his brother Mark and also himself to make a fortune out of the timber trade.

During the quarter century Benning Wentworth served as Governor of New Hampshire under the appointment of King George II and George III, the resentment of the Colonies toward the policies of the Royal Government in England steadily increased. All attempts at stricter enforcement of the trade laws-especially the unauthorized cutting of mast pines-was the big issue. Another very inflammatory issue was the desire of England to establish a portion of the British Army permanently in America to be supported in part by taxes raised in America by Parliament decree. Taxes on commodities shipped from England was another. The Boston Tea Party was a revolt against these taxes. (One of its leaders was Ebenezer MacKintosh, who fled to my town, Haverhill, soon after it and died there in 1816). After two centuries we have recently reversed the practice by leveling a ten percent custom (tax) on all goods shipped here from all other countries to protect ourselves from foreign competition.

A brief word about the stormy administration of John Wentworth, the last of the royal governors (1767-1775). He filled his council with relatives, including Mark Hunking Wentworth, his father. He also

became "Surveyor-General of the Woods" and was considered the most capable ever to hold that post. He remained loyal to the Crown, and fled to Boston (1775) and to England (1778). He later became Surveyor-General of Nova Scotia (1783) and its Lieutenant Governor (1792). He was made a 'Baronet' in 1795 (title Sir). He lived in Halifax 'til he died in 1820.

When Governor Benning Wentworth died in 1770 at his Little Harbor mansion, he left his entire estate to his young widow. You may recall how Longfellow described the wedding of Benning Wentworth and Martha Hilton (forty years younger than he) in "Tales of a Wayside Inn." His nephew John Wentworth had expected to inherit from Benning Wentworth, who had no children. Much trouble here and in England resulted from this conflict. Much New Hampshire land was lost on account of non-payment of taxes. All Vermont land was taken away from the Wentworth family by the boundary line decision.

It has been a real pleasure to prepare this paper, and bring it to you today. Perhaps you have gotten a little better insight into the early history of our State, and the problems and hardships our ancestors faced even before the American Revolution.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

One of the outstanding lawyers of our State, Compatriot Davison has had a long and distinguished record of public service. Elected from Haverhill, New Hampshire, as a member of the General Court, he was Speaker of the House from 1927-1929. He served on the Governor's Council from 1939-1941, and was Acting Attorney General of New Hampshire during World War II. For ten years, 1951-1961, he was a member of the New Hampshire Public Service Commission, much of the time as its Chairman.

As Chairman of the Haverhill Bicentennial observance in 1963, and in many other ways, he has manifested alike his interest in history and in public office. He long served on the Board of Managers for our Society.

[Return to Index of Essays](#)