

Highlights of Bethel History

Bethel's settlement came about from encouragements by Massachusetts' colonial government to populate its unsettled land in the District of Maine, use of land grants as pay for military service, immigration from England and Europe and pressure from children of large families to create homesteads of their own.

Gradually settlement in this Bethel area began after the British left Boston and the Revolutionary War had moved south. Capt Joseph Twitchell of Sherburne, Massachusetts had become the plantation president of a section of Maine then named Sudbury Canada; the Androscoggin River ran through the plantation in a section of western Maine that was still somewhat populated by Indians. Fifteen miles of rich intervale land on both sides of the Androscoggin River attracted early settlers to this area.

Sudbury Canada plantation was renamed Bethel at the time of incorporation in 1796. Neighboring townships were: Andover, incorporated 1804; Greenwood, 1816; Newry, 1805; Gilead, 1804; Hanover, 1843; Rumford, 1800; Paris, 1793; and Fryeburg, which had become an informal gateway to Bethel, 1777.

Bethel's economic history reflected the region's economic development. Small, mostly family, businesses produced farm and forest products for local sales and for export. Industry was related to these products – saw mills, dowel, spool and novelty mills, and canning factories. In the last decades of the 19th Century, paper mills brought big industry to the Berlin, NH, and Rumford areas. Paper demanded relatively huge amounts of wood. The Grand Trunk Railroad and the Maine Central Railroad were key transporters for getting goods out to the export markets. During the last of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, Brighton, Mass., was the main stockyard for the country and car loads of livestock left the Bethel depots for this market. However, as the country expanded and refrigerated transporters were introduced, demand for our locally produced goods declined.

Jobs in the educational field increased. William Bingham 2nd's rescued Gould Academy in the first half of the 20th Century. In the 1960's creation of School Administrative District 44 and with it a new high school and additional administrative jobs to be filled, brought more consumers into Bethel's market.

The 1980's and 90's saw the last of Bethel's small farms and mills. Three large dairy farms remain: Carter, Hastings and Blake. One large saw mill remains – Hancock Lumber, formerly the P.H. Chadbourne Co. - in South Bethel. One large potato farm, Sunday River Farm, raises chipping potatoes for primarily Frito Lay. Daily six to eight trailer trucks per hour roll down U.S. Route 2 loaded with wood chips for paper making. Altogether the output of Bethel's fewer but much larger producers and manufacturers may exceed the output of the many much smaller operators in business a century ago.

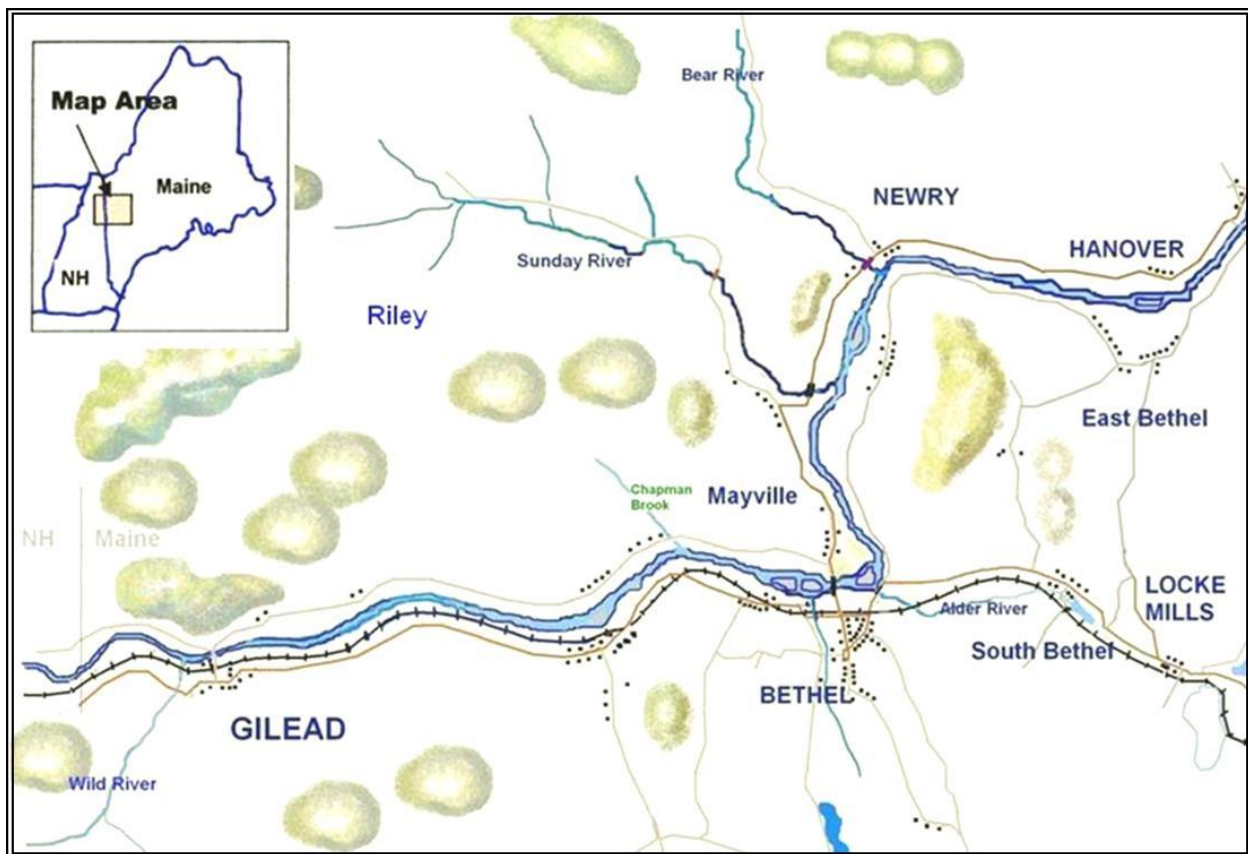
Bethel was once known for its plethora of small general stores. The automobile, Wal-Mart and merchant focus on tourism have changed Bethel's retail scene. Small stores in the surrounding towns and villages have virtually disappeared.

Bethel Maine History - Highlights of Bethel's History

Tourism was once mainly a summer business for hotels, boarding houses, motels, camp operators and lately Bed and Breakfast businesses. Since the 1980's skiing, snowmaking and condos have shifted the tourism focus to winters. Roadside eateries which operated summers only are now open year round.

What seems to be the biggest change in the area's economy from 1980 to 2010 is the surge in second home building and subdivision development. Particularly in the 1990-2010 years, Bethel has seen an influx of retired couples move into old and new homes, gather at social functions, attend town meetings and shop locally.

Meanwhile, although these changes have occurred, the town's population remains about where it was in 1860.



[For more detailed chronology see Dates in Bethel History](#)