

Key Themes in York History

The mission of the Museums of Old York is to preserve and promote the rich history of the York region through programs and educational experiences that enhance historical perspective and build on community pride. We are currently in the process of defining the special history of this particular place. In that effort, staff members have identified six broad themes we think tell our community's story. We would like to know what others think of them.

When we have reached the final version of these themes, they will serve as the basis for all our activities in collecting, preserving and educating. We want them to be clear and meaningful to all our area's residents and visitors, and to spark greater interest and participation in our mission.

I. York is where Maine began.

York was founded in the 1630s by agents of Sir Fernando Gorges with intentions of creating a city at the heart of a commercial empire motivated by economic gain. It remained a center for colonial administration and justice until the first quarter of the 19th century. Puritan Massachusetts took over in 1652 slowly transforming York into a center of Puritan culture. Located on the outer edge of settlement in northern Massachusetts, York faced Native American raids during the French and Indian Wars including the Candlemas Raid of 1692 that nearly destroyed the town. In the late 1740's York became a springboard for the movement that began a more personal and emotional style of Christianity across New England, known as the Great Awakening. As York families grew, the next generations moved north, settling many of Maine's new towns.

II. Periodic waves of newcomers have altered the character of the town.

English settlers immigrated to York beginning in the 1630s seeking economic gain. Settlers from Massachusetts altered York's character by introducing Puritanism. In the 1660s Scottish prisoners arrived in the area as indentured servants to work in saw and grist mills. Once their indentures were paid off some of these immigrants settled in York. Southern New England opportunists replaced failed merchant families in the early 19th century. In the 20th summer vacationers fell in love with York Beach and York Harbor, bought property and settled as year-round residents.

III. York's rivers and the ocean dominate its history.

The first settlers in York came to make a living in fish and timber because of the town's location on the ocean. York's two small rivers afforded sheltered locations for wharves and docks and after the threat of Indian raids diminished in the 1720s, York flourished as a small port town with several residents making their fortunes as merchants. Shipbuilding and other maritime services grew to support York's ocean-based economy. The heyday for York's mercantile economy, with its many ties to the British global commercial network, ended with the War for Independence. Jefferson's Embargo and the War of 1812 snuffed out the last of York's global trade, causing economic decline. For much of the nineteenth century domestic trade flourished with firewood and other commodities traveling aboard schooners and coasters to be sold in other cities. While York's streams and rivers powered small saw and grist mills, they did not have the falls required for the large textile mills established in other 19th century Maine towns. Because of this, and the fact that train service didn't arrive until 1886, York retained its rural, backwater feel.

IV. York emerged out of separate villages, each with distinct identity.

The separate sections of York developed individually and retain defining identities. York Village and York Harbor were built around businesses related to ocean commerce, fishing, and sales of imported goods. Later the Harbor became a fashionable summer resort. York Beach, originally a farming area, was transformed in the late 19th century into a summer resort. The Mountain was a relatively poor area known for basket makers and lumbermen. The Ponds (Scituate and Chase) supported lumber mills and small manufacturing. The Scotland District and Cider Hill were farming areas settled by the Irish and Scottish. Cape Neddick was made up of farmers, mariners, and fishermen. Seabury and Brixham were outlying farming districts. The unification and individual identities of these separate villages continues to evolve.

V. Summer seaside recreation transformed York.

Shortly after the Civil War, people began seeking refuge by the sea from urban industrial centers and York became a destination for summer recreation. With rail lines linking York to cities in the south and west, oceanfront land was developed for resorts and cottages. Year-round residents adapted their farms and other businesses to accommodate the needs of summer crowds. Summer residents brought demands for the services they were accustomed to such as running water, electricity, and telephone, leading to modernization. Groups of people from different communities and social classes settled in specific areas of York Beach and York Harbor, creating issues of local identity and spurring the first zoning in Maine. These wealthy summer residents began to preserve historic buildings and beautify the town. World War II drastically reduced summer recreation crowds refocusing the economy toward local residents

VI. The interstate highway brought dramatic growth and change.

Before 1900 the most reliable methods of transportation were railway or ship. With the introduction of the automobile, York recognized the importance of building and maintaining roads. In the 1920's Route 1 was rebuilt with a gravel base and concrete surface leading to a slew of tourist attractions such as motor courts, motels, and restaurants, along the newly improved road. Interstate 95 was completed through York in 1947, ending an era of travel along Route 1. The new interstate, with its 60mph speed limit, allowed former summer residents to settle in York year-round, commuting to work in the cities. The competing interests of newcomers and locals resulted in controversies over town government structure and growth control. New residents often valued beauty and environmental quality more than the commodities the rivers and forests produced resulting in a strong land conservation movement. In the second half of the 20th century traditional ways of life such as fishing, farming, small retail, and trades were threatened by rising property values, retail chains, regional malls and national businesses.