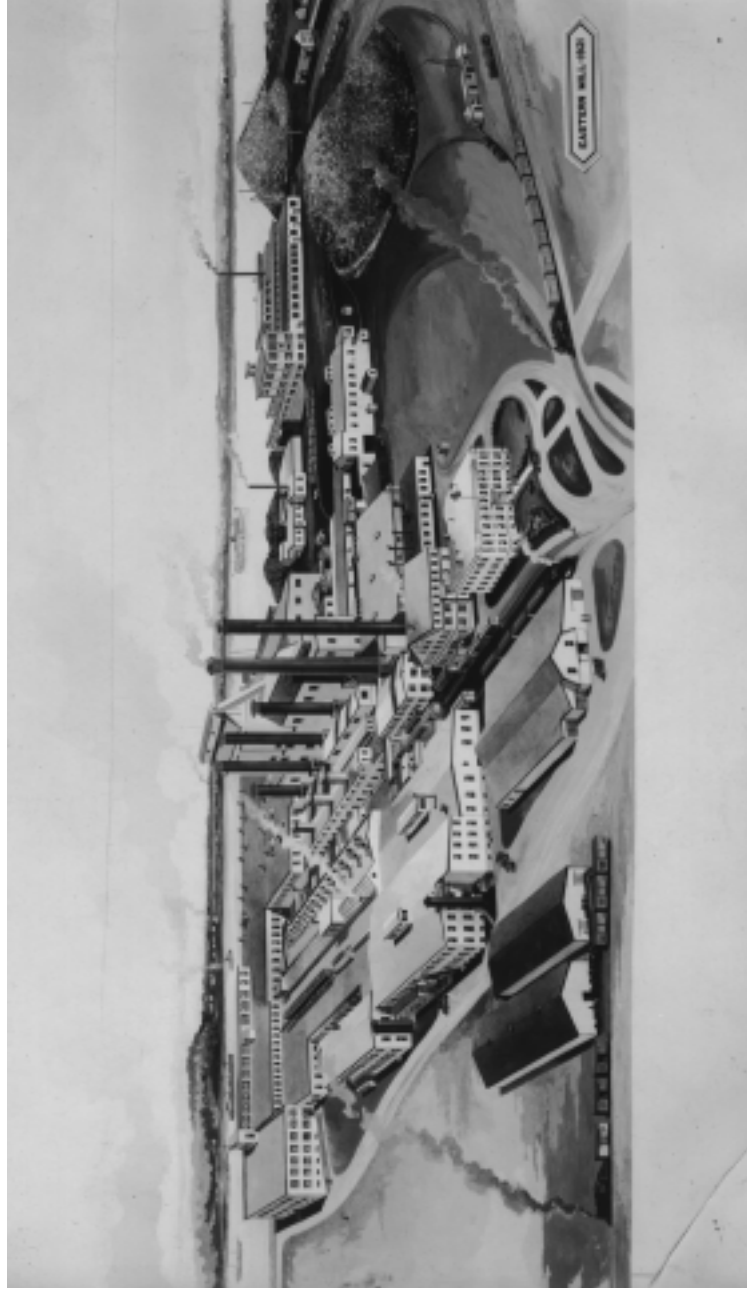




A 1921 drawing of the Eastern Manufacturing facility shows the mill buildings used for pulp and paper production, the storage yards, the smokestacks, and the trains, steamships, pulpwood piles, and conveyors — all integral components of the production process. This drawing was created shortly after Frederick Ayer sold the business to Old Colony Trust Company. Maine Folklife Center.

THE LIFE AND CAREER OF BANGOR'S FREDERICK WELLINGTON AYER (1855-1936), FOUNDER OF EASTERN CORPORATION

BY PAULEENA MACDOUGALL

In this article, Pauleena MacDougall presents a brief business biography of Fred W. Ayer, who founded the Eastern Manufacturing Company in Brewer, Maine, and set this pioneering firm on course as a leader in lumber production and later in the production of fine papers.

FREDERICK AYER was born July 29, 1855, the son of Nathan Chase Ayer (b. 1820) and Lucy P. Wellington Ayer, also of Bangor. Nathan Ayer made the family fortune in lumber. The United States Census of 1860 lists the value of Nathan's personal assets at \$3,000 and his occupation as merchant. However, the 1870 census lists his personal assets at over \$200,000 and his occupation as lumber dealer, indicating that he amassed quite a fortune in just ten years. Nathan Ayer's son Frederick attended boarding school in Farmington, Maine, and also at Andover Academy. He married Marietta Rollins Mann of Boston in 1879.

Frederick Ayer began his career as a clerk in the home of T.D. Chamberlain where he also boarded. Just four years later, he purchased a sawmill from the firm of Palmer & Johnson. The mill was located in South Brewer on the eastern shore of the Penobscot, not far from the head of the tide. Ayer incorporated the mill in 1889 as Eastern Manufacturing and improved the facility, buying band saws that raised the output of the mills to 35 million board feet per season. Taking advantage of the natural resources available to him, he burned sawdust to transform river water into steam power to run the conveyors that moved sawdust to the furnaces and the saws that cut the logs into boards, clapboard, lathes — and more sawdust.¹

In 1890, Ayer built a pulp mill to turn scrap wood into usable fiber. In 1901, following several expansions at the pulp mill, he began con-



This photo (c. 1917) is of Frederick Ayer's lumberyard at the Brewer mill. Nathan Ayer, Frederick's father, built his fortune in the Bangor lumber trade. Frederick too began his career as a sawmill owner, but slowly crafted a much larger and financially successful business in the pulp and paper industry. Maine Folklife Center.

structing a paper-making facility with three paper machines. As he expanded his operations to include pulp and paper, he purchased coal to fuel the steam boilers. The steam-powered paper mill consumed about 10,000 tons of coal per year, produced daily an average of 60,000 pounds of sulphite pulp and 50,000 pounds of manila and fine writing papers, produced wholly from the sawmill's waste materials, which amounted to about 13,121 cords of wood per year. In addition, Eastern lumber was shipped to Boston, New York, and England. Four hundred employees earned an average of two dollars per day. The mill's business was estimated at \$1 million annually.²

In 1902, Ayer was elected president of the Second National Bank in Bangor and served in that capacity until he retired and the bank consolidated with the Merrill Trust Company. In 1905, having already begun the manufacture of paper from wood pulp, Ayer chose to add a rag mill to the premises to meet the demand for high-quality cotton-content paper. Eastern produced its famous "Systems Bond" watermark paper until 1935 when, following the closure of the rag mill, rights to this paper were



Frederick Ayer

sold, and Eastern thereafter received royalties for its sale from another company.³

Having built up a successful business, Fred Ayer sold Eastern Manufacturing in 1912 to Old Colony Trust Company in Boston, although he continued to control the capital stock of the company. Old Colony Trust Company began taking control of management in 1919, and at that time the company became a Massachusetts corporation. The bank increased the capital available to the company. The company hired Stuart Brown Copeland, an experienced mill manager who had worked as general manager at the Lincoln mill, to manage the mills at South Brewer and Lincoln and to serve as the company's vice president.⁴

A 1912 article in a local paper reported that Eastern Manufacturing employed over 1,000 workers in its mills with an additional crew of 1,000 cutting timber on 115,000 acres in Aroostook and Piscataquis counties. The mill processed forty million tons of lumber annually, along with forty tons of pulp per day. To move lumber from the forest to the mills, and finished products to its customers, Eastern owned its own railroad. In addition, it owned twelve vessels, which regularly visited the Brewer mill's mile-long tract of docks along the Penobscot River. Ayer remained president of the company until 1928, as the federal census of 1920 lists him at age sixty-four as "President, Pulp and Paper mill." His

son, Frederick Rollins Ayer, also helped manage the company and succeeded his father as president. The elder Ayer retired in 1930 at age seventy-four, and continued living with his wife Marietta and one servant in Bangor.⁵

According to his obituary, Ayer collected postage stamps and at one point was invited to visit with the Duke of York, later King George V of England, to discuss their mutual hobby. Ayer sold his stamp collection to the Duke. He also belonged to the Knickerbocker whist club of New York, the Algonquin Club of Boston, and the Tarrantine and Canoe clubs of Bangor. He also collected oriental rugs, antique furniture, and other items, which his wife sold at auction after his death.⁶

Ayer's life illuminates the transition that took place among Bangor's lumber barons as they moved from lumbering to pulp and paper in the early twentieth century. Their increased wealth expanded their influence and power. Instead of presiding over specialized local businesses, these barons supervised large corporations with multiple products and extensive markets. Ayer, with his significant wealth and influential social contacts, is a symbol of that transition.

NOTES

1. United States Census, 1860, 1870, 1880.

2. *Thirteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of Industrial and Labor Statistics for the State of Maine, 1899* (Augusta, Maine: Kennebec Journal Print, 1900), pp. 37, 41 42. Employees included at least eight women who worked in the paper mill, likely in clerical positions.

3. "Fred W. Ayer Dies After a Short Illness," *Bangor Daily News*, September 28, 1936; *ibid.*, February 4, 1937.

4. Louis Clinton Hatch, *Maine: A History* (New York: American Historical Society, 1919), pp. 161, 162.

5. *Bangor Daily Commercial*, August 19, 1912; *Bangor Daily News*, February 4, 1937.

6. "Fred W. Ayer Dies After a Short Illness"; American Antiques of New England, Origin Collected for Marietta R. Ayer, Bangor, Maine, by the Late Frederick Wellington Ayer (Auction Catalogue, Sale No. 4299 illustrated in black and white, 444 lots, prices realized written in margins).