Fishing rods & their makers

_Fishing for Atlantic salmon is part of Maine’s heritage. Fly-fishing for salmon became a popular activity that inspired local entrepreneurs to build and invent new kinds of fishing rods. Maine-built fly rods became famous worldwide._

Native Wabanaki people made the earliest salmon fishing rods from sticks of ash or cedar with a line made of basswood or other fiber.

Anglers refined these solid wood models into different lengths and weights designed for a specific type of fish, then made rods in two or three sections that easily could be carried through the woods and assembled streamside. In the late 19th century, builders used imported tropical hardwoods to craft greenheart rods with lancewood tips. After they discovered the durable, flexible qualities of Tonkin cane, a species of bamboo from China, builders began using strips of bamboo to craft salmon rods of varied lengths, often up to 18 feet. The craft of rod-making spread north from New York and Philadelphia to Maine.

Interest in fishing increased again after the Second World War. To keep up with demand, makers started to use less costly fiberglass material, with stronger glues and bonding techniques. They began using graphite in the 1980s. These materials are still used today.

William Neal had a fishing tackle shop on the east side of Kenduskeag Stream in Bangor from 1843–1853. His apprentices included brothers Charles and John Ramsdell and Hiram Leonard. The Ramsdells then opened their own shop at East Market Square in 1853.

Fly fishing became more popular after the Civil War, as veterans sought the healing power of woods and waters. Hiram Leonard, a hunter and guide from Sebec, Maine, worked for Neal and the Ramsdells then opened his own shop in Bangor in 1870. He improved the design of bamboo rods, using six strips instead of four, which gave greater support during casting and playing the fish. Then he invented a machine to cut the bamboo culms into tapered strips, enabling mass production (200 a year) of different types of fly rods, including 14- and 17-foot salmon rods. A fixed to those long rods were large reels, tough reels (some also made by Maine craftsmen) as well as finely crafted nickel silver reel seats that could handle the frenzied fight of a salmon on the line. Leonard rods were sold in a showroom in New York City and he eventually moved his factory to New York.
Other bamboo rod makers of Bangor during this period included H. A. Merrill, E. H. Gerrish, Eustis W. Edwards, Hiram W. Hawes, and Loman Hawes.

Fred Thomas apprenticed with Hiram Leonard in New York before opening his own factory, producing a variety of sporting rods, including two-handed salmon rods. In 1897 Thomas moved back to Maine, first to Brewer then Bangor, where the family-run business continued until 1958; Steve Campbell restarted the company in 1999 and makes hand-crafted cane trout rods in Brewer, one of several cane rodmakers throughout Maine continuing the tradition.

How we interact with nature — the materials and designs, tools and techniques — has evolved over the centuries. But the desire to be outside endures.

Maine Atlantic Salmon Museum, The Friends of Craig Brook, NOAA Fisheries, Maine Sea Grant
Once abundant, now endangered

Atlantic salmon once numbered in the hundreds of thousands and ranged from New York to Maine. Today, Atlantic salmon are on the Endangered Species List, and wild populations survive only in a few rivers in Maine, including the Penobscot River.

“…the Salmon, Shad and Alewives, which were formerly abundant, have greatly diminished already, and unless a remedy is provided by law the benefit derived from the said fisheries must be entirely lost – And many poor people in consequence be deprived of a great part of the means of their support.”

—petition from citizens of Orland to the Maine Legislature, 1838
River to ocean and back again
Each spring, Atlantic salmon swim up rivers in search of cool, clean, flowing water for spawning. The young spend two to three years in freshwater streams before making their own journey to the sea.
A part of local culture...

A source of food
Ancestors of the native Wabanaki people fished for salmon—*polam* or *skamek*—at falls and rapids. Today, the Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, Maliseet, and Micmac tribes continue to value salmon, and are working to restore rivers for salmon and other fish and wildlife in order to maintain their cultural traditions.

“Traditionally the salmon harvest was a great time of celebration and renewal. Today, many Penobscot Nation tribal members continue to practice these culturally important traditional sustenance activities.”
—John Banks, Director of Natural Resources, Penobscot Nation

A major industry
In the nineteenth century, salmon fishing was a major enterprise throughout Maine, especially in the Penobscot River. Along with the Wabanaki, commercial fishermen were the first to speak out against dams and pollution that blocked fish migrations.
A sense of pride
Salmon—and other native fish that move between freshwater and the sea, including shad, alewives, striped bass, sturgeon, and brook trout—need clean, connected streams to survive. Realizing that endangered salmon still face many challenges, citizens are taking steps to remove barriers and promote clean water. Fish and wildlife are returning to Maine waters, bringing a sense of pride and renewal to communities.

The presidential salmon tradition
Fly-fishing for Atlantic salmon became popular in the late 1800s. Each spring, anglers competed to catch the first bright, silver fish arriving from the sea. In 1912, Karl Anderson decided to send his “first fish” to the President of the United States, beginning an annual tradition. Anglers also demanded clean water and free-flowing rivers to protect salmon.

Fishing is a way for people to connect with nature, to know their river. While fishing for Atlantic salmon no longer occurs in Maine because the species is endangered, there are many opportunities to fish for landlocked salmon, brook trout, and other fish; many other ways to enjoy the outdoors; and many rivers to know.

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