

# The Burning of Maine

"HE has plundered our Seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt our Towns, and destroyed the Lives of our People." This grievance against the King of Great Britain is listed among many in the Declaration of Independence. Unanimously passed on July 4, 1776 the Declaration of Independence was the final thrust towards a war for independence from the British Empire. One of the towns burnt by British forces, and referred to in the Declaration, was Falmouth, (now Portland) Maine.

In May of 1775, a militia group from Falmouth took British Navy Captain Mowatt prisoner. He was not held as a prisoner for long, in fact he was released on the same night of his capture. Later in the year, battles in Concord and Lexington, Massachusetts began the Revolutionary War. Mowatt, still stationed in the New England colonies was given orders to sail north and east to rebellious towns. His orders were to "burn, destroy and lay waste" to Cape Ann, Gloucester, Portsmouth, Ipswich, Saco, Salem, Marblehead, Newburyport, Machias, and Falmouth. Falmouth the site of Mowatt's capture was chosen as his first target.

On October 18, 1775, five warships under Mowatt's command opened fire on the town of Falmouth from the harbor. The warships bombed Falmouth for eight hours and then Mowatt sent troops ashore to burn whatever was left of the town. Falmouth was destroyed. Remarkably no one died in this attack. Seventy-five percent of the town burned in the bombardment and fire. Falmouth harbor was not useful as a seaport for the rest of the war. Mowatt had used almost all his ammunition during his bombardment of Falmouth and had to return to Boston to rearm his fleet. Other coastal towns took the burning of Falmouth as a warning and fortified their ports.

In 1786, part of the town of Falmouth separated and renamed itself Portland. Portland was destroyed two times before Mowatt's burning and once after. In 1690, Falmouth was

destroyed by an Indian raid, which resulted in the English abandonment of the Maine wilderness north of Wells. Then in 1703, a French and Indian expedition destroyed Falmouth, along with most of the settlements in Maine. The fourth burning of Portland happened on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1866 and was named the Great Portland Fire. The 1866 fire left 10,000 of Portland's 13,000 residents homeless, 2,000 buildings destroyed and 200 acres leveled.

As devastating as the Portland fires were, the worst fire in Maine's history occurred in October of 1947. The weather conditions that year led to this devastating fire. Maine experienced a wet spring with heavy rainfall followed by a very dry summer, a classic formula for fire. Most of the state was affected by wildfires that summer. In all 200,000 acres of Maine was destroyed. Fires ranged from Kittery in the south to the most northern of Maine's counties, Aroostook.

These fires were not only threatening to peoples' homes and lives, but also to their livelihoods. One of Maine's larger industries, forestry was devastated by these fires. The fires crippled economic growth in parts of the state for years to come. Although Maine has recovered from the wildfires of 1947, wildfires are still considered a serious threat to the Maine economy. Ninety percent of Maine is forested, and much of this timber is harvested by foresters to produce paper products at mills around the state.

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