

Echoes of Pejepscot: The Site of Fort Andross

At the edge of the Androscoggin River, where water carves through granite, stands a place that has borne witness to every chapter of this land's history.

It's an enduring area etched by ice, shaped by human hands, and rebuilt through centuries of change.

Here, glaciers once carved the valley. Native Americans fished its rapids and honored its rhythms. Colonists claimed it. Forts rose. Mills roared. And finally, renewal.

This is the story of a river, a people, and a place that never stood still.

This is the story... of the Site of Fort Andross.

Ice

Before people, before forests, before names, there was ice. The Laurentide Ice Sheet covered all of what we now call Maine. It ground mountains into valleys. It carved the winding path of the Androscoggin River. And when it retreated, it left behind a land marked by water and stone.

Life followed. Trees, animals, rivers teeming with fish. And then, the people came, ancestors of the Wabanaki Native Americans, who made their homes along this river, at a place they called Pejepscot, which roughly translates to: 'the long rocky rapids part.' Pejepscot encompasses the current towns of Brunswick, Topsham, and Harpswell, Maine.

As the glacier retreated, it left more than carved valleys, it seeded the hydrology of an entire region. The Androscoggin flowed freely, tumbling over bedrock, creating habitats that would sustain life for millennia. And in that sculpted terrain, the site of Fort Andross would find meaning, conflict, and purpose.

A Native Homeland

Pejepscot was not just a town. It was a world. A network of seasonal villages, trading paths, fishing grounds, and spiritual sites. The Wabanaki lived with the rhythm of the land, planting, harvesting, hunting, and gathering along the fertile bends of the Androscoggin.

This land was not empty. It was known. Loved. Named. And the site of Fort Andross was among the most important, where fish were plentiful and the river narrowed into rapids.

Seasonal migrations were not random; they were rituals. The Wabanaki returned year after year to the same fishing spots. Their relationship with the land was reciprocal. Every bend

in the river had a name. Every grove had a purpose. The site of Fort Andross stands was more than strategic, it was sacred.

The Arrival

In 1628, English settler Thomas Purchase arrived at Pejepscot. He built a homestead and trading post on the very land where Fort Andross would one day rise. He bartered with the Wabanaki, Native Americans, offering fish for furs. But this was no equal exchange. Purchase brought a new idea, ownership.

The land was no longer just lived upon. It was claimed. Cleared. Enclosed. The ground was shifting, not just physically, but culturally.

Purchase did not arrive alone. He brought with him tools of permanence, and a worldview rooted in possession. What he began was not just a trading post, but a precedent. A line was drawn, one that would soon be followed by fences, deeds, and fortifications.

And for a time, it worked.

Purchase prospered. His claim was strengthened in 1632 by a formal land patent from the Plymouth Council for New England, co-signed with his brother-in-law, George Way. From the banks of the Androscoggin, Purchase ran a successful fishery, harvesting sturgeon and salmon, and curing the catch for export to England. The site at Pejepscot was ideal.

But this was a fragile arrangement, sitting atop an unresolved conflict between cultures, claims, and nations.

By the late 1640s, tensions with the French and the ongoing presence of native resistance placed his outpost in increasing danger.

Then came King Philip's War, a conflict that spilled across New England and reached into Maine. In 1675, Thomas Purchase's house and trading post were attacked and burned by the allied Wabanaki, who were aligned with the French. He and his family narrowly escaped, fleeing first to Boston.

He would never return to Pejepscot.

Tension and the Need for Walls

As the number of settlers grew, so too did the conflicts. Native resistance to the encroachment on their lands intensified. To secure this strategic location for fishing, hunting, and settlement, the British Empire established Fort Andross, in 1688, the first fortification on the banks of the Androscoggin River.

In the early years of King William's War, Governor Edmund Andros of the Dominion of New England, seeking to promote eastern settlements, came to Pejepscot in the midwinter of 1688. With an army of one thousand men, he ordered the construction of a new fort as this was a highly prized location for fishing and hunting. Built of local timber, the fort rose quickly but sturdily, commanding a strategic view of the river. It stood on the very site of Thomas Purchase's former trading post.

The fort's construction was both practical and symbolic. It was meant to guard against attack, but its deeper purpose was psychological, to signal to the Wabanaki that the settlers would not relinquish the land. Under the command of Lieutenant Colonel McGregory and Major Thomas Savage, Fort Andross became both a defensive stronghold and a declaration of dominance.

In 1694, the fort was destroyed by the French and their Wabanaki allies. But the English rebuilt. The fort, like the town, was here to stay.

A new fort was built in 1715 by Captain John Gyles on the ruins of Fort Andross. This fort was named Fort George, named after King George I of Great Britain.

In 1736 as the series of wars were beginning to end in the region, the government of Massachusetts deemed it unnecessary to retain the fort any longer.

The ruins of the fort, with some portions of the wall yet standing, were seen as late as 1802. The materials of the old fort were used in the construction of dwellings in Brunswick and Topsham. Some of the lime mortar from the fort was used for the foundations of these buildings.

The Division of Land

By 1714, a group of wealthy Boston investors formalized control of the region under the name 'Pejepscot Proprietors.' They used colonial deeds and court rulings to parcel out land across what would become Brunswick, Topsham, and Harpswell Maine.

The Site of Fort Andross stood at the center of these shifting boundaries. Once a military outpost, it became a geographic and symbolic anchor in a land increasingly defined by ownership rather than relationship.

Their surveys divided the region into lots, each numbered, measured, and priced. A map replaced the memory of the forest. But the site of Fort Andross remained the axis, the point from which expansion radiated outward. Even as ownership changed, the physical anchor did not.

The Towns Around the Fort

In 1717, Brunswick was officially incorporated. In 1733, Topsham followed, and in 1746 Harpswell. The towns of Topsham and Brunswick grew up facing each other across the river, and the site of Fort Andross stood between them. It became a landmark, a point of

orientation.

Maine Street extended out from the site of Fort Andross like a spine, connecting civic life to the river's edge. The surrounding area changed, but the site remained, the observer of a growing and changing community.

Maine Street became the commercial epicenter, stretching from the site inland. Churches, schools, taverns, and shops emerged along its path. Across the river, Topsham developed differently, more agricultural, less centralized, but equally shaped by its proximity.

Transformation

After Fort George was abandoned in 1736, seventy-three years would pass before the site was occupied again. For decades, the land lay quiet. The echoes of war faded. But the river never stopped moving. And in time, it would power something entirely new.

In 1809, a group of investors led by Governor William King built the first textile mill in Maine on the site where Fort Andross once stood. It was a modest, three-story wooden structure known as the Brunswick Cotton Manufacturing Company. Though it failed within three years, it marked the beginning of a profound transformation. The site was no longer a garrison, it had become a place of production.

Through the 1800's, a succession of mills rose from the foundations of the old fort. Some burned. Others folded. But the promise of power, harnessed from the Androscoggin's relentless current, kept drawing new ambition to the river's edge.

In 1834, a new venture, The Brunswick Company, was formed. Unlike the timber structures that had come before it, this company built a permanent mill of brick, a structure designed not just to produce, but to endure. That original building still stands today, embedded within the larger Fort Andross complex. Its bricks have survived fire, flood, and industry. They remain a physical bridge between Brunswick's industrial past and its modern identity.

By the 1850s, the property had changed hands again, this time reorganized under the Cabot Manufacturing Company. Named for its Boston financiers, Cabot quickly grew into one of the largest textile operations in Maine. The mill complex became the dominant force on the Brunswick skyline. Inside, more than a thousand workers tended spindles and looms that turned Southern cotton into fabric shipped across the country. At its peak, the mill ran over 26,000 spindles, day and night.

As production demands increased, so did the scale of the building itself. In 1891, two massive brick wings were added to the original mill, extending east and west. These wings nearly doubled the facility's square footage and allowed for more loom space, storage, and expanded administrative offices. From the air, the mill began to resemble a fortress again, not of defense, but of labor and industry. The wings gave Cabot

Manufacturing its lasting footprint, a monumental presence on the river that still defines the downtown landscape today.

Currently, etched in the brick at the center of the complex are the words: 1834 CABOT 1891. 1834 marks the year the original structure was erected by the Brunswick Company. 1891, the year the wings were added by the Cabot Manufacturing Company. Together, they mark not just time, but transformation.

The Cabot workforce was made up largely of French Canadian immigrants who lived in crowded tenement housing built by the company. Whole families worked within its walls. Children as young as seven labored alongside their parents. In 1881, mill children staged a small strike for better pay, a quiet but remarkable act of defiance. In the years that followed, poor living conditions led to outbreaks of typhoid and diphtheria. Public health officials intervened, and the state pressed Cabot to improve worker housing.

Yet despite hardship, the mill endured. It brought life and industry to Brunswick for nearly a century. Generations passed through its doors. Its bricks absorbed the sweat of labor, the rhythm of machines, and the quiet resilience of those who depended on it.

In 1955, the mill shut down. The looms fell silent. An era had ended, but the building remained. And though the machinery no longer ran, the walls of the old Cabot Mill still held the memory of everything that had come before.

Bridges

As the mills roared and powered the heart of Brunswick's industry, bridges began to rise across the Androscoggin, adjacent to the site of Fort Andross. The first bridge, built in 1796, was a wooden span funded by local proprietors. It was a symbol of growth. Fires and floods claimed every early attempt, each one rebuilt with greater ambition. In 1871, a free iron bridge replaced the toll crossings. Known locally as "the Free Bridge," it stood longer than any of its predecessors and paved the way for modern infrastructure.

In 1932, another landmark crossing joined the river's skyline: the Frank J. Wood Bridge. Built by Boston Bridge Works, it was a bold, three-span steel truss bridge, over 800 feet long, with a central span stretching more than 300 feet, among the largest in Maine at the time. The bridge carried automobiles, freight, and even trolley cars to and from Lewiston, Maine until the late 1930s. For generations, it was the most recognizable link between Brunswick and Topsham, a workhorse of steel and concrete known simply as "The Green Bridge."

In 1892, as the Cabot Mill expanded and neighborhoods grew in Topsham, a new kind of bridge was imagined, not for carts or carriages, but for people. The Androscoggin Swinging Bridge was built by John A. Roebling's Sons Company, the same family firm behind the Brooklyn Bridge. Suspended between two steel towers, it offered mill workers a safer, faster path to the job site at the mill. Its design was both practical and poetic: a

narrow arc of steel and timber, swaying gently above the current, connecting lives on either side of the river.

Each crossing tells a different part of the region's story. The Swinging Bridge speaks of labor and resilience. The Frank J. Wood Bridge, of mobility and modernization. Earlier bridges, now long gone, tell of frontier ambition and the struggle to stay connected. And together, they echo the same truth: that the site of Fort Andross, was never isolated. It was, and remains, a center point in a web of connection, history, and human movement.

Revival

The old Cabot Mill building was sold in the 1950s and repurposed as the Lewis Industrial Building, a name that reflected its transitional phase from production to reinvention. The space hosted manufacturing, warehousing, and commercial tenants. Yet its true transformation was still to come.

In 1986, the building's historic identity was restored when it was sold to Coleman P. Burke of New York City, the name of the building was changed back to Fort Andross, reflecting the original fort that occupied the site in 1688. From colonial blockhouse to textile powerhouse, this was more than a change in name, it was recognition that this space still held meaning, and still held potential.

Renovation followed. The vast mill floors, once lined with looms, found new life as home to artist studios, technology startups, farmer's markets, restaurants, and community events. Brick by brick, Fort Andross was reborn, not as a fortress or a factory, but as a cultural hub.

Legacy

The legacy of Fort Andross is layered. It's not a single story, but many woven together, native homeland, colonial outpost, industrial hub, cultural cornerstone. The Androscoggin River still flows beside it. The towns still grow around it. And history still lives within it.