

Deeply Rooted: Changing Representations of Maine's Forests and Rural Histories

by Carter Emerson and Bridie McGreavy

In November 2024, Maine citizens voted on a proposal to change the state flag to an earlier version featuring two prominent symbols: a pine tree and a mariner's star. Ultimately voters chose to stick with the current flag, yet the question of how to represent Maine remains, not least because these two symbols are now an option on new state license plates (Wight 2025). The question of representation is especially significant for rural communities whose livelihoods are affected by representations of Maine as the Pine Tree State or Vacationland, and “the way life should be.” Such representations of rural Maine's identity, particularly those that erase its diversity, complexity, and multiple histories, do not adequately show what is happening in these places and limit possibilities for more just and resilient futures.

In this commentary, we discuss the need for creating new stories and critically engaging with current representations to amplify diverse histories, stories, and meanings within rural places. With rural Maine's identity deeply entwined with iconic representations of pine-covered landscapes, we wanted to take a closer look at dominant forest narratives and specifically examine the narratives at the Maine Logging and Forest Museum at Leonard's Mills in Bradley, Maine. This site is significant because it has been proposed as a national museum of forestry and logging history (Burns 2024), and

we as authors have longstanding connections with this place.¹

We advocate for reimagining the stories we tell about land, history, and identity to include multispecies relationships, Indigenous and Wabanaki knowledges, and rural lived experiences to foster more inclusive, place-based understandings of Maine's cultures, communities, and ecosystems.

PINE TREES AS ICONIC REPRESENTATIONS

How did the pine tree become an iconic representation of Maine? Reading the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry's “Maine Forest Facts” webpage, we learn that Maine became named the Pine Tree State in 1895, a designation that recognized the abundance and economic value of pine trees in the state.² This came at the end of a century during which Maine's forests were intensively harvested and at a time when old growth stands of pine were all but gone (Acheson 2008). Given this history, one might wonder: what were these pine trees valuable for? As this website also highlights and as frequently circulates in everyday discourse and news media about Maine's forest history, a common response to this question is that pine trees were exported for the British Royal Navy. While this narrative is not inaccurate, it hides the other drivers

for why large amounts of timber were harvested, processed, and exported.³

A critical perspective on this history examines how logging, and the related infrastructures of dams and mills, were part of colonization and that a significant portion of exported lumber was shipped to plantations in the West Indies and the southern United States and used for housing for enslaved persons, as fuel for sugar processing, and as staves for barrels (Goldstein 2024). While the forest products industry has long been a driver of Maine's economy, the dominant narrative erases how Maine's forest products are also deeply entangled with global histories of colonization and enslavement.

We believe there is a need to reinterpret historical narratives to invite and amplify Indigenous voices, and in particular Wabanaki knowledges and perspectives, in the curation and presentation of place-based histories and to broaden our discussion of land management strategies to reflect Indigenous and communal ecological knowledge (Carroll et al. 2024). This shift invites rethinking prevailing land-use concepts, particularly the idea of the working forest, which reduces forests to sites of natural resources and economic extraction, emphasizing timber harvest over intrinsic, ecological, or cultural significance. Reimagining forests this way means moving beyond the image of the solitary settler lumberjack (like Paul Bunyan) to instead respect forests as participants in local and regional ecosystems (Sutton et al. 2025).

Yet, shifting dominant narratives around rurality requires more than language and land use reform; we must consider how rural places are visually



Paul Bunyan Statue in Bangor, ME.

Note: Sutton et al. (2025) contrast this iconic representation of Maine's forest history with another, where "Upriver, a skicin statue stands along the water holding a salmon spear, a practice representing how Penobscot livelihoods are expressed" and where Wabanaki peoples continue to resist industrial forestry and colonization.

Credit: Carter Emerson

represented. Visual culture shapes public memory, and the stories we tell are inseparable from the images we use to tell them. Reimagining rural stories, therefore, must include a reevaluation of the images used to represent these places. Examples of this work include moving beyond romanticized imagery of endless pine forests, hearty lumberjacks, and rugged frontiers to include representations of the complexity of rural life. This shift can manifest across many aspects of rural life, from community events and gatherings to educational materials and everyday public spaces, embedding those diverse and inclusive stories into how places are

seen and valued (Corntassel et al. 2009). By transforming visual representations across countless rural contexts, we can help reshape how histories and meanings circulate in places.

Deeper narrative transformation also requires reconsidering the perspectives we use as we tell rural stories. Much of Maine's forestry heritage focuses on the stories of settlers, laborers, and landowners and leaves out the stories of non-human lives involved in this multi-species world, shaped not only by axes that fell trees but also by rivers, soil, fish, and wildlife (Kirksey 2017). We can broaden our rural stories through narratives that trace animal migrations within rural communities, feature how forest ecosystems respond to logging, and consider the relationships between people and other species over time. By weaving these stories into community education, local media, and cultural/communal events, multi-species storytelling broadens understandings of rural landscapes as interconnected worlds, deepening ecological awareness and respect for nonhuman life.

The stories of rural Maine also need to reckon with the human histories that have been systematically excluded. The rural experience in Maine has long marginalized Wabanaki presence and knowledge systems that continue to resist these narratives (Sutton et al. 2025). To address this imbalance, we need to learn how to listen to and create different stories that include Wabanaki knowledges, voices, and perspectives. This approach can enrich communal storytelling, rural discourses, and educational programs to foster more respectful engagement with place.

DIFFERENT STORIES FOR THE MAINE FOREST AND LOGGING MUSEUM

The Maine Forest and Logging Museum at Leonard's Mills offers a unique memorialization of Maine's forestry heritage, sharing the story of Oliver Leonard and the early development of Bradley, Maine. The site interprets the colonial era and its relationship with forest practices, tracing a history of logging that begins with white settlement in 1763. A recent proposal to designate Leonard's Mills as the National Museum of Forestry and Logging History presents a significant opportunity to expand the narrative to include Penobscot and Wabanaki voices and relationships with the forest and within the Penobscot River watershed and homelands.

As a brief introduction to the site, we want to guide the reader on a walking tour to create a feel for the constructions of forestry and logging history at Leonard's Mills. Leaving the parking lot and heading toward the central grounds of the museum, one encounters a kiosk with a host of signs, primarily listing the rules and regulations. The dirt road guides the visitor toward the river now known as Blackman Stream, over a covered bridge, and around a grassy field with a series of colonial era buildings along the edges. Nature trails leave from this main road and include descriptive signage about trees and forest management. Veering off from the main road, the path crosses a stone dam that controlled the flow of water to the mill. In addition to harnessing waterpower for the mill, this dam is one among thousands installed along Maine rivers as a technique of colonization (Sutton 2020). In an early phase of the Penobscot River Restoration Project,³ a Denil fish ladder was installed to allow



Signage at Leonard's Mills.

Credit: Carter Emerson

migrating fish, especially alewives, to make it up over the dam, though many fish are still blocked by the dam.

By expanding the visual and interpretive storytelling at Leonard's Mills, the museum has the opportunity to become a national leader in communicating the layered histories and futures of forests in Maine. This work is not about erasing or rewriting the past, rather it is about opening the door for more stories, relationships, and ways of knowing forests.

Center and Amplify Penobscot and Wabanaki Knowledge

To honor Indigenous epistemologies and reshape the narratives of forest history, it is important to cocurate and coshare forest stories. In museum contexts, this work has been modeled by initiatives such as the Abbe Museum, which foregrounds Wabanaki voices through collaborative exhibition practices, and the Maine Historical Society's Code Red project that amplifies Wabanaki and local experiences of climate and forest change in rural Maine.⁴

Reframe Working Forests

Rather than only focusing on a culture of extraction and production, future exhibits could explore the forest as a site where story, culture, ecology, labor, and memory intersect. The Penobscot Experimental Forest, which sits along the same road as Leonard's Mills, is a partnership between the US Forest Service and the University of Maine.⁵ This proximity offers an opportunity for dialogue between history, science, and community knowledge. We can consider how research and education can support, not overwrite, place-based and Indigenous ways of knowing. Together, these sites could communicate a more integrated vision of forestry, one that bridges Indigenous stewardship, ecology, and multiple histories of place.

Re-Sign the Landscape

While Leonard's Mills fosters a strong connection to nature through its outdoor setting, the experience resembles that of a park—spaces designed as escapes from everyday life and shaped

by romantic ideals of the natural world (Demars 2009). While valuable for fostering appreciation of the landscape, this design reflects assumptions about nature as something to be visited, observed, and left untouched. This effort could update existing signage with content that reflects Penobscot place names for trees, rivers, and landscapes. It could work with Wabanaki cultural and knowledge bearers to highlight Indigenous forest management practices, relationships to land, and seasonal lifeways. The Penobscot Signage project at the University of Maine provides a model for how to re-sign landscapes in this way and the Penobscot Nation's Cultural and Historic Preservation Department has led multiple related efforts.⁶

Multiply Meanings of Maine's Rivers, Forests, and Fish

Many of the site's features, including mills, boats, and machinery, trace their origins to colonial histories, technologies, and values, and the signage reflects this emphasis. For example, a sign that reads "Water-powered mills marked the passage from frontier to civilization" invites a question about how the use or nonuse of rivers influence the way we define or recognize a civilization. With dam removals and the return of alewives upstream, including to Blackman Stream, rural ecosystems are experiencing change. Signs that acknowledge these changes can explore logging's impact on nonhumans (fish, wildlife, and rivers), deepen the understanding of forestry's impact on rural communities and ecosystems, and, at the same time, create spaces to celebrate the healing that can come from restoration.

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NOTES

- 1 Emerson visited the museum as a child, which left a lasting impression on his understanding of Maine's forest history and McGreavy brings undergraduate and graduate students to Leonard's Mills to apply environmental communication perspectives to how forest these histories are communicated within the museum.
- 2 Maine Department of Agriculture and Forestry, "Maine Forest Facts," https://www.maine.gov/dacf/mfs/projects/fall_foliage/kids/meforestfacts.html.
- 3 <https://www.nrcm.org/programs/waters/penobscot-river-restoration-project/>
- 4 <https://www.abbemuseum.org/>; <https://www.mainehistory.org/all-exhibitions/code-red-exhibition/>
- 5 <https://research.fs.usda.gov/nrs/forestsandranges/locations/penobscotresearch>
- 6 Penobscot Signs, <https://umaine.edu/penobscotsigns/>; See also Francis, Sockalexis, and Paul, <https://www.penobscotnation.org/departments/cultural-historic-preservation/>

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