

# BICENTENNIAL MAINE

Four uncompromising places  
to visit for the state's 200th birthday

By Hilary Nangle

**M**aine achieved statehood in 1820 in one of American politics' most significant deals. The Missouri Compromise preserved the balance of power in Congress by admitting Missouri as a slave state and Maine as a free state, created by severing it from Massachusetts on March 15 of that year.

To celebrate the bicentennial of that deal-making event, why not agree to seek out some of the state's lesser-known sights and experiences that contribute to making Maine the special place it is? Here are four to get you started.



HILARY NANGLE

## *If These Walls Could Talk* AMBAJEJUS BOOM HOUSE

Logging lore runs deep in Maine. Museums in Patten, Ashland, Bradley, and Rangeley highlight the era, but to truly understand the dangerous work of driving logs down the rivers, visit the Ambajejus Boom House, which has been restored by former river driver Chuck Harris. Harris is now curator and caretaker of the site for the nonprofit West Branch Historical Preservation Committee, formed in 2013 to maintain the historical buildings along the West Branch of the Penobscot River. Boom houses sheltered workers at the river barriers that collected floating timbers.

Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, Ambajejus is located on an island where the West Branch flows into Ambajejus Lake, about halfway between Millinocket and the south entrance to Baxter State Park.

"For every man lost working the woods, 10 drowned on the drive," says Harris. "There was no safety equipment back then. A lot of the old-timers I worked with couldn't even swim."

Logging trucks began replacing river drivers in the early 1970s. After the last Penobscot River drive in 1971, Ambajejus sat abandoned. In the 1980s, Harris appointed himself caretaker and began fixing it up. He researched the history, added artifacts, enlarged old photos, and created exhibits. "I spent summer after summer working for nothing; it was a labor of love, but it worked," he recalls.

Harris also restored a second site, the Chesuncook Boom House, which lies roughly 25 miles northwest of Ambajejus along Golden Road. "I hired on at Chesuncook Lake when I was 19, more than 50 years ago," says Harris. He's dedicating this restoration to Nelson Levasseur, his Chesuncook foreman, who thought it would be a beautiful museum. Harris says he fulfilled Levasseur's dream to not only give a voice to the old drivers who couldn't tell their own stories, but also to preserve this colorful part of Maine's history.

Both boom houses are open to the public daily from May 15 to September 15. Once the ice melts, Ambajejus can be reached only by boat. [themaineboomhouses.org](http://themaineboomhouses.org).



*If you Build It, Tourists Will Come*

## POLAND SPRING PRESERVATION PARK

In the mid-1800s, when Hiram Ricker began touting that drinking from a spring on the family farm cured his chronic indigestion, people took notice. As word of the medicinal liquid spread, increasing numbers of wealthy city folk came to take the waters. The family's hospitality operation grew, and the sprawling Poland Spring House had expanded to 500 rooms by 1914.

An architectural and technological marvel, tricked out with modern wonders including elevators, fire-sprinklers, and dance and photography studios, the resort attracted celebrities, politicians, and socialites. These included Babe Ruth, Alexander Graham Bell, Mae West, and Betty Grable, as well as a slew of presidents, from Ulysses S. Grant to Theodore Roosevelt. Charles Lindbergh flew over but couldn't land because of the crowds.

Although the grand hotel burned to the ground in 1975, some outbuildings survived. Now the Poland Spring Preservation Society operates two of them as museums.

The stories of the famous spring come to life in the ornate, octagonal Maine State Building (pictured at right), originally created for the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. When that ended, Ricker purchased, dismantled, and shipped the structure by train to Lewiston. Ox carts hauled the pieces to Poland Springs, where it reopened as an art gallery and library in 1895.

After admiring the hand-painted windows in the adjacent granite chapel Ricker built for his guests, immerse yourself in the water's history. The springhouse (above) and then state-of-the-art bottling plant, built in 1907 and restored in 2001, now share that story.

One of the Gems of Route 26 ([gemsof26.com](http://gemsof26.com)), Poland Spring Museums are open from mid-May to mid-October. 37 Preservation Way, Poland Spring. [polandspringps.org](http://polandspringps.org).



## Keep the Light Burning BURNT ISLAND LIGHTHOUSE

When Elaine Jones, education director for Maine's Department of Marine Resources, learned that Burnt Island Light was available, she acquired it for the state in 1998. She thought the property off Boothbay Harbor and about a mile's sail from the Maine State Aquarium would be ideal for creating educational programs for teachers and students, and a living history program for the public.

"What's amazing about Burnt Island is that it's the oldest original lighthouse in today's Maine," she says. The 1821 beacon's granite block was quarried from the island; the hole it left is the keeper's house cellar. Eight lighthouses predate it, but all have been altered in some way.

While Jones knew implementing her vision would require both labor and money, she had no budget for either. She wrote grants, researched, traveled, and asked; donations of time, money, and artifacts followed. She also found and interviewed 14 former keepers and their families to help create the living history program.

Visitors time travel aboard the Novelty excursion boat from present-day Boothbay Harbor, arriving at the island as it was in the 1950s. They're welcomed by reenactors portraying lightkeeper Joseph Muise, along with his wife, Annie, and their children, Willard, Adele, Prudy, and Ann.

Burnt Island is open from May 1 to mid-October. The living history program typically runs Mondays and Thursdays in July and August but will not be offered in 2020 due to construction in advance of the light's 2021 bicentennial. [tinyurl.com/burntisl](http://tinyurl.com/burntisl); [keepersofburntislandlight.com](http://keepersofburntislandlight.com).

FROM FAR LEFT: TOM NANGLE; COURTESY MAINE OFFICE OF TOURISM; COURTESY TWOPLATE



*Blessed Be the Artists*

## SOUTH SOLON MEETING HOUSE

Ask about Maine's artistic heritage and replies usually include masters of American art such as Winslow Homer, artist colonies like Ogunquit and Monhegan Island, or the treasures along the Maine Art Museum Trail. Rarely do they include an 1842 Gothic Revival meetinghouse at a rural crossroads in South Solon. The building's prim, white-clapboard exterior, with its twin entries and 20-over-20 paned windows, gives no clue to passersby about the treasure inside.

In the early 1950s, Margaret Day Blake, a trustee of the Art Institute of Chicago who was enrolled at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, took a shine to the meetinghouse. With the school's support, she funded 13 fellowships for young professional artists, selected in three juried national competitions, to fresco murals inside. While subject matter wasn't limited, it was suggested that the Bible might supply a rich trove of material for free and imaginative interpretation, given the building's nature.

Step inside now, and the simple box pews, raised pulpit, and choir gallery provide the ideal foil for the contemporary frescoes that cover nearly every interior surface, including the ceiling. It's astonishing not only for the technique—more associated with medieval European churches than American ones—but also for the freely interpreted religious scenes. The head-swiveling result is both inspired and inspiring: a visual feast affirming that God is in the details.

Located at the southwest corner of South Solon and Meeting House roads in South Solon, the meeting house is always open to visitors except during special events. [southsolonmeetinghouse.org](http://southsolonmeetinghouse.org).

# 200 CANDLES

Celebrate Maine's Bicentennial all year long with special events, cultural programs, and exhibits statewide. Take note of Maine200's Signature Events (most dates are set, but details are still being developed):

**MARCH 14-15  
STATEHOOD WEEKEND**  
Among the planned activities are bean suppers, speeches, poetry, and music in Augusta and statewide.

**MAY 16  
BICENTENNIAL PARADE**  
A huge parade from Auburn to Lewiston with bands and floats will celebrate Maine's veterans, youths, and culture.

**LATE JUNE-JULY 20  
SUMMER COAST FESTIVAL**  
Tall Ships America sails into Portland, Camden, Rockland, Bucksport, and other harbors.

**OCTOBER 9-12  
GRAND FINALE WEEKEND**  
There'll be fireworks, of course, but also special activities, culminated by sealing the 2020 time capsule on the capitol grounds in Augusta.

**FIND EVENT LISTINGS** as well as bicentennial-related news, history, souvenirs, and resources at [maine200.org](http://maine200.org).

**Hilary Nangle** most recently wrote about Maine windjammers in *Northern New England Journey*. She publishes [mainetravelmaven.com](http://mainetravelmaven.com) and writes Moon Publications' Maine guidebook.