

## Maine's Old Apple Trees Show Us the Way

by John Bunker

In the spring of 1972, several of us moved into three old, tattered, US Army wall tents in a small woodland clearing in Waldo County. We knew no one in town. Although we were told that we lived on “the Jones Road,” there was no road sign to indicate where we were. In fact, there wasn’t a road sign in town. We had no mailbox or street address. We got our mail at the post office. Box 57. We had no phone. We bathed in a nearby pond. There were a few working farms left in town, but they would be gone before long. The population was a third of what it had been before the Civil War.

But the land was cheap, quiet, and beautiful, and it became home. I built a small cabin, which was expanded into a larger house, then a barn and outbuildings and small gardens that became big gardens. I began to explore the neighborhood, the town, and the county. Everywhere I went, my eyes were pulled to the ancient apple trees that graced the lawns of the silent old farms.

I stopped. I asked. I picked the apples, often right off the ground. And I wondered. Why was no one paying attention to all this wonderful fruit of so many sizes, shapes, colors and unfamiliar flavors? What were they used for? What were their names? Who planted them?

I decided to devote my life to searching for, identifying, and preserving these old apple varieties of Maine. In the process I discovered a paradox: what had been a tragedy for Maine was also one of its greatest blessings.

As New England’s small-farm culture came to an end in the late 19th and

early 20th centuries, much of the Northeast embraced suburbia, the mall, and the parking lot. But not Maine. At least, not much. Maine was left depopulated and undeveloped, which was devastating for many communities but not for the land itself. The farmland and the once-cherished apple trees were spared.

The old apple trees were living reminders of a past when most Mainers worked at home, cultivated a garden, planted small orchards, and ate what they grew. Those days were gone, but the apple trees remained, patiently waiting for our arrival. They were calling out to whoever would listen that there used to be a different way of living and that there could be other ways to envision the future.

The days of hundreds of apple varieties selected and grafted over centuries for their exquisite pies, sauce, butter, cake, bread, and cider were gone. It was time for cheap, mediocre food. One size fits all. Apple pies made in a factory because no one has time to cook and if you add enough of this or that, who can tell the difference?

So we have the paradox. Big Ag had taken grip of the United States, and the small farms of Maine were among its first victims. Maine’s rural, farm-based economy collapsed, and along with it, we lost many thousands of on-farm jobs as well as thousands of small farm-related businesses. Since development didn’t much care about anything north of Portsmouth, what was for many a real tragedy was the savior of



*Tolman Sweet tree, New Sharon, Maine, John Bunker and intern, Skylar Bodeo-Lomicky, October 22, 2025.*

Maine’s greatest asset: its land. And as Maine’s young people were leaving in droves, looking for whatever it was that the rest of the country had to offer, while a new crop of young people—the back-to-the-landers—arrived.

Untended, the abandoned farms grew milkweed, goldenrod, gray birch, and white pine, and the stone walls faded into the forest edge. You could almost forget what had been, but then you saw the apple trees: unpruned, unsprayed, unpicked, and unidentified. Even with no care at all, the apple trees survived for decades on their own, generously dropping their bountiful fruit and asking for nothing in return. Waiting to tell their story.



*As apple trees age, they occasionally fall over and lay down on the ground. The prone trunk then roots itself and what was once a small branch becomes the new vertical trunk. Such is the case with this Black Oxford tree. That tree was planted in about 1791, although the current stem is only 40 or 50 years old. The part in the foreground is considerably older.*

And as the farms disappeared, so too did the Grange. The beloved agricultural and community-based cornerstone of nearly every Maine town became irrelevant. And here was another paradox. While it's true that Maine's young people had left the state, the influx of the back-to-the-landers could have easily provided the bodies and energy required to keep the Patrons of Husbandry thriving for another 100 years. But with few exceptions, the Grangers did not welcome the young folk from away, and without young blood, the Grange's incredible run came to its end.

Having no agricultural organization but wanting one, the back-to-the-landers started their own. The Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA) formed just as we moved to our land in Waldo County and immediately set out to do the work the Grange could have been doing. In 1972, there were two mixed vegetable

farms within a half hour of my home: one in South China and another in Searsmont. Now, after 50 years of MOFGA, there are dozens of small farms within that same half-hour drive. We now have coop stores, farmers' markets, farm-to-table restaurants, and many other rural agriculture-related businesses. Much of that abandoned farmland is back in action.

And the apple trees in the front yards of the old farms have remained. Through historical research, a lot of observation, and now DNA profiling, the trees are telling us stories about

the first Europeans to come to our state. They are telling us about a time when Mainers cooked dinner in the middle of the day from what they grew in their gardens and orchards. The trees tell us about the importance of patience, generosity, staying put, and stewardship of the land. The resilience, ruggedness, hardiness, and endurance of the dozens of old varieties these Mainers grew and grafted and handed down from generation to generation connect us to an inspiring past and give us hope for a promising future.

Fifty-three years later, a bit like an old apple tree perhaps, I'm still on that piece of land. I decided to follow their lead and stay put. Every day, when I'm out in our orchards and gardens, I thank the apple trees for showing the way.

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## HISTORIC APPLES FROM MAINE'S 16 COUNTIES

**Androscoggin County:** *Brigg's Auburn* is a large green cooking apple that we had feared was lost forever. For a time, we had it confused with another old variety, Northwestern Greening. Now with the aid of DNA profiling, we think we've found an old Brigg's tree in Poland only a few miles from where it originated.

**Aroostook County:** We found *Dudley Winter* in Westmanland, a few miles north of Castle Hill where it originated. Still called "North Star" by many local old-timers but elsewhere known as Dudley Winter to differentiate it from at least three other North Stars. Despite its name, it's early season and all-purpose.

**Cumberland County:** We found the large yellow *Blake*, which originated in Westbrook, in a UK collection. Somehow it made the trip across the Atlantic and even played a role in Charles Dickens' classic, *David Copperfield*. We brought the apple back to Maine through the USDA APHIS program.

**Franklin County:** We think we found the red-striped *Sarah* apple with the help of Wilton fruit explorers in fall 2025. Sarah was one of many varieties that originated in Wilton and Farmington. Franklin County was a vibrant center of Maine apple growing for many decades.

**Hancock County:** We have confirmed the discovery on Verona Island of *Drap d'Or de Bretagne*, a long-lost French apple and ancestor of dozens of American cultivars. Drap d'Or de Bretagne has only been confirmed to exist in Denmark (the country) and Verona Island in Maine.

**Kennebec County:** With the help of local old-timers, we were able to find *Starkey* (pictured above) near its point of origin in Vassalboro. The superb, fresh eating "dessert" apple was introduced by Moses Starkey, a Quaker farmer from the abolitionist hotbed along the Kennebec River.

**Knox County:** We rescued an old russet in Union just before the tree died. We think it may be the *Union Russet*, mentioned in old local newspapers but never described. DNA has shown it to be an ancient child of even older Maine apples.



**Lincoln County:** Retired professor and local historian, George Dow, introduced us to what he thought was the last *Kavanagh* tree. The apple was famous for its fried apples and was introduced by James Kavanagh, founder of the old Damariscotta Mills.

**Oxford County:** One of the most famous of Maine apples is the *Black Oxford*. The medium-sized, dark purple-black fruit keeps all winter in the root cellar. It still makes a very good pie on July 4th.

**Penobscot County:** The original immense *Royal Sweet* tree is still growing strong in Garland. It is a true "sweet" apple with little or no acidity, best for stewing and molasses. An apple, almost certainly from this same tree, is depicted in a beautiful watercolor commissioned by the USDA in 1894.

**Piscataquis County:** The beautiful red, all-purpose *Rolfe* was nearly lost, but was kept alive by Sweetser's Orchard in Cumberland. It originated in Abbot.

**Sagadahoc County:** The *Givens* apple has not yet been found although an old diary suggests that it might still be somewhere in the Topsham area where it originated. Abraham Preble, a grafter in nearby Bowdoinham, "set 262 scions for Uncle Samuel Given" in 1846.

**Somerset County:** We found the large, oblate, ruddy-red, September-ripening *Somerset of Maine* in New Sharon. It is a wonderful cooking apple that originated in Mercer.

**Waldo County:** With the help of the Lincolnville Historical Society and an old-timer, we found the ancient *Fletcher Sweet* tree in "Fletcher town," an abandoned village of Lincolnville.

**Washington County:** After at least one false-positive, we think we may have located the true *Cherryfield* apple in the fall of 2025. We obtained fruit and leaves for DNA profiling from a promising candidate.

**York County:** *Cole's Quince* is an apple—not a quince. It is a wonderful August apple from Cornish, particularly good for sauce and pies. Unlike many other summer apples, Coles remain firm when they ripen