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Fire of Patriotism

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The war begun!" the *Bangor Whig Courier* blared on the morning of April 13, 1861, hours after its editors had received the telegraphs from Charleston. "Upon the Southern traitors rests the responsibility of the consequences that must follow."

South Carolina's bombardment of Fort Sumter the day before shocked the nation, turned previously sympathetic New Yorkers, Marylanders, and Delawareans against the South, and triggered the bloodiest conflict in U.S. history. In Maine, the assault on the U.S. military installation unleashed what one observer described as "an unquenchable fire of patriotism" and "an eagerness to avenge the foul blow that had been struck [and] crush out treason forever." In just a fortnight, six thousand men had volunteered to fight the Confederates — six times the quota called for by President Abraham Lincoln — populating instant tent city boot camps outside Portland, Augusta, and Bangor. "Let the loyal states exhaust every resource they have," Governor Israel Washburn proclaimed. "The hour for action has arrived."

Though far from the fields of battle, Mainers followed their governor's lead, acting vigorously to defend the Union and exhausting the state's economic, demographic, and political resources in the process. More than 9,300 would die, and another nine thousand injured, the second-highest casualty rate in the north, after Vermont. But the conflict also put an end to Maine's all-too-brief Golden Age, severing its trade links, devastating key industries, scattering its sons across the continent, and plunging many communities into a crisis from which they've never emerged.

"The war had a devastating effect on the state in a number of ways," says Civil War expert Tom Desjardin, currently the staff historian at the Maine Bureau of Parks and Lands. "Industries were devastated. Soldiers went to the South and West and said, 'Hey, there aren't any rocks in these fields,' and decided not to come home, which made the decline of the economy even worse. We've never really recovered from it."

Ironically, on the eve of the Civil War, Maine was in many ways at the height of its power and influence. Its population had increased by 8 percent since 1850 to 628,000, half of whom were twenty-one and under. This gave Maine six seats in the U.S. Congress, more than California, Texas, and Florida combined. Hannibal Hamlin of Hampden was vice president and William Pitt Fessenden was one of the most powerful men in the U.S. Senate. John A. Andrew, formerly of Windham, had been elected governor of Massachusetts, while Governor

Washburn's own brothers represented Illinois and Wisconsin in Congress. Maine's early bird September elections had national influence of the sort the New Hampshire primaries do today, thus the phrase: "As Maine Goes, So Goes the Nation."

Its economy was ascendant as well. Maine was a storehouse of granite, ice, timber, salt cod, and foodstuffs — resources critical to the development of the cities of the Atlantic seaboard, and the South in particular. Maine farmers, fishermen, lumberjacks, and factory workers were plugged into the national economy by Maine's enormous merchant fleet, which dominated the coastal carrying trade, and provided tens of thousands of jobs for sailors, shipbuilders, and dock workers in Portland, Bath, and beyond. Ships built, owned, and crewed by Mainers returned home from southern ports with molasses for Portland's cavernous rum distillery and cotton for the rapidly expanding textile mills, which in 1860 accounted for almost a quarter of the state's economic output.

"What's fascinating is that Mainers didn't hesitate to give Lincoln an overwhelming victory in 1860 and an even bigger one in 1864," says Jerry Desmond, the Maine-born and -educated executive director of the Birmingham History Center in Alabama. "They weren't voting their pocketbooks, because as soon as the war started the coastal trade dropped off to almost nothing. If the war hadn't happened, perhaps some of Maine's industries wouldn't have folded."

Amid the anti-Confederate fervor that followed the attack on Fort Sumter, few Mainers worried about long-term economic consequences. The war, after all, was expected to be over in a matter of weeks. The thousands of Mainers who flooded the state's recruitment camps in the spring of 1861 had signed up for just three months of service. Only as the war dragged on for months and then years did its full consequences begin to sink in.

Sumter electrified Maine. Actor John Wilkes Booth — southern sympathizer and future assassin — was completing a run of *Richard III* in Portland when the news arrived; assessing the mood, he wisely, quickly skipped town, not pausing to pay his bills. In Bangor, pro-slavery newspaper editor Marcellus Emery was put out of work a few months later, after a mob attacked the offices of his *Bangor Democrat*, burning its contents in the street. With army recruiters turning away the oversupply of volunteers, some Mainers rushed to Massachusetts, joined Governor Andrew's hastily assembled regiments, and found themselves en route to defend Washington, D.C., within four days of Sumter. When a pro-Confederate mob attacked the 6th Massachusetts Volunteers as they changed trains in Baltimore, two of the four soldiers they killed were from Maine.

In Augusta, Governor Washburn was left to oversee the creation of Maine's army by scratch, the federal War Department not yet able to provide equipment, training, or guidance. "He had to find shoes, clothing, tents, wagons, horses, harnesses, weapons, band instruments, and even buttons," writes biographer Kerck Kelsey, of the Washburn-Norlands Living History

Center in Livermore. “Washburn was everywhere: driving, cajoling, inspiring, and providing absolute certainty that the cause was worthy.” He even tried to assemble a special unit comprised entirely of oversized lumberjacks and Penobscot river drivers called the “Jam Breakers” who would require “uniforms several times larger . . . than had ever been made.”

Ordinary soldiers recognized the ad hoc state of affairs, even as they embraced new sights and experiences. Seventeen-year-old Eugene Kingman, of Dexter, joined the 12th Maine in the fall of 1861 and was shipped from Bangor to Portland by train, an experience so novel it was literally worth writing home about. “We saw many, many strange places on the way and many new things,” he wrote, though after arriving at the tent camp outside Portland, they had little to do. “We shall not go into service for some time, I am sure, for we are not drilled any,” he wrote after nearly two weeks at the camp. “We are exposed to temptation more here than we shall anywhere else and I have resisted it so far.”

“We cannot drill as there seems to be no one who knows enough about it to teach us,” Private John Haley of the 16th Maine reported from Camp King in Cape Elizabeth ten months later. “Several days of this [droll] regime have so disgusted and sickened us that we have lost all enthusiasm over the war and desire to depart for home.” When drilling finally began he wrote, “the paucity of military knowledge of both officers and privates renders this pretty dull music.” Some six thousand men spent that winter camped out on frozen ground outside the Capitol building in Augusta and forty-eight of them died before the War Department got them arms and transportation.

In many units, morale only went downhill once they reached the war zone. Five Maine regiments participated in the disastrous First Bull Run in July 1861, where Union troops panicked and left Washington, D.C. vulnerable to attack. Maine units suffered heavy casualties repelling General Robert E. Lee’s invasion of Maryland the following season.

After suffering losses at Fredericksburg, Private Haley’s regiment was ordered to camp in a miserable swamp at the foot of a muddy hillside, from which flowed the “drainage of the mule stables.” “Short rations, bog water to drink, malaria inhaled with every breath . . . Is it any wonder that we are being swept off at the rate of two a day,” Halsey wrote in his diary. “We stay and die off like sheep while all around us are hills and elevations dry and healthy, with plenty of wood and hope of clean water.” Without adequate rations, they were forced to spend their pay on grossly overpriced foodstuffs offered by area peddlers. En route to the Battle of Chancellorsville, they passed through a field hospital “where the surgeons were cutting and slashing human flesh right and left. They had a pile of arms and legs there nearly as large as a Virginia haystack.” The surgeons, he remarked, “are no more fit for their position than a cow is for teaching the languages [and are] often moved more by their individual likes and desires than by any medical knowledge.”

As the human cost grew on the fields of Maryland and Virginia, the mood grew increasingly sober in Maine. First, there was the realization that Maine itself was vulnerable to attack. In June 1863, Confederate raiders snuck into Portland Harbor under cover of darkness, seized control of the U.S. revenue cutter Caleb Cushing, and slipped out to sea before the city’s forts were any the wiser. (Locals caught up with and captured the rebels, but not before the raiders had set fires that destroyed the ship.) Eastern Maine lived under constant fear of rebel attack from sanctuaries in British-controlled New Brunswick. The concern was warranted: In the summer of 1864, Confederate agents slipped over the border and held up a bank in Calais, “determined upon plunder, pillage, and robbery to be carried out on a large scale,” according to the local St. Croix Herald. Forewarned by a telegram from the American consul in Saint

John, State Guards laid a trap for the insurgents, who spent the next three years at the Maine State Prison.

Such incidents prompted the Federal government to upgrade its military defenses on the Maine coast. New batteries were added to the fortifications defending Portland Harbor and the enormous Fort Knox at the mouth of the Penobscot, while work began on a massive new installation, Fort Popham, at the mouth of the Kennebec. None were completed by the time the war ended, and so largely failed to relieve wartime anxiety.

Meanwhile, much of the state had fallen into a state of profound economic crisis. Its southern markets cut off, the coastal trade collapsed. Shipyards in Bath went from building an average of twenty-three ships a year in the 1850s to just nine in 1861. Maine's sea fisheries — the largest in the nation in 1861 — were hobbled by geometric increases in the costs of marine insurance, salt, canvas, anchors, chains, and other supplies. Many cotton mills closed for lack of supply.

"The shipbuilding trade was ruined, the coastal trade was destroyed, and people were leaving because there was no work," says Desmond, who suspects the generous bounty money offered to recruits spurred poor Mainers, like his Irish immigrant ancestor, Cornelius Desmond, to volunteer. "The war was not kind to Maine."

There were exceptions, however. Military contractors whose raw material supplies were close at hand made out extremely well, including boot and leather goods factories. Powder mills in Gorham and Windham worked all out to provide a quarter of the Union's gunpowder. The Portland Company complex churned out locomotives, cannons, and the steam boilers for naval gunboats, while the nearby Casco Iron Works built the pilothouse for the famous ironclad, USS *Monitor*. Perhaps most successful were the Lewiston textile mills controlled by Benjamin Bates — who owned the Bates, Androscoggin, and Hill mills — one of the few Mainers who had foreseen a long conflict.

"During a time when other New England mills were exhausting their cotton supplies and trimming their workforce, Bates was hiring new workers and using cotton it had stockpiled [before the war] to make war products such as tents and uniforms," says Susan Beane, archivist at Museum L-A. Bates had to scrounge for workers, however, as many men were away fighting and most available women were already at work in his factories.

Thus the ads he placed for "120 Boys and Girls . . . required to work nine hours per day" to meet the demands of his army tent contract. He later invested part of the resulting fortune in the nearby Maine State Seminary, which renamed itself Bates College in gratitude.

Military service became less attractive as well, particularly after the imposition of the draft in March 1863. Residents of several small towns in north Franklin County —Kingfield, Salem, Anson, Freeman, New Portland — drove conscription officers out of the area after seizing their draft papers. "In one of the towns they are said to be throwing up earthworks," the *New York Express* warned, suggesting a major insurrection along the lines of that city's deadly draft riots. But when the Lewiston Light Infantry were dispatched to the region, they were invited to banquets and sent on their way with the happy assurance that all draft notices had been delivered. Despite the possible defections in the western foothills, by war's end more than seventy thousand Mainers had enlisted in the army or navy, the highest proportion of any northern state.

Gettysburg was, of course, the turning point of the war, and Mainers played an outsized role in the Union victory. Maine regiments were everywhere in the battle: Cemetery Ridge, the Wheat Field, Devil's Den, and, of course, at Little Round Top. The 20th Maine's role in the latter action has become the stuff of legend, its heroic stand against a more experienced Alabama regiment having supposedly saved not just the Federal victory, but the Union itself.

Desjardin, a former archivist at the Gettysburg National Military Park and author of a comprehensive study of the action, *Stand Firm Ye Boys From Maine*, says the 20th's action was indeed heroic, even if its strategic significance has been blown out of proportion. A green unit led by a bookish Bowdoin College professor, Joshua Chamberlain, the 20th was completely out of its element on July 2, 1863. "They were probably placed on the backside of the hill, way off to the left because they were so inexperienced they needed to be kept out of harm's way," Desjardin notes. "But harm moved."

In a twist of events, the Mainers found themselves defending the ridge of Little Round Top from wave after wave of Alabama troops. Chamberlain, deathly ill from dysentery and malaria, rallied his men and, when they ran out of ammunition, led a dramatic bayonet charge that surprised and routed their opponents. "The regiment really had no business performing as well as it did," Desjardin says. "When I was a battlefield guide I used to tell people: It's as if you're in the stands watching the Superbowl and Tom Brady blows out his knee and someone says, 'Hey you, get in there.' Maybe you've watched a lot of football, but nobody expects you to throw four touchdown passes. It was that remarkable."

The stakes, however, were not as high as legend would have it. The summit of Little Round Top isn't round at all, but is actually shaped more like a hot dog, and the short end was the only part oriented toward the Union lines that day. At best, Desjardin says the Confederates would have had room for three or four cannon — not nearly enough firepower to destroy the Federal army. Nor would they have remained there very long. "At the time the 15th Alabama attacked the 20th Maine, there were something like ten thousand Union soldiers not otherwise engaged who could have stormed that hill within minutes," he notes. "Chamberlain did not save the Union Army from destruction on July 2nd." He did, however, receive the Congressional Medal of Honor, and went on to lead his men in a number of other genuinely heroic actions.

Another unfortunate distinction for Maine: Being home to the highest single-day casualty rate of any Federal unit in the entire war. The unfortunate soldiers were the 950 Penobscot Valley men of the First Maine Heavy Artillery, who had spent much of the war manning Washington, D.C.'s defenses. But in the spring of 1864, the regiment was converted to infantry and sent to the grueling siege of Petersburg, Virginia. There, their commander ordered a foolish World War I-like charge over open ground against a heavily fortified Confederate position. In just fifteen minutes, 115 Mainers were dead, 489 wounded, and 28 missing. By the end of the war the following year, the regiment had lost a total of 683 officers and men, including 260 felled by disease.

The war's conclusion ended the suffering on the battlefield, but not the crisis back at home. The clash of the *Monitor* and the *Merrimac* had put a symbolic end to the era of wooden sailing vessels; the future of shipbuilding would be with the iron steamships built in Liverpool and Baltimore, not the wooden brigs and schooners of Bath. Facing postwar inflation and the loss of federal bounties, small owner-operated fishing enterprises collapsed up and down the coast. Many coastal and upland farmers were unable to survive the wartime interruption in trade. "All those people who had farmed the coast because they had good access to the

ocean were left high and dry," says Richard Judd, professor of history at the University of Maine. "The farms were abandoned and when letters came from soldiers who'd seen the timber and good soils of the prairies or the South, people left Maine in droves."

Indeed, for the only time in its history as a state, Maine actually lost population between the censuses of 1860 and 1870 as people fled the economic malaise. An 1873 report said that Waldo County's "once teeming fields that bore bounteous harvests, now show a deplorable state of deterioration." Maine would of course grow again, but was continuously outdistanced by much of the rest of the country, cementing its backwater status.

"We had six hundred thousand people at the time of the Civil War and there's only a little over double that today. Meanwhile the country has gone from 30 million to 300 million," notes Desjardin. "After the war, we went from being a powerful economic and political force to a small New England state."

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