# Historic and Archeological Resources

**Overview of Bingham:**

Historic, archaeological, and cultural resources contribute significantly to the character of Bingham's community today and provide context for future growth and change. This chapter inventories and examines available information on historic and archaeological resources so they can be incorporated into planning for the future.

In addition to numerous historical resources, Bingham's legacy is also in the historical settlement patterns of its early residents. The village and landscape are the result of decisions made by the ancestors of today's residents.

**Bingham's Historical Narrative:**

Long before European settlers cleared the forest, established farms, factories, and built houses in the region now known as Bingham, Native Americans moved seasonally through the area. The Kennebec River acted as a major thoroughfare for the Native Americans in their travels.

In January of 1793, William Bingham, considered, by the time he was 40 years old, to be the wealthiest man in America, along with his friend Major General Henry Knox, became joint owners of two million acres in Maine, which was at that time still part of Massachusetts. That land was made up of two separate tracts, one east of the Penobscot River and one straddling the northern portion of the Kennebec River, thus earning the name, the Kennebec Purchase, or the Bingham Purchase.

The Kennebec River tract extended from the southern border of the present town of Bingham to a line north of Parlin Pond Township. It extended westerly to the present-day towns of Kingfield and Mt. Abram and easterly to Wellington, inclusive of those towns. A large portion of the Old Canada Road (U.S. Route 201), which served as the primary link between Lower Canada and Maine from1820 until 1860, cut through the tract west of the Kennebec River.

Part of the sale agreement called for the buyers to establish 2,500 settlers on the land by 1803 or pay a fee of $30 per deficiency. Despite an expensive marketing campaign, including a European recruitment trip, garnering settlement was a major difficulty for Bingham and Knox, an issue that carried over for the trustees of Bingham's estate following his death in 1804.

Some of the obstacles Bingham and Knox faced in settling the land on the Kennebec Purchase resulted from the fact that the sales were pitched primarily as farmland. While a portion of the land was suited to farming, most of it was not. The trustees eventually pitched the land sale as timberlands, which were abundant in this location, as they are today. By the middle of the 19$^{th}$ century, they had disposed of most of the Maine holdings.

The current Town of Bingham is the southern and principal part of the Kennebec Purchase made by William Bingham, for whom the town is named. The Town of Bingham was settled in 1784 and incorporated in 1812.

Early settlers of the town included Daniel Foster, Joshua Goodrich, William Fletcher, and Reverend Obed Wilson

William Fletcher, the first permanent settler in the county, moved from Solon to Bingham in 1799, and located near the present site of Bingham Village. Fletcher lived in Bingham until his death in 1809 at 64 years old. In his lifetime, he lived over a quarter of a century in the county and saw three prosperous settlements begun.

Reverend Obed Wilson, son of early settlers of Skowhegan, moved to Bingham from Starks in 1802. Wilson was a self-made man; he was not surrounded with advantages, but he had a devoted thirst for knowledge. Early in life, Wilson adopted the maxim: “get wisdom; and with all thy getting, get understanding.”

Wilson was a graduate of Bowdoin College where he was known to stand out. He later became the first Chairman for Bingham’s Board of Selectmen. He went on to represent the town in the Legislature for eight terms: four in Portland and four in Augusta. Wilson was well known for his political speaking abilities. In his lifetime, Wilson was a well-respected man with significant influence. He died in 1840. His house still stands on the side of Route 201 next to the 45$^{th}$ parallel sign. It is the oldest house in Bingham.

The early settlement patterns along the Kennebec River are still evident today. Much of Bingham’s present-day population and the most developed areas in town are still around the locations of the original mills. Bingham Village was one of the first settlements and is still the center of town.

In fact, present day Murray Street was the early center of Bingham Village. The town developed with this street as the main hub and expanded outward, so that Route 201 eventually became the main corridor through town.

Following its 1812 incorporation, the town established roads and a school system. The school system originally consisted of nine schools because people were scattered so far apart. The village, known as Bingham Village, was the focus of commercial development, because of the availability of waterpower, though most of the population lived on outlying farms.

By 1859, the town boasted 752 residents, two water-powered sawmills and two gristmills. Contributing to its growth, Bingham had become an important Maine Central Railroad loading point for pulpwood floated down the Kennebec River to Wyman Dam until environmental regulations curtailed log driving in the 1970s.

Over the past 180 years, several factors contributed to the concentration of development in the village. One factor was that many of the early farms were on poor, rocky soil.

As a result, most of these were abandoned during the westward movement, as bigger and more farmable tracts of land became available. The cellar holes of these long-ago farms, now scattered throughout the woods, are the only remains of this past era. Mills and other commercial enterprises clustered along the river, to take advantage of the waterpower and nearby transportation system.

That is not to say there were not successful farming endeavors in Bingham. In Southeast Bingham, on the current day Mahoney Hill Road, fruit trees were so prolific that the produce, mostly apples but other fruit, too, was shipped to England between World War I and World War II.

Another factor that contributed to the concentration of development in the early Bingham Village was that there were two railroad systems: a narrow-gauge and a regular gauge railroad. The narrow-gauge had a station at the end of Murray Street, which is still in existence today, though the narrow-gauge railroad is long gone. The regular gauge railroad, also long gone, had a turntable where the ambulance station is today.

As roads eventually improved, Bingham became a crossroads for travelers. People traveling to other parts of the state and Canada often traveled through Bingham, in fact, in that time, Lake Road went all the way from Portland to Moosehead Lake.

Because Bingham was more populous than other towns in the regions, the original Canada Road was moved from the west side of the Kennebec River to the east side of the river, traveling through Bingham in its current location.

Bingham's rich cultural and historic resources are as enticing to tourists as the natural landscape of the region in which the town lies.

Bingham's population changes over the years can be traced to several historic events, such as the construction of the Wyman Dam and the opening/closing of mills. They can be seen in Table 1, below.

**TABLE 1: POPULATION CHANGE: 1820 TO 2020**

| Year | Population | % Change |
|---|---|---|
| **1820** | 336 | - |
| **1830** | 537 | 59.80% |
| **1840** | 751 | 39.90% |
| **1850** | 752 | 0.10% |
| **1860** | 831 | 10.50% |
| **1870** | 826 | -0.60% |
| **1880** | 828 | 0.20% |
| **1890** | 757 | -8.60% |
| **1900** | 841 | 11.10% |
| **1910** | 775 | -7.80% |
| **1920** | 1,143 | 47.50% |
| **1930** | 1,592 | 39.30% |
| **1940** | 1,210 | -24.00% |
| **1950** | 1,354 | 11.90% |
| **1960** | 1,308 | -3.40% |
| **1970** | 1,256 | -4.10% |
| **1980** | 1,184 | -5.60% |
| **1990** | 1,230 | 3.90% |
| **2000** | 989 | -19.60% |
| **2010** | 922 | -6.80% |
| **2020** | 866 | -6.10% |

*Source: United States Census*

Several of these population changes can be explained and are related to historical events in Bingham.

- 1785: Bingham was settled and became incorporated as a town in 1812.
- 1920-1930: The population increase was the result of the construction of Wyman Dam, which caused an influx of workers to Bingham.
- 1940s: The dramatic population decrease was because the construction of Wyman Dam was complete and the workers who moved to Bingham for this project left.
- 1930s-1940s: The population decrease was offset by the opening of the Quimby Sawmill in 1936, which imported numerous French-speaking Canadian families into the area.
- 1950s: Almost all employment centered around the strong forest product industries.

- Early to mid-1970s: Improved technology in tree cutting, such as tree fellers and grapple skidders resulted in decreased forestry jobs.
- 1976: River drives (pulp and log lengths) ceased due to state and federal laws.
- The other major population decrease, in 2000, was a result of the closing of KD Industries located at the old Quimby Sawmill site.

Overall, Bingham's long ago established Bingham Village is still the epicenter of this rural town. The vestiges and resulting settlement patterns of the reliance on waterpower and the forest industry are still evident today.

**Maine Historic Preservation Commission Data:**

According to Maine Historic Preservation Commission (MHPC), there are three types of historic and archaeological resources that should be considered in comprehensive planning. They are:

- Prehistoric Archaeological (Native American, before European arrival)
- Historic Archaeological (mostly European-American, after written historic records)
- Historic Buildings/Structures/Objects (buildings and other above ground structures and objects)

Archaeological resources are those found underground and are locations where there have been prior signs of the existence of human beings including structures, artifacts, terrain features, graphics or remains of plants and animals associated with human habitation. Prehistoric archaeological resources are those associated with Native Americans and generally date prior to 1600s. Historic archaeological resources are those associated with the earliest European settlers.

***Prehistoric Archeological Sites:***

Evidence of prehistoric settlement is primarily found as encampment sites. The Kennebec River was a major travel route for native Americans, and the banks of the river would be prime locations for encampment sites. At the time the Williams Dam in Solon was built, the Kennebec River's banks were surveyed, and eight archeological sites were found, though the locations have not been revealed to prevent unauthorized exploring.

According to the MHPC, as of September 2022, various professional archaeological surveys have been done in Bingham. There are nine known archaeological sites, eight of which are located on the banks of the Kennebec River, and one is located on Jackson Stream. The information on the map dated 2013 is still valid for these archeological sites.

Portions of the banks along the Kennebec River and floodplain have not yet been surveyed by a professional archaeologist. The banks of Austin Stream (except where it has been cut for an artificially enhanced channel) also need survey.

***Historic Archeological Sites:***

Historic archaeology predominantly refers to signs of early settlement, such as cellar holes. Bingham has records of settlements dating back to the 1780's, but coordinated effort is needed to identify and record remnants of the earliest structures. The locations of several historic farms sites in town are known, and Bingham residents have been active in identifying building sites along the Old Canada Road in Concord, the neighboring town to the west. Grant's Farm Preserve is a historic farm site off Mahoney Hill Road, but it is not marked nor publicized.

As of October 2022, the MHPC has identified and documented 17 historic archeological sites for the town. See Table 2 for details.

**TABLE 2: HISTORIC ARCHEOLOGICAL SITES IN BINGHAM:**

| Site Name | Site # | Site Type | Periods of Significance | National Register Status | Location |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Bingham Cemetery | ME 042-001 | cemetery | c 1795 to present | undetermined | Known |
| Bingham Old Free Meeting House | ME 042-002 | church | 1836 to present | Listed | Known |
| Bingham School #1 | ME 042-003 | school | c 1815 to c 1836 | undetermined | Known |
| Goodrich Hotel | ME 042-004 | hotel | 1822 to 1952 | undetermined | Known |
| A.B. Wilson House | ME 042-005 | domestic | c. 1835 to present | undetermined | Known |
| Wilson-Gray Farm | ME 042-006 | farmstead | c. 1816 to present | undetermined | Known |
| Wilson-Gray Cabin & Wells | ME 042-007 | domestic, cabin | 1802 to c.1816 | undetermined | Known |
| Unidentified #1 | ME 042-009 | farmstead | c. 1800 to c.1855 | undetermined | Known |
| Austin Stream Mill | ME 042-010 | mill, sawmill and gristmill | c. 1799 to c. 1955 | undetermined | Known |
| Cattle Drover's Trail & New Canada Road | ME 042-011 | road | c. 1802 to present | undetermined | Known |
| Goodrich Store | ME 042-012 | commercial, store | c. 1831 to present | undetermined | Known |
| A. Bosworth Homestead | ME 042-013 | domestic | 19th century | undetermined | Known |
| C.B. Gilman Farmstead | ME 042-014 | farmstead | 19th century | undetermined | Known |
| N. Withee | ME 042-015 | | | undetermined | Location Known |
| J. McCollar | ME 042-016 | | | undetermined | Known |
| Bingham Ferry Landing | ME 042-017 | ferry crossing | Depicted as "Ferry" on the 1860 (Chase) map of Somerset County | ineligible | Known |

*Source: Maine Historic Preservation Commission*

No professional town-wide surveys for historic archaeological sites have been conducted to date in Bingham. The Maine Historic Preservation Commission states a need for such a survey. According to MHPC, future archaeological survey should focus on the identification of potentially significant resources associated with the town's agricultural, residential, and industrial heritage, particularly those associated with the earliest Euro-American settlement of the town in the 18th and 19th centuries.

***Bingham's Historic Buildings/Structures/Objects:***

The traditional, recognized standard for what makes a historic or archaeological resource worthy of preservation is normally eligibility for, *or* listing on the National Register of Historic Places. The National Register, administered by the National Park Service, United States Department of Interior, is a listing of those buildings, districts, structures, objects, and sites deemed worthy of preservation for their historic, cultural, or archaeological significance. The National Register is intended to accommodate buildings and sites of national, state, and local significance.

The recognized standard for historic or archaeological resources is listing on the National Register of Historic Places. One benefit of National Register listing is that certain buildings may qualify for a 20 percent investment tax credit. To qualify, the building must be income producing, depreciable, and a "certified" historic structure. To obtain this certification, the historic or archeological resource must meet criteria mandated by The National Register Criteria for Evaluation, by the National Parks Service. Additionally, the National Parks Service developed criteria for the recognition of nationally significant properties, which are designated National Historic Landmarks and prehistoric and historic units of the National Park System. Both these sets of criteria were developed to be consistent with the Secretary of the Interior's *Standards and Guidelines for Archeology and Historic Preservation*, which are uniform, national standards for preservation activities.

Structures that are listed on the National Historic Register are also provided a limited amount of protection from alterations or demolition where federal funding is utilized. Bigham has one stand-alone historic structure on the National Register of Historic Places: the Bingham Free Meeting House on South Main Street, formerly known as the Old Union Church.

The Bingham Free Meeting House, constructed between 1835-1836, and built with voluntary funding by Mrs. Goodrich, spouse of early day settler Joshua Goodrich. It was listed on the National Historic Register in 1976 and is considered in good condition. The bell atop Bingham's Free Meeting House, known as the Revere Bell, was cast in 1819 or 1820 by John Revere, son of Paul Revere. The Revere Bell was bought from a Boston Church for the Free Will Baptist Church in Skowhegan. It was purchased and brought to Bingham in 1863.

The church has 52 pews, contributed by parishioners. Each family that owned a pew was responsible for locating a preacher for one week of the year.

The Old Free Meeting House is in good condition, generally, except that the steeple wood is beginning to rot and will need replacement to ensure it does not crumble.

Other structures of note include the Bingham Union Library, built as a private residence in the 1840's, it has now been used as the Town Library since the 1920's.

Many of the existing homes in the village date from one of the two historic upticks in building: the 1830's and 1840's, and then the 1890's. There are several examples of the large, Victorian- farmhouse style of the 1890's on Main Street, and other older homes are scattered throughout the village; however, no comprehensive survey has been done of private homes in town.

The MHPC states that a comprehensive survey of Bingham's historic above-ground resources needs to be conducted to identify other properties that may be eligible for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places. According to the MHPC, there are numerous structures scattered throughout Bingham that are eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

**Historical Societies and Historic Districts:**

Bingham has the unique distinction of being included in part of the Arnold Trails to Quebec Historic District. This District runs the entire length of the Kennebec River from the Atlantic Ocean up to Quebec.

Bingham is also home to the Old Canada Road Historical Society, located at 16 Sidney Street. The Society became designated as an official 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization in 2001. Soon after, they launched an event series called "Community History Nights," featuring various speakers and topics.

As the Society's collection expanded, it became clear that a physical location was needed to display the collection. In November 2009, the Society acquired the building at 16 Sidney Street in Bingham to use as their headquarters. They are open to the public on Fridays and Saturdays.

Unfortunately, Bingham currently does not have any protective measures in place for historic or archaeological resources.

**Local Historic Sites and Places:**

Not all features with known local historical importance are represented by the Maine Historic Preservation Commission. For example, the historic river drives are an area of strong community interest. The history of the Wyman Dam and the significant impact its construction had on Bingham are well-known local knowledge. And the impacts of its construction are still evident today in the strong French-Canadian presence in town. Many of those French-Canadian families can trace their roots back to immigrants who came to Bingham to work on the dam, then chose to make Bingham their home.

**Threats to Local Historic/Archeological/Cultural Resources:**

The Bingham Free Meeting House and the Bingham Public Library are both public buildings and as such, they are maintained and protected by the town. Private homes that are eligible for listing on the National Historic Register or other privately owned structures do not receive any formal protection based on their intrinsic historical importance.

The primary threat to most of these buildings is the desire of their owners, present and future, to alter them in ways that destroy their architectural integrity and character. The buildings' survival in their present form is likely to depend upon the willingness of the individual owner to preserve the historical heritage and integrity of that structure.

No known significant historical resource has fallen into disrepair; however, it is possible that is because there is minimal local knowledge of what is considered historically significant. Bingham has identified this as a goal for the Old Canada Road Historic Society in the future.

**Cemeteries:**

Cemeteries are a critical link to our heritage. The town has an obligation to protect and maintain some cemeteries, while others are private or family cemeteries. The following is a list of known cemeteries in Bingham, which can also be seen on the Historic Resources Map: Village Cemetery, Gilman Cemetery, Fall Brook Cemetery, Clark Cemetery, Atwood Cemetery, and Grant Cemetery.

**Protecting Significant Historic and Archeological Resources:**

Bingham does not have any official historic districts to provide guidance and design criteria for historic structures. Most of the historic structures in Bingham are privately owned, so they are subject to the will of their owners. While some historic buildings and other structures have been lost through fire or neglect, there remain many significant historic buildings throughout Bingham.

Due to the lack of traditional "Historic Districts," the existing regulatory protection for historic and archaeological resources is primarily provided through the mandated state subdivision and Shoreland Zoning statues. Maine's subdivision statute requires review of the impact on "historic sites," which includes both National Register and eligible buildings and archaeological sites. The State Shoreland Zoning statute includes, as one of its purposes, "to protect archaeological and historic resources." This requirement, however, is only applicable to areas located in a shoreland zone. Any area outside of a Shoreland Zone does not require a survey or review for activities occurring on, or adjacent to sites listed, or eligible to be listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Therefore, the town does not currently have any specific incentives or regulatory protective measures for historic areas and/or buildings, or potential historic or archeological resources.

Possibly the biggest threat to local historic resources and to those of state and national significance is lack of public knowledge and lack of identification for these important resources. Another significant threat to local historic resources is lack of regulatory oversight.

**Existing Land Use Protections:**

Bingham does not have zoning or a land use ordinance aside from the mandatory Shoreland Zoning which require site plan reviews to consider potential archeological sites, or structures eligible for listing on the National Historic Register.

The Building Permit and Lot Requirement Ordinance includes regulatory measures that have potential to be expanded to include protective measures for sites that potentially historic sites.

Since Bingham does not have a site plan review ordinance there is no regulatory protection or requirement for a site survey for an area that may contain historic or archeological resources.

In Bingham's Subdivision Ordinance, under Section 4, General Requirements, there is a provision that reads:

*Before granting approval of a subdivision, the Planning Board shall be satisfied that the following criteria have been met. The proposed subdivision: [H] Will not have an undue adverse effect on the scenic or natural beauty of the area, aesthetics, historic sites, or rare and irreplaceable natural areas.*

However, if the historical site is unknown, then this provision is not useful. And aside from this, there are no other regulatory protective measures for Bingham's historical resources, or potential resources.

**Important Partners for Historic and Archeological Preservation:**

Old Canada Road Historic Society
Arnold Trails to Quebec Historic District
Maine Historic Preservation Commission
National Register of Historic Places
Old Canada Road National Scenic Byway

**Future Considerations:**

- Consider introducing special policies and/or regulations to protect historic homes and buildings. Currently, Bingham opts for voluntary preservation of homes without government intervention or restrictive zoning.

- Is a site survey in areas of proposed development something Bingham would consider?

- Does the town feel it is important/necessary to add protection for potential archeological sites to goals?

- Recommendations by Maine Historic Preservation Commission- have historic archaeological surveys conducted to advise local citizens.