

Maine Statehood: An Overview

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Maine Statehood: Background Information

Maine became the twenty-third state in the US on March 15, 1820. The movement to separate from Massachusetts began at least as early as 1785 and gained momentum as a result of the War of 1812. When the US Congress linked the admission of Maine with Missouri (where slavery might be legal), a major political controversy flared across the nation.

Maine Statehood: Key Questions

The bicentennial of Maine statehood in 2019-2020 prompts us to examine a number of important historical issues that remain pressing today.

- Do voting patterns for statehood from 1792 to 1819 reveal that “two Maines” and bitter partisan division existed even prior to the creation of the state?
- What did the separation of Maine from Massachusetts mean for Wabanaki people and Native American sovereignty in their homelands?
- How did Maine statehood trigger a national crisis about slavery and western expansion that led to the Missouri Compromise?
- Did statehood have international implications due to an unclear border with Canada?

Maine Statehood: A Political Chronology

The movement for the District of Maine to separate from Massachusetts began in 1785, and the *Falmouth Gazette* newspaper was largely founded to advance the cause. Early separation conventions were held in Falmouth/Portland in the 1780s and 1790s. Six popular votes occurred for statehood from 1792-1819. Lack of military support from Massachusetts for the District in the War of 1812, especially during the British occupation of downeast Maine in summer/fall 1814, revitalized the separation cause.

The final campaigns for independence from 1816-19 were championed by Republican party leaders and their newspaper the *Eastern Argus*. Votes in May and September 1816 failed to get the extra-majority required by the Massachusetts legislature. Controversy over an attempt to manipulate the tabulation of the vote left the movement in disarray by December 1816. A key change in 1818 to the federal coasting law (having to do with paying customs duties on inter-state maritime commerce) spurred the final successful effort.

The popular vote for statehood in July 1819 had majority support in all nine Maine counties. Populous Kennebec County contributed the most votes in favor of independence, and Hancock County was the most closely divided (52% in favor).

The statehood process in Maine has largely been understood as a conflict between coastal areas with a strong Federalist presence that opposed separation from Massachusetts versus a pro-separation interior dominated by Republicans. Both this spatial pattern and partisan alignment deserve more careful analysis. Some Federalists in Massachusetts favored separation since their party’s strength would increase without strong Republican votes from Maine residents. Meanwhile, the Republican party had significant

disagreements between its leaders in Massachusetts and the District of Maine as well as discord among its national leaders.

Following the successful separation vote in July 1819, the Maine state constitutional convention met in Portland in October 1819. The proposed state constitution had strong protections for religious freedom, allowed black voting rights, and had no property requirement to vote, yet it also denied paupers, women, and Native Americans the franchise. The state constitution was overwhelmingly approved by a popular vote in January 1820. Although federal law granted Native American voting rights in 1924, Maine state law did not allow it until 1953.

To Wabanaki people (the indigenous inhabitants of Maine), statehood may have been looked upon with apprehension. After almost two centuries of diplomatic negotiations with Massachusetts, Penobscots were reluctant to sever ties with the old bay colony. In an effort to uphold the 1819 articles of separation, in which Maine would receive \$30,000 from Massachusetts to carry out its new responsibilities with tribes, Maine entered into a treaty with the Penobscots. Native leaders agreed to recognize the new state in return for an annual distribution of treaty annuities and an affirmation of their land holdings. Neither Maine nor Massachusetts officials consulted with the Passamaquoddy tribe about statehood, thereby delaying the extension of state colonialism to downeast Maine.

The Maine legislature has long had non-voting tribal representatives from the Penobscot (starting in 1823), Passamaquoddy (1842), and Houlton Band of Maliseets (2010). In 2015 the Penobscot and Passamaquoddy withdrew their representatives. Maine is the only state in the US to have had tribal representatives to its state legislature, part of the unique and evolving Wabanaki-Maine relationship.

Maine statehood has significantly different meanings and implications based on where in the state one lives. For French-speaking residents of the St. John Valley, for example, statehood challenged deep connections with Quebec and New Brunswick. When the international boundary was permanently identified in 1842, the border divided communities that had shared the St. John River, often resulting in a sense of loss.

At the national level the 16th US Congress received a petition to admit Maine as a new state in December 1819. Admission of Maine and Missouri (part of the territory in the Louisiana Purchase) were linked to one another by Congress, which fueled an explosive argument about the future of slavery in the US. A controversial compromise that allowed slavery in Missouri passed the House of Representatives by just three votes (with two of Maine's seven Representatives among only fourteen northern politicians who favored this resolution).

William King of Bath was the most influential politician in Maine during the statehood process. He had been regularly elected to the Massachusetts legislature, never ran for federal office, and served as Maine's first governor, although he resigned to take a diplomatic position after 14 months as governor. King favored the compromise to admit Missouri as a slave state, yet his half-brother, Rufus King of New York, was a leading anti-slavery leader in the US Senate.

Maine became the 23rd state in the US on March 15, 1820. Maine was only the second state to be created from a pre-existing one, following Kentucky (the 15th state in 1792). West Virginia is the only other state to have been created from another one. It separated from Virginia during the Civil War to become the 35th state in 1863.

Missouri entered the US as the 24th state on August 10, 1821. Arkansas and Michigan would follow but not until 1836-37. Missouri's state constitution caused yet more controversy since it prohibited the state from ending slavery in the future and also blocked free African Americans from settling there. Many felt this proposed state law violated protections in the Federal Constitution, but it was accepted by an ambiguous agreement by the US Congress.

The Maine statehood process unfolded over many years and sparked several controversial issues that remain unsettled today. The state bicentennial provides a unique opportunity to think more deeply about current public matters with a strong connection to the past, which may help us to better understand the present and to plan more effectively for our future.

Recommended Reading: Maine and the Era of Statehood

- Banks, Ronald F. Maine Becomes a State: The Movement to Separate Maine from Massachusetts, 1785-1820 (Wesleyan University Press, 1970)
- Craig, Béatrice and Maxime Dagenais. The Land In Between: The Upper St. John Valley, Prehistory to World War I (Tilbury House, 2009)
- Forbes, Robert Pierce. The Missouri Compromise and its Aftermath (University of North Carolina Press, 2009)
- Hornsby, Stephen J. and Richard W. Judd, eds. Historical Atlas of Maine (University of Maine Press, 2015), esp. plates 20-23
- Leamon, James S., Richard R. Westcott, and Edward O. Schriver. "Separation and Statehood, 1783-1820" in Richard W. Judd, et al, eds., Maine: The Pine Tree State from Prehistory to the Present (University of Maine Press, 1995), pp. 169-192.
- MacDougall, Walter M. Settling the Maine Wilderness: Moses Greenleaf, his Maps, and his Household of Faith, 1777-1834 (Osher Map Library and Smith Center for Cartographic Education, 2006)
- Mason, Matthew. "The Maine and Missouri Crisis: Competing Priorities and Northern Slavery Politics," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 33 (Winter 2013), pp. 675-700
- Pawling, Micah. Wabanaki Homeland and the New State of Maine: The 1820 Journal and Plans of Survey of Joseph Treat (University of Massachusetts Press, 2007)
- Smith, Joshua M. Battle of the Bay: The Naval War of 1812 (Gooselane Publishing, 2011)
- Taylor, Alan. Liberty Men and Great Proprietors (University of North Carolina Press, 1990)
- Ulrich, Laurel Thatcher. A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812 (Vintage, 1990)
- Van Atta, John R. Wolf by the Ears, The Missouri Crisis, 1819-1821 (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015)