

A GUIDE FOR LEARNING & REFLECTION

# The History of **Philanthropic** **Wealth** in Maine



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Maine  
Philanthropy  
Center

**PLACE  
MATTERS**

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### ABOUT PLACE MATTERS

The Place Matters project, based at the University of Southern Maine Catherine Cutler Institute, supports the design, implementation, and evaluation of a community-based continuum of care through systems innovation, community-centered data resources, storytelling, and community learning and engagement. While our staff work on a variety of projects, our main focus is supporting transition-aged young people, children of incarcerated parents, families, and individuals who have been impacted by the criminal legal and behavioral health systems in Maine.

For more information please visit:

[placemattersmaine.org](http://placemattersmaine.org)

### ABOUT THE MAINE PHILANTHROPY CENTER

Maine Philanthropy Center (MPC) is a membership organization for funders, nonprofits, and consultants that works to make philanthropy more effective and equitable by building relationships, providing valuable tools and resources, and creating opportunities to learn and move our sector forward. We collaborate to create a vibrant, just, and equitable Maine.

Learn more here: [mainephilanthropy.org](http://mainephilanthropy.org)

# Forward

## A Letter from Maine Philanthropy Center

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

Maine Philanthropy Center believes in a just, vibrant and equitable Maine. At the heart of that vision is the understanding that philanthropy must not only address the challenges of today, but also to honestly acknowledge and learn from the histories that have shaped how wealth and power came to be held in our communities.

This report invites us to pause, to listen, and to learn from the often-untold stories of how wealth was created in our state, and how those histories continue to shape communities today. It builds on MPC's commitment to learning and leadership — to help Maine's philanthropic community grow in accountability, equity, and relationship to place.

As Edgar Villanueva reminds us in *Decolonizing Wealth*, **“Everyone has a role in the process of healing, regardless of whether they caused or received more harm. All our suffering is mutual. All our healing is mutual. All of our thriving is mutual.”** This vision of shared healing is at the heart of what we hope this work will inspire.

Philanthropy in Maine has a long and proud tradition of service and generosity. We have seen it do incredible things for our state, including expanding access to education, protecting our natural environment, and strengthening community well-being. Yet, like philanthropy everywhere, it is also rooted in systems that have too often extracted from people and the land, creating enduring inequities that persist

to this day. This report offers us an opportunity—to look with courage and humility at our own stories, to consider how our institutions were built, and to imagine how we might use our resources to acknowledge past injustices, invest in healing, and build equitable systems rooted in shared prosperity. The report is designed as both a mirror and a guide — offering historical context, reflective questions, and practical tools for individuals, institutional funders, and partners to philanthropy seeking to move from understanding toward action.

This project would not have been possible without the thoughtful research and collaboration of the Place Matters team at the University of Southern Maine, Catherine Cutler Institute, as well as the funders, historians, and community members who contributed their voices and wisdom. We are deeply grateful to all who helped bring this truth-telling work to life.

As you read, I invite you to approach this report with openness and reflection. Let it challenge and inspire you. Let it deepen your understanding of what it means to be a true steward of wealth and to engage in philanthropy that heals, restores, and uplifts all our communities.

And I invite you to join MPC and others in reimagining philanthropy's role in building a just, vibrant, and equitable Maine.

With gratitude and solidarity,

**Jeannette Andre**

*President & CEO*

Maine Philanthropy Center

# Executive Summary

Philanthropic giving in Maine has resulted in significant achievements. However, the wealth that makes it possible often originated from harmful historical events and practices such as land dispossession, enslavement, and environmental degradation. In recent years, many in philanthropy are joining a growing movement to uncover the truth about the origins of philanthropic wealth, change the inequitable practices that continue to exclude and exploit, and take steps towards repair.

This project aimed to explore the history of wealth in Maine and ways in which today's funders can implement restorative and transformative funding practices to promote equity and address historic harms. Project staff conducted secondary research and completed interviews with historians and philanthropists in Maine. This report summarizes the findings from this research and offers tools for reflection and resources for deeper learning. We hope that it calls you in to learn, reflect, and act.

## KEY HISTORICAL EVENTS TIED TO WEALTH IN MAINE

- ▶ While the land that is now known as Maine was inhabited by the Wabanaki people for thousands of years, the arrival of European settlers in the early 1600's began a significant shift towards the concept of private property ownership and a period of violent forced removal of the Indigenous populations from the land.<sup>1</sup> Many early settlers in what would become the State of Maine, were granted land as a reward for their participation in violence against Indigenous people throughout the region.<sup>2</sup> Land ownership during this time formed the foundation of what would become generational wealth, and would continue to shape who holds land, power, and wealth in the state to this day.<sup>3</sup>
- ▶ Land ownership in Maine is also tied closely to the forest products industry. Today, many of Maine's wealthiest families and largest private landowners have connections to the timber industry.<sup>4</sup> Early logging in Maine expanded fast as the lumber was used to build ships for the English navy. The industry reaching its peak in the early 1800's with Bangor serving as the logging center of the world.<sup>5</sup> Not only did this booming industry result in vast pollution of our waterways, and devastation of our forests, but the timber was also used to build ships which have been connected to the global slave trade.<sup>6,7</sup>
- ▶ After the boom of the lumber industry, Maine companies turned to pulp and paper mills with the very first paper mill built on the Presumpscot River in Westbrook in 1734.<sup>8</sup> While these mills were a vital economic boon for Maine, many were built on important Wabanaki planting and fishing areas. The dams that accompanied the mills prevented the migration of fish, further devastating the livelihoods of the Indigenous people, and forever altering the natural environment. The impacts of the paper industry in Maine were also devastating to the local economies when the paper mills began to close as the industry declined.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, the impact of pollution of the rivers continues to this day as health hazards such as PFA contaminated water has been tied to the paper industry statewide.<sup>10</sup>
- ▶ In addition to paper, much of Maine's early wealth can be tied to mills and factories which processed and finished products that often originated from enslaved labor in the South and the Caribbean, such as cotton and sugar.<sup>11</sup> Saco and Lewiston housed some of the largest cotton textile mills in the nation resulting in fast economic growth and wealth, but that growth came as a result of exploitation and violence.<sup>12</sup>

## WHY DOES THIS MATTER TODAY?

- ▶ These historical exploitations of land, labor, and the environment resulted in vast amounts of wealth accumulation, and systemic barriers put in place by those in power that have continued to exploit and concentrate wealth and power in the hands of a few.<sup>13</sup> These inequities are seen in the racial disparities among rates of land and home ownership, income inequalities, rates of poverty, and social determinants of health.<sup>14</sup>
- ▶ The philanthropic model that exists in the U.S. today was built on this history of wealth accumulation and unchecked capitalism which resulted in mechanisms and structures that allow wealthy individuals to continue to hold onto their wealth, invest and earn more, and avoid paying taxes. Tax laws, investment structures, funding practices, and programs serve to continue exploitation and allow for more wealth accumulation in the name of charitable giving and legacy.<sup>15</sup>
- ▶ Many of today's wealthiest families and foundations have accumulated their wealth over many generations, tracing back to these exploitive historical events and industries.<sup>16</sup> There is a growing number of philanthropists, and many of the interview participants in this study, who are questioning the morality of their inherited wealth and looking to change the mindsets and practices that are common among their social circles.<sup>17</sup> Most notably, many question traditional investment practices and are beginning to implement mission-aligned strategies.

## WHAT CAN WE DO DIFFERENTLY?

- ▶ Shifting a structure as large as the system of philanthropy in the U.S. takes time and may not happen in our lifetimes. However, like most systems change, it can start locally with just a few who hold wealth and power taking steps to seek the truth, shift practices, and begin to repair past harms. This report invites readers to start with reflecting on history and being transparent about the origins of wealth. Taking accountability is a key step in healing.<sup>18</sup>
- ▶ There are many frameworks and models for moving forward towards a healing, community centered approach to philanthropy. Some of these include employing more relational, trust-based approaches, like that of **trust-based philanthropy**.<sup>19</sup> Other key frameworks include **collective impact models**,<sup>20</sup> which involve multi-organizational collaborations working towards common goals, and **participatory decision-making** where those most directly impacted are given power in the grant-making process.<sup>21</sup> Further, many philanthropic organizations are moving towards **reparative philanthropy** models which aim to build authentic, reciprocal relationships and work towards healing and restoring power imbalances.<sup>22</sup> This approach includes giving that supports larger restorative **land back**<sup>23</sup> or **reparations**<sup>24</sup> movements.
- ▶ Moving beyond a restorative approach, there are some who are transforming the concept of philanthropy and leading the change in their approach and legacy. This includes moving away from the traditional endowment investment strategy of only giving away 5% of one's portfolio annually, the federal minimum requirement for private foundations which allows them to continue to use the other 95% to invest and build more wealth.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, trends in **sunsetting foundations** and spending down one's wealth are growing.<sup>26</sup> Another model for transforming the power of one's wealth is through **mission-aligned investments**, which includes divesting from global stock markets that are contradicting the mission of the organization, and instead employing strategies that consider the social impact of the entire investment portfolio.<sup>27</sup>



## Who is This For?

This document has been designed to offer a space for learning, reflection, and growth for people who work in philanthropy. This may include leaders and board members of foundations, people who manage donor advised funds, or private donors. This guide may also be useful for anyone who holds wealth and power in Maine who seeks to understand more about the history of wealth and find ways to use their power for social change. While we recognize that there are many different scales of wealth and roles among philanthropists, we hope that people with a variety of roles or giving at any scale may benefit from reading and using this guide and resources. Additionally, any individual, regardless of their relationship to philanthropy, who is interested in learning more about the history of Maine as it relates to historical practices and economic events that caused harm may find this report useful.

We acknowledge that many of the historical events and practices, and resulting traumas, are already known and felt in the everyday lives of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. We also acknowledge that the ramifications of wealth inequity and the history that paved the way for it in Maine impacts many communities throughout the state and may be part of the lived experiences of individuals engaging with this report.

In response to the way that race, wealth, and power have played out in the U.S. and led us to where we are today, we designed this report to prompt reflection for a primary audience of white people of European descent, who live in the U.S. and/or have historical roots here. However, the report is an invitation for all to reflect on their own family history and lived experience, and we invite all readers to explore this guide and use it to possibly learn more about the histories of your community, your family, and yourself.

## CIRCLE OF REFLECTION

Understanding the history of wealth requires moving intentionally. Before we can take meaningful action, we must ground in context, personal connection, systems, and emotions. Often, we realize that as we go deeper into issues, we find there is more to learn. Throughout this report we offer space for reflection and further resources for diving deeper in the content. As you read through some the sections in this report, we offer these core questions for you to use to guide your progression, reflect, and revisit. In addition, if you wish to go deeper, there are additional reflection resources and questions at the end of this document.

### KNOW THE CONTEXT

What do you know about the Indigenous peoples and histories of the places where you live, work, or hold wealth?

### EXAMINE YOUR STORIES

What stories about land, property, labor, or wealth have been passed down in your family or institution, and how might those stories look different from excluded perspectives?

### UNDERSTAND THE SYSTEMS

In what ways might colonialism, enslavement, or extractive industries have shaped your wealth, investments, or philanthropic resources today?

### WORK THROUGH YOUR EMOTIONS

What feelings come up when you connect your wealth story to this broader history, and how might those feelings guide your giving rather than silence it?

### MOVE TOWARD ACTION

How can your philanthropy support efforts to restore land, redistribute power and wealth to Indigenous, Black, People of Color, and other historically excluded communities, and shift systems that perpetuate inequities and harm?

# Introduction

Philanthropy and charitable giving in Maine have a long history and have been deeply connected to economic development in communities across the state. Maine's economic history is complex, and we recognize the nuances of time and place as it relates to many of the events discussed in this report. While we recognize that philanthropic giving in Maine has led to significant achievements in land conservation, education, and healthcare, at the same time, as with philanthropies nationwide, the assets used to fund progress for societal good often originated from extractions of land, labor, and culture. Communities in Maine continue to feel the negative impacts of these practices today. Within the broader movement of racial and historic reckoning in the first half of the 2020s, organizations in Maine have discovered opportunities for truth-telling as a way of repairing damaged relationships and inequities created through extractive practices. National movements have also inspired many in Maine's philanthropic community to examine how traditional models of giving and charitable structures, while well-intended, reinforce inequities, and inspired them to employ strategies for repair and healing.

This report is an invitation to explore the history of wealth in Maine and examine its significance for communities today. Our intention with this report is not to call out any particular funder or foundation that may be connected to the historical events discussed throughout, but rather to call funders in and offer a space for reflection. We hope that it serves as an informational resource and inspires those who hold wealth and power to reflect on the origins of their wealth, and to consider changes in their approach to giving to better address historical harms and inequities as a move towards healing for all our communities.

## Background

Wealthy individuals in the U.S. today have more power and resources than ever before, even as many Americans live with economic insecurity. These wealth inequities continue to grow. Wealth concentration has risen sharply, with the top 1% of wealth holders now holding 30.8% of the wealth in the nation, compared to 2.5% of wealth held by the bottom 50% of people.<sup>28</sup> Further, racial wealth gaps continue to deepen; while median incomes are increasing overall, the divide among racial groups grows larger.<sup>29</sup> In 2022, on average, white families in the U.S. had six times the wealth of Black and Latine families.<sup>30</sup> These gaps widen even more when considering gender and age. While wealth inequities exist in many other places, the U.S. has one of the highest wealth gaps among developed countries.

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This is not about making people feel bad, this is **an invitation for us to better understand the responsibility that we have as stewards of these resources** so that we can make better decisions with our partners and really work towards repairing any harm that has been done to the communities and the environment in Maine.

— INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT

Inequities in Maine follow similar trends, with gaps in income continuing to widen considerably since the 1970s. In 2012, the top 5% of households in Maine had incomes that were 10.7 times higher than the bottom 20%.<sup>31</sup> A 2023 report found that 11% of Maine's households were below the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) and another 29% were identified as being above poverty level, but not earning enough to afford their basic needs— defined as the ALICE Threshold. This same report found that while 40% of white households were below this ALICE threshold, 58% of Black households and 50% of Indigenous households were not earning enough to meet their basic needs.<sup>32</sup>

Historic extractive practices and policies, typically related to land and labor, account for a large part of the wealth gaps in the U.S. and in Maine. Examining the nature of historic extractions is essential for understanding how we got here, and why wealth inequality increases between generations.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, the historic, collective, intergenerational trauma that is a result of colonialism, enslavement, environmental pollution, and other historical harms is still felt today. Subsequently, any responsive strategy to address wealth inequity in Maine must consider the history of wealth creation in the state.<sup>34</sup> In *Decolonizing Wealth*, author Edgar Villanueva (2021), uses the metaphor of a virus to discuss how colonization has infected all of us and the structures we live in, including philanthropy and financial structures. He suggests that philanthropy continues to reinforce the colonial divisions and exploitations, but that money could be used as medicine for healing, if funders follow seven steps: Grieve, Apologize, Listen, Relate, Represent, Invest, and Repair. These steps are meant to be a circular process, which funders can use to help decolonize their practices and work towards restoring balance and healing.<sup>35</sup>

As many participants interviewed for this report pointed out, addressing the wealth gap requires structural changes and cannot be solved by individual responses, even by wealthy people. Furthermore, philanthropy represents only a small percentage of funding that goes to Maine's nonprofits each year.<sup>36</sup> However, as stewards of wealth, philanthropists and funders have the power to lead in the movement towards larger systems-level change of wealth redistribution, values-aligned investment, and trust-based philanthropic models. Since Maine is a relatively small state, small changes can have a significant impact on our local communities, nonprofit organizations, and the people who are directly impacted by these inequities.

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The term philanthropy, which...means love of humanity. If we're gonna love humanity, then we've gotta treat humanity with kindness and respect, and that requires that we understand any harms that have been done. And that we take responsibility for those harms and that we make attempts at repair. **We can't undo the injustices, but we can at least work towards repair.**

— INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT

Philanthropy in Maine has a long history of making an impact, starting with the earliest private donors such as Edward Little, who founded Lewiston Falls Academy in 1834,<sup>37</sup> which would later become Edward Little High School; Eliza Homans, who donated significant portions of property that would help start Acadia National Park;<sup>38</sup> and the Nelson family, whose legacy as civic leaders began in the 1930's.<sup>39</sup> Maine's first family foundation was the Harold Alfond Foundation, established in 1950<sup>40</sup> and continues to this day to be a leader in philanthropic efforts in the state.<sup>41</sup> Not only do Maine's foundations and private donors make a significant contribution to our economy, nonprofit organizations, and improvements to our communities, but many are leaders in social and civic engagement in our state. Funders hold power and influence and therefore have the potential to help work towards recognizing the hard truths about our history, the origins of their wealth, and lead in systems change towards repair.

## Methodology

This report was created by the Place Matters team at the University of Southern Maine in collaboration with the Maine Philanthropy Center (MPC). This project aims to explore the history of wealth accumulation in Maine and ways in which today's funders can implement restorative funding practices to promote equity and address historic harms. The questions below guided our research and interview design.

### GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. How did wealth in Maine come to be in the hands of so few people? By what means was it accumulated?
2. What impacts did the process of accumulating wealth have on people, society, and the environment and what is the relationship to today's structural inequities?
3. How might philanthropists and foundation stewards consider the origins of their wealth in the way that they engage with philanthropy and how they prioritize their giving?

These questions are being actively explored by many in Maine's philanthropic sector, and we hope that this report will help further inform this work.

To answer the questions, project staff conducted a literature review of historical research, explored case studies, and conducted interviews with historians and individuals who serve in philanthropic roles in Maine. The project team conducted three informal interviews with community experts, which helped shape the design of the project including outreach and questions used in formal interviews.

Between June and August 2025, project staff conducted eleven 1-on-1 and small group interviews with 14 individuals. Interviewees included Maine-based foundation leaders, academics, historians, and private donors with experience working with philanthropic wealth distribution and the history of economic development in Maine.

## LIMITATIONS

This project is limited in scope and is not meant to be a comprehensive analysis or examination of the entire history of wealth or these events in Maine. Rather, it serves as an introduction to inspire further research and inform practice changes. Many historians have documented stories of Maine's past in books, films, and other resources. Some of these resources are listed throughout this report for further exploration into the topics as we hope this document inspires more research and reflection. This project is limited to highlights and summaries of events and does not document every possible connection between wealth and Maine's history, as this would be impossible to do in one report. Additionally, the findings from the interviews are limited in scope and may not be generalizable due to small sample sizes and the nature of qualitative research.

Furthermore, the authors acknowledge our own limitations in knowledge, experience, and ability to understand the first-hand experiences of the people who have been most directly affected by the historical events and harms discussed throughout this report. Uncovering the truth about historical, and often racialized events and experiences is difficult without first-hand experience, and the nature of qualitative research means a certain level of subjectivity is often introduced in interpretation of findings. We will always defer to those with direct, lived experience on these matters. We welcome any feedback about any misunderstandings that may have occurred in our interpretation.

## GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

### Wealth

Wealth can be defined in many ways, including non-material definitions of wealth. For the purpose of this project, we are using a financial definition in which wealth is defined as the value of all assets you own, including savings, property, and investments minus any debt you owe.<sup>42</sup> Wealth is more than just your income, which is the amount you earn over a period. Wealth is used to provide financial security, and stability for your future. Wealth is also tied to power as people with large sums of wealth are able to influence structures and policies. Related is the term **philanthropic wealth** which is used to describe the wealth that is directed towards charitable giving through the creation of foundations, donor-advised funds, or other charitable structures.

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### Funder

Funder is used in this report as an umbrella term to include anyone giving grants or philanthropic donations, including foundations, private donors, donor-advised fund sponsors, and public charities.<sup>43</sup>

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### Foundations

Foundations are non-governmental nonprofit organizations or 501(c)3's that support charitable activities through grants or funding their own charitable giving activities. Foundations are federally required to pay out a minimum of 5% of their assets annually.<sup>44</sup>

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### Donor-Advised Funds (DAFs)

Donor-Advised Funds are charitable giving mechanisms where assets are donated to a fund sponsor, while the donor maintains advisory privileges over the use and allocation of the fund. DAFs do not have federal requirements for minimum payout percentages, but sponsors can set their own minimums for funds they manage. Donors may also receive tax benefits for their contributions while unspent funds can continue to grow overtime.<sup>45</sup>

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### Trust-Based Philanthropy

Trust-based Philanthropy is a framework for shifting and redistributing power, advancing equity, and building mutually accountable and reciprocal relationships. This includes funders working alongside nonprofits and grantees, and people who are directly impacted to meet the needs of the community. For more information visit the [Trust-based Philanthropy Project website](#).<sup>46</sup>

# A Brief History of Wealth Accumulation in Maine

This brief history is meant to help build awareness about wealth accumulation in Maine. It is not all encompassing and instead aims to highlight the key economic and historical events that allowed substantial amounts of wealth to concentrate in relatively few hands throughout Maine's history. Our research focused on events where wealth was generated through extractive practices such as land dispossession, environmental degradation, and labor exploitation. We invite you to explore further resources to find out more about any of these topics, especially those that may be related to your family, workplace, and community. Throughout this section we invite you to return to the circle of reflection questions which we hope will guide you in thinking about your own family's history and the history of the places in which you live and work. These questions may not be applicable to everyone, so we invite you to choose what resonates with you and your experiences.

**Mining** (1820–Today)

**Ships, Sugar, Slavery** (1650–1880)

**Labor Movements & Worker's Rights** (1650–Today)

**Fishing & Canning** (1600–Today)

**Forest Products** (1600–Today)

**Land Dispossession** (1600–Today)



## Colonization & Land Dispossession

Much of the exploitation of land, people, labor, and resources in Maine began during the colonial period of the 1600s. For thousands of years, the Wabanaki communities have inhabited the land that is now known as the State of Maine. During this pre-colonial period, people in the region approached ownership, land use, and wealth very differently from those living in Europe. The arrival of European settlers in the early 1600s represented a significant change in conceptions and practices related to wealth and property.<sup>47</sup>

During the colonial period, Europeans accumulated wealth by exploiting natural resources and establishing permanent settlements with cordoned-off private property held in perpetuity. Settlers often achieved both endeavors through the violent, forceable removal of Indigenous populations. Reflecting on the overall topic of wealth accumulation, one interview participant stated, *“It’s hard to have this conversation without thinking about Wabanaki people in Maine. And the whole hundreds of years of history, not just land being taken and cheated from them, but even in current times.”*

Throughout the colonial period and into the mid-1800s, the government and other institutions gave property in what would become Maine to white colonial settlers as rewards for serving in wars or participating in acts of violence.<sup>i</sup> One interview participant discussed the land grants that were given to people who participated in the violence against the Narragansett people in what would become the State of Rhode Island during a period known as the “Narragansett Wars” (part of King Philip’s War)<sup>48</sup> and that much of Maine was settled as a result of these land rewards. The 1755 Spencer Phips bounty is known as the first act of wealth accumulation in what would become the State of Maine. The capital earned from these bounties enabled white settlers to purchase land in Maine.<sup>49</sup> Before the Homestead Act of 1862<sup>ii</sup> granted much of the Western U.S. to white settlers, Massachusetts established the Committee for the Sale of Eastern Lands (1783–1801). In the aftermath of the Revolutionary War, Massachusetts had run out of money and was indebted to veterans of the war. To raise money, Massachusetts offered nearly 17 million acres of Maine to speculators in a system that anticipated and set a precedent for the Homestead Act and the Indigenous displacement it would enshrine into law.<sup>50</sup>

i The film *Bounty* and the associated teaching guide detail the history of the government issued scalp-bounty proclamations that were used across New England. Visit <https://upstanderproject.org/films/bounty> for more information and to find out where you can watch the film.

ii For more information about The Homestead Act of 1862 visit: <https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/homestead-act>

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When you have a society, a place that **so much wealth is built on the enslavement of both Black and Indigenous people, as well as the dispossession of the land of Wabanaki people** that creates a culture that, you know, generationally privileges, whiteness and excludes people of color.

— INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT

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For instance, the Narragansett Wars. Down in what we now know as Rhode Island, **entire towns in Maine were established through the rewards that were given to the descendants of the people who participated in those massacres against Narragansett people.** So, it also is like Maine’s wealth being generated from settler colonial violence elsewhere... it kind of shows this like web of dispossession and wealth creation that expands throughout the region as well.

— INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT



## WHY DOES THIS MATTER TODAY?

Seized or otherwise awarded land in the colonial period and during the early decades of Maine's statehood, formed the foundation of generational wealth, and subsequently continues to shape who holds land, power, and wealth in Maine today. A 2022 report found that Wabanaki Tribes hold only 1.06% of land in Maine.<sup>51</sup> Meanwhile, 95% of land in Maine is privately owned, with 30% of the land controlled by timber investment and real estate companies<sup>52</sup> and large proportions owned by a small number of wealthy families.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>54, 55</sup> The role of land ownership in wealth accumulation is well-documented.<sup>56</sup> The lasting and devastating effects of settler colonialism in Maine manifest today in the disproportionately high poverty and low homeownership rates among Indigenous communities.<sup>57</sup> Historic and ongoing land dispossession perpetuates a cycle of harm that continues to prevent Indigenous communities from accumulating and accessing wealth.

### Key Resources for Deeper Learning

- ▶ **Maine Memory Network**  
An online historical timeline of Maine's history.
- ▶ **The Upstander Project**  
Films and resource guides.
- ▶ **Wabanaki REACH**  
Programs, events, and educational resources focused on truth telling and healing.
- ▶ **Land Access for Indigenous & African American Farmers in Maine (2022)**  
A report by the Permanent Commission.
- ▶ **Native Land Digital (2024)**  
An interactive digital map of global Indigenous territories, languages, and treaties.
- ▶ **Sovereignty Starts Here (2025)**  
A groundbreaking report from the Maine Center for Economic Policy with history and policy recommendations.

**Image:** Greenleaf, Moses. 1820. "Map of the State of Maine from the Latest and Best Authorities." Osher Map Library and Smith Center for Cartographic Education, University of Southern Maine. <https://oshermaps.org/map/931.0001>

### CIRCLE OF REFLECTION

We invite you to use the circle of reflection questions in the beginning of this toolkit and encourage you to pause, sit with the information, and maybe journal using the framework below.

Visit page 4 for the full questions. »



KNOW THE CONTEXT



EXAMINE YOUR STORIES



UNDERSTAND THE SYSTEMS



WORK THROUGH YOUR EMOTIONS



MOVE TOWARD ACTION

## Forest Products: Lumber & Paper

It is no mistake that Maine is known as The Pine Tree State. From the colonial period to today, industries like ship building, lumber, and paper production have harvested expansive tracts of Maine's forest to generate profits and wealth. Today, many of Maine's wealthiest families and largest private landowners have connections to the timber industry.<sup>58</sup>

After the arrival of European settlers, early logging started with lumber from Maine's forests being used to make ships for the English navy.<sup>59</sup> The first sawmill in Maine was built in 1634 in South Berwick.<sup>60</sup> Logging continued throughout the 18th century and reached its peak in Maine in the early 1800s. By 1830, Bangor was the logging center of the world<sup>61</sup> and in the 1840s it is estimated that there were about 1,500 sawmills statewide.<sup>62</sup> Between 1830 and 1890, 9.7 trillion board feet of timber were moved through Bangor.<sup>63</sup> In addition to the vast supply of trees, the logging industry relied on Maine's rivers for log drives, using the river's current to transport harvested tree trunks downstream to saw or pulp mills, a practice which was banned in the 1970s due to the pollution and environmental devastation.<sup>64, 65</sup>

The lumber and paper industries are vital to Maine's economy, and a source of income and security for many working Mainers historically and today. At the same time, these industries are built on a legacy of land dispossession and environmental destruction. Not only did the lumber industry drive deforestation, but log drives polluted the state's rivers and dams and blocked the migration of fish. The paper companies, who owned many of the dams, freely controlled the water and emptied their waste into the rivers. As pine and other lumber trees were depleted, Maine's sawmills declined, and the production of pulp and paper took over.

Cumberland Mills, the first paper mill in Maine, was established in 1734 on the Presumpscot River in Westbrook, and exemplifies the tension between economic gain and the harmful ramifications of extraction. The mill was built on a Wabanaki planting ground, known as Ammoncongjin.<sup>66</sup> The damming<sup>67</sup> of the Presumpscot river also prevented the migration of salmon, destroying the livelihood of the Indigenous people in addition to creating lasting

environmental impacts. Cumberland Mills was later purchased by S.D. Warren in 1854. Warren was known as an innovator for being one of the first to add wood fibers as the base for paper.<sup>68</sup> By 1880, the S.D. Warren Mill in Westbrook was said to be the largest paper mill in the world.<sup>69</sup> It stands today as one of the last remaining paper mills in Maine, under the ownership of Sappi.<sup>70</sup>

“

At one point we had over 120,000 acres of land... And as we came to realize and understand that much of that land was stolen from the Wabanaki community, **we felt like we wanted to be able to take the resources that our family have and return them in some way.**

— INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT

Between 1880 and 1900 there were about 40 pulp and paper mills in Maine, spread across towns along the Androscoggin, Kennebec, and Penobscot rivers. For decades, these mills provided employment opportunities and supported the economies in many Maine towns, including Rumford, Jay, Livermore Falls, Millinocket, Skowhegan, and Westbrook.<sup>71</sup> While the families who owned these companies generated wealth and left vast legacies across the state, when the paper mills closed, many Maine towns were left with little economic activity and few employment prospects. The impact of this decline is still felt in many of these towns to this day.



## WHY DOES THIS MATTER TODAY?

Shifts in global economics triggered the decline of the forest products industries in the state,<sup>72</sup> but the lasting impacts of these industries' heydays continue to shape Maine's rural economy, community health, and environment. As companies closed, Maine's communities had little resources and support to buffer against economic fallout.

Since the passage of the 1972 Clean Water Act, there have been efforts to depollute rivers and remove some dams. Nevertheless, today the few Maine-based paper mills in operation are among the top emitters of hazardous air pollutants among U.S. pulp and paper facilities.<sup>73</sup> A growing body of research links paper companies' practice of spreading paper mill waste, or "sludge," as fertilizer to PFAS contamination in drinking water. PFAS is a "forever chemical" linked to cancer, kidney disease, low birthweight, among other health concerns.<sup>74</sup>

In addition to contending with health hazards, many communities with formerly operating mills have struggled

to recover economically, underscoring the harm industries perpetuate when they leave a community without a plan for future investment. This impact has been seen in many of Maine's former "mill towns," but hit rural areas the hardest as the mill closures left little to no employment prospects.

Even with the decline in industry, much of the land that was exploited for forestry products in the past remains privately held and continues to generate wealth for its owners. Some of this land has been allocated to conservation efforts in recent years. Although conservation can bolster environmental health, without intentional efforts to maintain accessibility, it can limit the use of the land by local communities, including Indigenous peoples. Further, very little land has been returned to the stewardship of the Indigenous people. In the last few years, however, organizations such as the Wabanaki Commission<sup>75</sup> and various funders and land trust groups are working to change this, and land back movements are gaining ground in Maine.<sup>76</sup>

### Key Resources for Deeper Learning

- ▶ **Living Off the Land & Sea, Making Paper Making Maine, & Big Timber: the Mast Trade**  
Maine Memory Network (n.d.) collections on the history of logging and paper in Maine.
- ▶ **The Wabanaki Commission and First Light**  
Learn more about the work being done to heal and restore Wabanaki presence and access to the land.
- ▶ **Restoration of Land Stewardship (2020)**  
A Sunlight Media Collective video about the return of land stewardship to the Penobscot Nation.

### CIRCLE OF REFLECTION

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Visit page 4 for the full questions. »



KNOW THE CONTEXT



EXAMINE YOUR STORIES



UNDERSTAND THE SYSTEMS



WORK THROUGH YOUR EMOTIONS



MOVE TOWARD ACTION

## Mining the Earth

In addition to timber, large mining businesses were built in Maine starting in the early 19th century. In areas like Blue Hill, Hallowell, and Thomaston, high-quality granite and lime deposits were extracted in large quantities for nearly a century. The materials harvested through these activities laid the foundation for the nation's buildings and monuments, such as the Brooklyn Bridge and Grant's Tomb.<sup>77</sup> Monson and Brownville were known for high-quality slate, which adorns roofs across the region to this day. The slate industry grew so large that a railroad was built connecting remote Monson to Bangor in the late 19th century.<sup>78</sup> Later, mining in Maine expanded to include lead, iron, and metals like copper and zinc.

While large industries can spur economic development and create jobs in rural communities, mining is also implicated in detrimental environmental impacts—leaching acid, toxic heavy metals, and other contaminants that pollute land and water as well as harming fish, animals, and people. Two specific sites in Maine are notorious for the environmental impacts, the Black Hawk mine in Blue Hill and the Callahan Mine in Brooksville. While the corporations that owned these mines promised, and did often spur economic growth, they consistently left behind contamination, expensive maintenance, and resource depletion. For example, the Callahan Mine Company project site was so toxic that it was designated a Federal Superfund site in 2002, requiring a \$23 million dollar cleanup, 10% of which was paid by the State of Maine.<sup>79</sup>

In addition to the direct, localized environmental impacts of mining in Maine, the refining of lime also required large amounts of wood, which contributed significantly to deforestation. Wood was eventually replaced by coal when local forests were sufficiently exploited and the cost to ship coal into port towns like Rockland and Rockport was more economically advantageous. Of course, this burning of wood and coal was also an early contributor to the emergent problem of greenhouse gas emissions.

Mining in Maine was also dangerous work, and mine workers played a role in early labor movements in Maine, successfully unionizing to improve their working conditions and wages. This was not until after they were met with significant resistance from industrialists, quarry managers, and politicians, who created a conspiracy law in the 1840s that effectively banned strikes as a form of protest.<sup>80</sup>



## WHY DOES THIS MATTER TODAY?

The disputes about the environmental costs versus the economic benefits of the mining industry persist to this day in Maine. In 2012, a bill was introduced to the legislature that would have allowed J.D. Irving, the largest landowner in Maine, to blast an open pit mine at Bald Mountain in Aroostook County. Proposed rule changes would have resulted in loosened standards for water quality and shifts in permitting oversight.<sup>81, 82</sup> Implementation was delayed and in 2014 this plan was struck down. In 2017, the legislature passed a bill that implemented some of the strongest protections against mining in the country, with overwhelming bipartisan majorities. Despite these protections, a proposal was recently

brought by Wolfden Resource to rezone and create a zinc mine at Pickett Mountain in the Katahdin region. It was defeated in 2024 after much opposition by tribal groups, conservation organizations, and environmental justice groups.<sup>83, 84</sup> As initiatives to expand U.S. capacity for battery development increases, the 2021 discovery of a large lithium deposit in Western Maine brought the debate over Maine's mining laws to the forefront.<sup>85</sup> Pressures to meet the global need for lithium to support a clean energy transition will likely continue to put pressure on policymakers in Maine to loosen mining restrictions.<sup>86</sup>

### Key Resources for Deeper Learning

- ▶ **Mining in Maine: Past, Present, and Future.**  
Lepage, C., Foley, M., & Thompson, W. (1990). Maine Geological Survey, Augusta, ME.
- ▶ **Open-Pit Mines in Maine: Serious Risks to Our Environment.**  
Natural Resources Council of Maine.
- ▶ **Extracting Wealth**  
Maine Memory Network (n.d.).

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KNOW THE CONTEXT



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WORK THROUGH YOUR EMOTIONS



MOVE TOWARD ACTION

## Ships, Sugar, & Enslavement

Historians estimate that up to 50% of the wealth generated during the colonial period in the U.S. was built on the forced labor of enslaved people.<sup>87</sup> Much of Maine's early economic growth can be directly and indirectly tied to the slave economy. In the early to mid-1800s, Maine was a stop<sup>88</sup> along the Transatlantic Triangular Trade routes.<sup>iii</sup> Raw products created by the labor of enslaved people on plantations in the Southern United States and Caribbean Islands were shipped to the Northern states, including Maine, where those products were processed for sale in European markets. Much of Maine's early development was driven by the transatlantic slave economy through building ships, fueled by the timber industry, and used to transport enslaved people.<sup>89</sup> Maine's forests also supplied the wood for wooden barrels, which, among other products, were used to transport sugar and rum from the Caribbean. Maine companies generated large amounts of wealth, particularly in Southern Maine, by adding value to raw materials produced by enslaved labor,<sup>90</sup> including processing cotton and refining sugar.<sup>91</sup> Maine also provided food that enabled the system of chattel slavery in the Caribbean and Southern United States, including farm products and salt cod.<sup>92</sup>

Records show that Maine-built ships were used to carry over 18,000 enslaved people from Africa to Cuba, in the years between 1850 and 1862 alone.<sup>93</sup> At least 1,000 of those people died on their way across the Atlantic. These numbers are on record, and it is hard to know how many more unrecorded people were transported into the brutality of slavery by ships built in, owned by, and crewed by people from Maine. However, some families with legacies in Maine can trace their origins to these "merchant" ships. Many Maine families also generated wealth directly through the illegal slave trade during this time.<sup>94</sup> As one interview participant pointed out, *"Slave ships also operated at the same time as merchant vessels. So, they were transporting goods as well as enslaved people, primarily to Cuba and Brazil... that equates to approximately yearly \$350 million coming back into the state of Maine in today's money, just in the slave trade alone."*

Wealth built in Maine's mills also has ties to the slave economy. Saco and Lewiston housed some of the largest cotton mills in the nation, where they processed cotton produced by enslaved labor in the Southeastern United States. In 1828, Saco was even said to have the largest cotton mill in the world.<sup>95</sup> A recently uncovered history traces the Bates Mill, known for producing cotton bedclothes and providing the founding wealth for Bates College.<sup>96</sup>

iii See this BBC (n.d.) [article](#) for more information about the Transatlantic Triangular Trade routes.

“

**A huge amount of the early wealth** by some extremely prominent families who continue to have a lot of wealth and privilege in the present day **comes from, either directly through being involved in the merchant activities related to the slave trade or from trading goods and commodities produced by enslaved people along the coast.**

— INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT

As one interview participant stated, until just a few years ago *“the story of how a bedspread was made... as cotton came to the north... was the full extent [of the story]... not where or how it was picked.”* Textile mills created many jobs and fast economic growth for Maine, but that growth and subsequent wealth accumulation came at a cost.

Projects like Atlantic Black Box and Maine’s Visible Black History uncover and tell the stories of those who made their wealth either directly or indirectly through the slave economy, as well as the stories of the people who were enslaved in Maine. For example, one of the wealthiest families in Maine and New England in the 17th and 18th centuries, the Pepperells, built their grand home in Kittery in 1682. Their legacy was built by Sir William Pepperell, a prominent merchant, who was also a documented slave trader and owner of enslaved people.<sup>97</sup> The Pepperell Manufacturing Company and the associated mill, which stands today, was named in his honor.<sup>98</sup> One interview participant stated, *“Lots of families benefited from timber, lots of families benefited from ship building and we’re learning more and more about what the cargo was in those ships.”*

“

Lots of families benefited from timber, lots of families benefited from ship building and **we’re learning more and more about what the cargo was in those ships.**

— INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT





## WHY DOES THIS MATTER TODAY?

Today, the legacy of Maine’s connection to the slave economy and the resulting structural inequities are apparent in the disparities faced by Black Mainers. As enslaved people, African Americans were never compensated for their labor; they were also denied access to land and the financial, political, and social capital that would have allowed them to accumulate wealth.<sup>99</sup> Even after legal slavery ended in the U.S., other oppressive laws and practices entrenched the racial wealth gap, and Black Mainers today continue to face the impacts of this history. As one interview participant stated, *“There were state-sponsored policies and local violence that created segregation... It wasn’t organic.”* Black Mainers continue to earn lower incomes on average and are more likely to live below the poverty line—in 2022, 29% of Black Mainers lived in poverty compared to 10.2% of white Mainers. Maine also ranks as the worst state in the U.S. for racial disparities in home ownership.<sup>100</sup>

“

It’s every town. It all ties back to slavery during the 19th century and to the burgeoning merchant economy, and even when you go inland... you know, mill communities in places like Lisbon or Lewiston... **the raw materials being produced by enslaved people in the south or in the Caribbean...** There’s no way to think about how our towns were built and funded during this very critical time period of the industrial revolution and capitalist expansion without seeing these connections to slavery.

— INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT

### Key Resources for Deeper Learning

- ▶ **Atlantic Black Box**  
Online resources and historical records documenting Maine’s history and the ties to systemic racial injustices.
- ▶ **Maine’s Role in the Slave Trade: Research Uncovers Significant Slave Trading in New England**  
Listen to Maine Calling’s (2020) episode, about slave trading in New England.
- ▶ **Cotton Town: Maine’s Economic Connections to Slavery**  
Maine Maritime Museum (2022) past Exhibit on Maine’s connections to cotton and the slave economy.
- ▶ **Maine and the West Indies Trade**  
Recording of Maine Historical Society event featuring historian Seth Goldstein (February 2024).
- ▶ **Maine Museum of Innovation, Learning, and Labor**  
A history and culture museum in Lewiston that hosts collections, exhibits, and events related to life, labor, and culture in Central Maine.

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## Waterways: Fishing, Whaling, & Canning

Historically, Maine's waterways — its coastline, oceans, and rivers — were critical sources of sustenance and transportation infrastructure, and they remain sacred waters to the Wabanaki. Rivers helped advance the State of Maine as a leading supplier of building materials and textiles which fueled much of the industrial economic growth in Maine during the 1800s.<sup>101</sup>

Prior to colonization, the Wabanaki People relied heavily on fish that inhabited both the rivers and ocean, and native fish species were abundant in numbers unimaginable today. Estimates suggest that 30–40% of the traditional Wabanaki diet came from fish. Maine's waterways, however, also attracted European settlers who looked to the sea and the vast network of accessible rivers as sources of potential wealth. European settlers relied on rivers to build wealth, using them to transport raw materials such as logs. Alongside lumber, fishing was one of the earliest and most profitable economic activities in Maine's early colonial period.<sup>102</sup> However, building this economy and wealth also meant displacing Wabanaki communities and restricting their access to waterways and fisheries, both through violence and state-sanctioned policies.<sup>103</sup> Many of Maine's oldest colonial forts, such as Fort St. George and Fort Pownal, were built on crucial fishing sites in an effort to limit the Native People's mobility and food source on the waterways.

Fishing sustained the first European settlements in Maine, where salt cod exports were one of the primary sources of wealth. Early fishing stations were located on Monhegan, Damariscove, Southport, and Matinicus Islands.<sup>104</sup> The fishing trade was so profitable that the term "codfish aristocracy" came to describe New England families who built wealth through the marine economy.<sup>105</sup> Maine-harvested salt cod also provided food for enslaved people as lower quality cod, called "stockfish," was exported to be served to enslaved people in the Southern United States, the Caribbean, and Latin America.<sup>106</sup> Today, salt cod still features in cuisines among communities whose ancestors were enslaved.

In addition, fish were harvested for oil that was used in leather tanning, with many oil processing plants springing up in Maine by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. After the primary source of fish for oil, menhaden, became less available in 1879, oil was sourced from whales including humpbacks and fin whales. At the height of the Maine whaling industry, over 100 whales were killed for oil annually. The extracted oil, in turn, supplied tanning operations that produced leather for household objects like boots and shoes as well as byproducts like fishmeal that could be used for fertilizer.<sup>107</sup>

Throughout this history, food processing and canning has also been a large wealth generator, with families like the Baxters amassing fortunes, in their case primarily from the canning of vegetables.<sup>108</sup> In the early 1900s, Maine had 89 canneries, mostly canning sardines and employing over 8,000 people.<sup>109</sup> Canneries largely employed women and children on a seasonal basis, and at minimum wage.<sup>110</sup> The Baxter family is renowned in Maine for its philanthropic donation of the land that comprises Baxter State Park, including Mount Katahdin, a sacred place to the Penobscot Nation. The Penobscot have long disputed Maine's right to own this sacred part of their traditional land and the existence of the park.<sup>111</sup>



## WHY DOES THIS MATTER TODAY?

Today, fishing and aquaculture continue to play an important role in Maine's economy, contributing \$3.2 billion to Maine's GDP in 2019.<sup>112</sup> The impact of industries, including fishing, lumber, and paper, that historically relied on Maine's waterways to build wealth manifest in environmental and socioeconomic disparities. Dams and accompanying mills significantly altered the ecosystems in which they were constructed, with significant impacts on migratory fish like Atlantic salmon.<sup>113, 114</sup> A 2022 report<sup>115</sup> detailed the history of the system of practices and policies that limited Wabanaki access to waterways and fisheries in Maine and the impact of dams, logging, pollution, and overfishing.

The devastation in fish populations and pollution of the waters have drastically changed the viability of fishing in Maine's rivers today. One of the most striking examples is the near extinction of Atlantic salmon, which are estimated to have once returned to the Penobscot river in populations of 100,000. Now, only about 500 Atlantic salmon return to the river annually.<sup>116</sup>

In recent years, state and federal policies have led to improvements in water quality and dam regulations, and some species, such as Alewives, have started to rebound. However, even with fish returning, the Maine Department of Health and Human Services has issued warnings that people should limit, and in some cases avoid, eating fish caught in any of Maine's inland rivers due to water pollution and contamination. Mercury and PFAS pollution in Maine's waterways continue to limit the ability for inland fish to be significant sustenance for anyone in Maine. Furthermore, the debate over clean up and stewardship of Maine's waterways persists to this day.

### Key Resources for Deeper Learning

- ▶ **Casco Bay's Four Thousand Year History of Sustainable Stable Productivity**  
An infographic sign detailing the history of Casco Bay (Casco Bay Estuary Partnership, 2010).
- ▶ **Maine's First Ship**  
A collection of historical resources and a recording of a lecture, *Founding Fish* (2021) with historian Mike Dekker.
- ▶ **Economic Impacts of the Maine Seafood Sector (2023 report)**  
by Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterrey (2023) and Maine Center for Business and Economic Research.
- ▶ **H.C. Baxter and Brothers Canning Company**  
Collection by the Hartland Historical Society.
- ▶ **Sea Run: A Study Regarding the Impact of Maine Policies on the Quality and Quantity of Traditional Tribal Fish Stocks and Sustenance Practices.**  
A 2022 report published by the Maine Indian Tribal-State Commission.
- ▶ **The Penobscot: Ancestral River, Contested Territory**  
A Sunlight Media Collective (2022) film that tells the story of Penobscot People's stewardship of the river and current legal battle.

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## Labor Movements & Worker's Rights

Maine has a strong history of collective bargaining and labor movements, which really took off in the 19th century as the economy shifted.<sup>117</sup> When Maine became a state in 1820, the primary types of work were farming, lumbering, fishing, shipbuilding, and commerce.<sup>118</sup> Most artisans in this period trained apprentices and had small, local businesses trading within their communities. In the first half of the 19th century, an increase in trade and imports of cheaper, manufactured goods from Europe began to put pressure on these small enterprises. This economic shift, in turn, created more competition, forcing small artisan businesses to specialize, consolidate, or expand. As a result, the relationship between labor and ownership shifted from one of artisans and apprentices to one of employers and employees, with significant impacts on career paths, pay, and the experience of work for laborers in a wage labor system.<sup>119</sup> Resistance to this new system was widespread in Maine as laborers in this early phase demanded high-quality public education, legal systems that were accessible and fair to all parties, the abolition of imprisonment for debt, and the abolition of licensed monopolies, among other demands. They saw the accumulation of wealth and power among the merchant class as a threat to their livelihoods.<sup>120</sup>

In addition to negotiating higher wages and better working conditions, early organized labor in Maine worked to end exploitation of children, gaining the first legal protections against child labor in 1847. Prior to the passage of this law, in the 1820's and 1830's, children under sixteen made up between one third and one half of the industrial workforce in New England. The 1847 law stated that children under fifteen must attend at least 16 weeks of school to work in manufacturing.<sup>121</sup> The Maine Child Labor Committee was established in 1907 and the minimum age for child labor was raised from fourteen to sixteen in 1909.<sup>122</sup>

The rise of the mills and trade workers in Maine fueled the growth of Maine's labor movements in the 1880's and continued into the early decades of the 1900's. While many unions in the 1880's were generalized, in the 1890's they began to organize around specific trades and Maine is said to have had 150 unions established by 1902. Unfortunately, the movements were not always successful. In 1934, 10,000 Maine workers joined the national textile worker strike known as the "Great Uprising of 1934" before the Supreme Court stopped it.<sup>123</sup> A few years later, in 1937 when shoe factory owners failed to recognize the union, the CIO organized a massive strike which resulted in thousands of workers on strike and a violent conflict between the workers and the national guard, which ultimately led to their defeat.<sup>124,125</sup> In 1956, the Maine AFL-CIO was created with the merge of the two large unions, resulting in a membership of about 60,000 workers which helped push the movement forward in Maine. Maine's modern labor movements made significant grounds in the 1950's and later half of the 20th century with worker protections and gains such as general minimum wage laws.



## WHY DOES THIS MATTER TODAY?

Over time, specialization and globalization have continued to grow the system of wage labor in the state. Subsequently, disputes over fair wages and labor standards across industries have persisted. While employees continue to fight for rights such as paid leave, many also continue to fight for fair wages and protections from retaliation. The service industry and agriculture are two of the most prominent examples where workers have been fighting for fair pay in recent years in Maine.

A 2021 study found that wage theft in Maine costs workers tens of millions of dollars in unpaid wages each year.<sup>126</sup> Studies have shown that typically the workers most affected by wage theft are those who are in low-wage hourly

positions including tipped workers and others working in the service industry.<sup>127</sup> A 2009 national study also found that women, immigrant workers, and Black and Latine workers experienced minimum wage violations at higher rates.<sup>128</sup> Until a new law passed in 2024, the penalties for unpaid wages were relatively minor and not consistently enforced.<sup>129</sup>

Potatoes, dairy, and blueberries in Maine are produced on an industrial scale and often farms rely on seasonal migrant workforces. In 2023, 90% of all market value from Maine farms came from only 10% of the farms.<sup>130</sup> Blueberries alone, which bring in tens of millions of dollars to Maine's economy, rely on thousands of migrant and Indigenous workers every year to harvest the berries, carrying on a thousand-year-old Wabanaki tradition.<sup>131</sup> Meanwhile, farmworkers only gained the right to state minimum wage in summer 2025.<sup>132</sup> Even with new wage laws in recent years, many workers still lack protections against retaliation if they raise an issue related to work conditions.<sup>133</sup>

### Key Resources for Deeper Learning

- ▶ **Labor History: When the Supreme Court Broke Maine's Textile Unions**  
Maine AFL-CIO. (2024).
- ▶ **History of Labor in Maine**  
Reed, K. & Strachan, O. (2001).
- ▶ **MIT Living Wage Calculator**  
Explore and compare living wages with current data.
- ▶ **Maine MILL (Museum of Innovation, Learning, and Labor)**  
A history and culture museum in Lewiston that hosts collections, exhibits, and events related to life, labor, and culture in Central Maine.
- ▶ **Collective efforts among Maine workers: beginnings and foundations, 1820-1880.**  
Scontras, C. A. (1994). Bureau of Labor Education, University of Maine.
- ▶ **Organized Labor in Maine: Twentieth Century Origins**  
Scontras, C. A. (1985). Bureau of Labor Education, University of Maine.

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## The Elmina B. Sewall Foundation

Today, the Elmina B. Sewall Foundation serves communities and the environment in the state of Maine by providing philanthropic funds. There is little public knowledge about the origins of the wealth that makes this philanthropy possible. The following narrative traces the wealth of the Brewster family, a large part of which was inherited by Elmina B. Sewall.<sup>iv</sup> This story is being told with permission from the Sewall Foundation in the spirit of truth telling, and is an example of how other foundations and private donors might trace their origins so they may better understand the origins of their wealth and make informed decisions about strategies for repair.

“

It's built into our principles and our values that we engage with and are honest about the history and that **we seek to repair harm, not just that we're institutionally or historically responsible for, but that the system that has allowed our sector to exist has been responsible for...** we try to share as much information as we can very openly, as a way of shifting that power dynamic.

— DR. GABRIELA ALCALDE

*Executive Director of the Sewall Foundation*

<sup>iv</sup> Some of this history was taken from internal documents which were provided to the authors by the Sewall Foundation. The rest was added through secondary and genealogical research to draw the connections between what was already known and further historical origins of the wealth.

### THE STORY OF THE BREWSTER'S GENERATIONAL WEALTH.

Most Americans are familiar with the story of the Mayflower, in which sixty English people arrived at today's Plymouth Bay, Massachusetts, in 1620. Among this first group of English settlers in New England was William Brewster, who had grown up in luxury at Scrooby Manor in Nottinghamshire. He arrived with his wife, Mary, his sons Love and Wrestling, and a servant named Richard More. The Brewster family quickly prospered in the new colony, claiming six acres of land and later building a house in Duxbury.<sup>134</sup>

Of course, the English did not arrive in a new, uninhabited territory, but in a land that had been home to Indigenous People for thousands of years. The Europeans were baffled by the paradox they perceived with the richness and abundance of the land contrasted with the “poverty” they ascribed to the Indigenous nations. In reality, there were profound differences between English and Indigenous understanding of property rights and relationships with the land, and this quickly created conflict.<sup>135</sup> This conflict erupted into the Pequot War in Connecticut in 1636, in which Love Brewster volunteered under Myles Standish, another Mayflower passenger known for his brutality toward Indigenous people.

The Pequot War was brutal, and Europeans including Standish's army were implicated in several massacres of hundreds of Pequot and Narragansett People. They burned the main village of the Pequot Nation and enslaved Pequot People for forced labor in Caribbean sugar plantations.<sup>136</sup> At the conclusion of the war, the leader of the Mohegan Nation, Uncas, who had allied with the English, granted the Brewster family a large plot of land in current-day Griswold, Connecticut.<sup>137</sup> It was here, in eastern Connecticut, that Benjamin Brewster was born and raised.

In 1849, attracted by the money to be made in the California Gold Rush, Benjamin Brewster moved to San Francisco and opened a mercantile store, outfitting miners who sought fortunes by claiming and exploiting the land in the Sierra Nevada.<sup>138</sup> The environmental impacts of the gold rush, including deforestation, destruction of riverbeds, and mercury pollution continue to plague this region today.<sup>139</sup>

Benjamin Brewster and his business partner, Oliver Burr Jennings, returned east to New York in 1874 with their fortunes and invested in Standard Oil, as well as a host of transportation companies including railroads, canals, and steam ships.<sup>140</sup> After amassing ever greater fortunes, Brewster built himself a large manor home in Cazenovia, New York, naming it Scrooby after the home his ancestor had left behind in England.

Elmina B. Sewall, granddaughter of Benjamin Brewster, inherited wealth grown over generations of the Brewster family, starting in England and continuing to increase through land accumulation and business enterprises including mining, fossil fuel extraction, and the exploitation of labor. In 1983, she gave a generous sum to the Elmina B. Sewall Foundation, which today funds nonprofit organizations focused on animal welfare, land conservation, and human wellbeing.<sup>141</sup>

The Sewall Foundation is committed to promoting equity and strives to build trust and long-term relationships with their nonprofit and philanthropic partners. Many of the interview participants recognized the Sewall Foundation as an organization that is employing trust-based philanthropy practices and investment strategies that align with their mission and goals of making their funding more accessible. As one interview participant said, *"the Sewall Foundation has done a lot of good work around this. They're still evolving... But they're a pretty good example of a foundation taking it seriously, taking the time to really think about how to do it differently, making some mistakes, but you know, generally making their funds more accessible to more people who need them."*

## CIRCLE OF REFLECTION

Using the circle of reflection framework as provided on page 4, we invite you to reflect on this story and add some additional questions for reflection.

When you read the history of the Sewall family's wealth, what feelings come up for you?

How do you relate this history to the wealth that you hold? Are there feelings of superiority, empathy, or curiosity?

If this was your family's story, how would you feel about sharing it? How might it change the way you relate to your wealth or what you do with it?

# Modern Day Wealth Accumulation & Philanthropy

Many interview participants discussed the connection between Maine and U.S. history and modern-day wealth and philanthropy. Some of the themes included the complex moral dilemma of generational wealth, the impact of “outside” influence in the state, and how capitalism informs the structures of philanthropy. Many of these themes point to potential strategies for creating systems change. Participants’ insights also offer points of reflection for those who hold wealth and power and for those who work in Maine’s philanthropic industry.

## The Moral Dilemma of Generational Wealth

Many of today’s family foundations and private donors have accumulated wealth over generations, tracing back to some of the aforementioned historical events and industries in Maine, other parts of the U.S., or even internationally. For many of the interview participants, the concept of generational inherited wealth was a source of moral struggle and they discussed seeking ways to change traditional practices.

As one interview participant stated, *“when you have money, it’s relatively easy to just keep making more money. But when you don’t have money, it’s just impossible to sort of access money.”* Large concentrations of capital and assets enable wealthy people and families to continue to invest and earn more wealth through the stock market, real estate, and business endeavors. Many of the interview participants discussed the traditional philanthropic practices and tax structures that have allowed private donors and foundations to continue to amass wealth, while giving away only a small portion each year. Interview participants also commonly discussed the hypocrisy of foundations investing enormous amounts of money in the stock market, often in stock portfolios that are not aligned with their values. *“Foundations exist to drive a stock market. Ninety-five percent of the money that’s held by foundations is in the stock market... you’re still involved in this mechanism that’s designed to drive increasing hoards of money.”* Many discussed strategies they were adopting to change traditional models, including mission-aligned investing and increasing the percentage of payout. They expressed a desire to use all their wealth to do good, not just 5%. However, some expressed conflicts between themselves and other family members who may be more habituated to the traditional model.

“

This money’s been kicking around for four generations. It’s time to get [it] out the door. It’s time to not have it in the stock market. **It’s time to have it in the nonprofits doing good in the world.**

— INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT

Differences in intergenerational mindsets was a broad theme. For example, many participants noted diverging approaches to wealth between their own generation and their parents, grandparents, or ancestors who prioritized continuing to earn more money to provide for future generations. Members of the current generation who manage wealth in the present expressed both discomfort with the power and control afforded by their wealth, and an awareness of structural inequities that persist. *“A little part of me bristles at the idea of being comfortable with the money. ‘Cause I kind of feel like nobody should be comfortable with this level of inequality.”* Many pointed out the difference in quantities of wealth, and the massive amounts of wealth present today that were inconceivable in the past, as they are questioning the structures and practices that have allowed them to inherit the funds, and the role of philanthropy in wealth accumulation. *“As a philanthropist, you still maintain the control...because it goes down generation to generation forever and forever.”*

Some interview participants discussed the exclusive nature of wealth and how inequities in access to resources entrenches power imbalances between different socioeconomic classes. One interview participant acknowledged the exclusivity of wealthy lifestyles, which diverge significantly from the lived reality of the individuals and communities philanthropists aim to help. They stated that people in the wealthy circles rarely interact with people who do not have money, recalling *“And then another philanthropist told me a month later, she’s like, yeah, I was in this workshop and they asked me to, to imagine someone who’s struggling. She said, and I realized I didn’t know anyone.”* This observation underscores the value of participatory practices in grant-making, policy, and program design.

Many interview participants were motivated to better understand and pursue ways to use their wealth to change systems and to repair the social and environmental harms inflicted through the extraction of their wealth. They shared that this desire arose not only because of the historical ties to oppressive and extractive practices, but also because of the immorality of today’s wealth gap. *“The atonement that I think of a lot more, instead of oil and climate, is for the system that has created such a wealthy person for generations later. So that is what I feel deeply the need to atone for.”* Another stated, *“Most people intuitively know there’s great unfairness in our systems that allow for this kind of accumulation... It’s another thing when you actually hear a person describe the generation skipping trusts and the tax deals—the actual policies that are baked into our government and into the way the stock market works.”*

“

There’s an **enormous difference in the sort of worldview of the older generation and the adult children’s generation about wealth distribution and the genesis of the wealth and their family,** whatever it might be, and how, how it should be transferred into community.

— INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT

## Money from “Away” & Tourism

Ties to outside wealth have long influenced societal structures, laws, and practices within Maine, from the sway of Maine’s earliest industries to the millions of tourists who drive much of Maine’s economy today. The tourism industry in Maine began in the 1800s as a summer escape for people from major East-coast cities. Early tourist destinations, such as Old Orchard, remain popular summer vacations today.<sup>142</sup> As Maine’s primary industry, tourism continues to influence complicated economic and land structures in our state. Many of Maine’s wealthiest people and families made their money in other places before buying property here. Some of the largest landowners in Maine are people and companies from other places.

Controversy over car traffic on Mount Desert Island in the early 1900s exemplifies the influence of “outside” wealth and tourism on policies in Maine. In response to an uptick in summer traffic caused by increased tourism, John D. Rockefeller Jr. and Joseph Pulitzer lobbied the state to permit a ban on cars on all islands, including MDI. As a result of the MDI car ban, tourists sought other destinations, harming local businesses who relied on a critical mass of tourism for profits. Not long after the MDI car ban was established, residents and hotel owners along the coast demanded its reversal following a significant drop in tourism.<sup>143</sup> The history of this ban illustrates the tension between local needs and the influence of powerful individuals “from away.”

Land ownership is another area of common conflict over land access and permitted usage between local and often wealthy part-time residents. While land and home ownership are inaccessible for many local Maine residents, large corporations and wealthy people from away continue to own and purchase large swaths of land and real estate. As one interview participant stated, *“The people working the land have been on it for generations, don’t have the money to actually buy it or even continue to pay taxes on it and all of that where people can swoop in from Connecticut or New York or Maryland and just buy it up.”* Maine suffers from a housing crisis, with an estimated additional 80,000 new homes required to meet the need.<sup>144</sup> At the same time, as interview participants observed, much of Maine’s real estate continues to be purchased by part-time, seasonal

residents, many of whom are also some of Maine’s wealthiest individuals and private donors. *“When you look at where wealth is wrapped up in Maine, it’s in private donors, not just full-time residents, but part-time seasonal residents.”*

Summer residents and people who have moved to Maine in recent years are a vital part of Maine’s philanthropic ventures and a key source of foundation and donor-advised funds for our state. It is a strength of Maine’s that many seek to build a meaningful relationship with the state and support communities here. As one interview participant stated, *“You know, I think that Maine is unusual. In that we’re such a small population of people who are here all the time... there’s, an enormous wealth influx every summer here and that has benefited the state greatly. And many of the foundations and smaller donor-advised funds, for example, are funded via people who have second homes in Maine and who have a real affinity for the state and for the people here in the community.”* Similarly, many people who live in Maine today and contribute large amounts of funding to philanthropy have moved here from other places, meaning their wealth was built there. *“All of the people that I know that have family wealth and practice philanthropy in Maine know... where the resources came from. And not a lot of it came from Maine.”* While philanthropy has brought significant economic benefits to Maine’s communities, it is vital to ensure that the voices of the local people are included in local and statewide decision-making processes to ensure use of the philanthropic funds meet the needs of all.

## Philanthropy as an Arm of Capitalism

Philanthropy as it exists in the U.S. today is built on a history of wealth accumulation and unchecked capitalism that has created a structural base of wealth inequality. At the same time that philanthropic wealth is often deployed to improve conditions for people and the environment, it is also a mechanism by which ultra-wealthy individuals can avoid paying taxes and continue to invest and earn more wealth. As one interview participant stated, *“Philanthropy is the child of capitalism. It will always be part of a capitalistic system. And so... If your analysis is that part of the problem is the extractive capitalist system, then philanthropy is not gonna be your tool.”* As many of the interview participants pointed out, philanthropic structures employ exclusive decision-making processes, funder priorities, and flawed tax and payout policies that further the wealth gaps and continue to amass wealth for the funders and foundations that have pledged to do good. In addition, as Villaneuva discusses in *Decolonizing Wealth*, only recently has the field of philanthropy begun to meaningfully engage in conversations about the origins of wealth and harmful practices about how it has been invested, managed, and allocated.<sup>145</sup>

One interview participant remarked on how a U.S. brand of capitalism dictates a different role of philanthropy compared to other places in the world: *“I’m not from the U.S. and there isn’t as much philanthropy [where I am from]. And I was curious as to why. One reason is ‘cause government does not provide for basic needs in this country.”* The participant’s

“You name it, whichever population it is, to break into that already established relationship structure... **I think the comfort isn’t there from the donor’s perspective**, but how do you start if you can’t start... it’s very prohibitive to get new organizations up and running, or even efforts.

— INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT

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So, is the effort really to, to shift people out of poverty, or is the effort to sort of mask the poverty? **Because if we had the will, we could solve poverty. We know how to do it; we just don’t want to.** And that’s a systemic driver that we still are wanting to elevate some people and suppress other people.

— INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT

observations reflect the weak social safety net in the U.S. compared to most other industrialized countries.<sup>146</sup> As a result, philanthropy functions as a workaround to meet basic needs for under-resourced communities and fill gaps left by inadequately funded public programs.<sup>147</sup>

Current systems of philanthropy further inequitable power dynamics that privilege wealth holders and exclude others from participation and decision making. One participant reflected on these dynamics in the context of the grant-application process: *“Traditional philanthropy...had a very punitive approach... Here’s the right way of doing it and if you don’t do it, you won’t get the money if you don’t comply. There’s a lot of compliance-oriented frameworks and approaches...you use our models; you use our approach to everything...if you don’t follow every instruction exactly, we will penalize you [and you will lose resources].”* A nonprofit organization has to develop and allocate the necessary resources – money, time, staffing, social capital – just to be able to follow procedures to apply for funding. Subsequently, smaller organizations with fewer connections to institutional power, including BIPOC-led organizations, struggle to out-compete better-resourced organizations for funding. One participant highlighted this vicious cycle when they shared, *“[That there is a] need to prove that you can manage money before you have money... to get money... is kind of a really damaging thing for a lot of people. And I think that it definitely extends to the immigrant and refugee community who don’t come with assets and have never managed assets in the American system.”*

“ You can’t solve the problems via philanthropy because **philanthropy is part of the problem.** ”

–INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT

Additionally, many foundations and private donors give grants and donations on an “invite-only” basis, meaning that an organization needs connections just to be invited to apply. This dynamic furthers inequities as the groups most often excluded are the same groups who were exploited to generate historic wealth in the first place.

One interview participant highlighted that in many cases, people and organizations need unrestricted funds. Grants with unrestricted funds are uncommon and run contrary to the traditional philanthropic model. The participant’s comments speak to how rules and regulations that require organizations and individuals to jump through hoops to demonstrate impact and secure future funding ultimately do not support them in achieving their goals. This participant told a story of a group of moms who were required to attend a financial literacy training, when what they ultimately

needed was unrestricted cash. *“I don’t know how many times many of them have been forced to go through financial literacy courses. It never meant anything to them because they had no money. Once they had money, they are geniuses.”* In this case, these people were financially literate, and knew how to budget, but they couldn’t budget money they didn’t have. This example further highlights the need for more participatory practices that allow for collaboration in design to ensure resource allocation adequately meets organizations’ and communities’ needs. As this participant continued, *“We were always community driven. We just didn’t get what the community was saying right away. And that they were saying they liked the programs; they attended the programs, but they really needed cash. And what we realized is you can’t get out of poverty through programs. You need actual cash.”*

## Key Resources for Deeper Learning

- ▶ **The True Cost of Billionaire Philanthropy, How the Ultra-Wealthy Use Charity to Avoid Taxes and Exert Influence- While Taxpayers Foot the Bill.**  
Flanner, H., Collins, C., & DeVaun, B. (2023).
- ▶ **Stifled Generosity: How Philanthropy Has Fueled the Accumulation & Privatization of Wealth.**  
Justice Funders. (n.d.).
- ▶ **The New Gilded Age (2022) a Throughline, NPR podcast**  
Traces the history of big philanthropy and the meaning of private wealth for the public good.
- ▶ **Decolonizing Wealth Project**  
A healing-centered project started by the author of the book, *Decolonizing Wealth* (2021), that includes a collection of resources, research, and storytelling.

## CIRCLE OF REFLECTION

We invite you to use the circle of reflection questions in the beginning of this toolkit and encourage you to pause, sit with the information, and maybe journal using the framework below.

Visit page 4 for the full questions. »



# What Can We Do Differently?

## Frameworks for Shifting Philanthropy in Maine & Beyond

Shifting the structures of a massive system such as philanthropy as it has evolved in our country takes time; it may not happen for decades. However, as one interview participant stated, *“It feels important and hard...living in a colonized state with people that experienced great loss because of colonization. I feel like it’s imperative that people that are part of the system of colonization respond in a meaningful way to the damage that has been done.”* Systems change sometimes starts with small groups of people taking small steps. Funders in Maine could take the first steps to seek and tell the truth about the origins of their wealth; shift funding practices and processes to a more community-based approach; deepen the relational model of the funder-grantee relationship; and shift goals in terms of investments and future wealth accumulation. As challenging as it may seem, working towards a trust-based or reparative model of philanthropy in Maine is possible.

### REFLECTING ON HISTORY AND BEING TRANSPARENT

Restorative practices start with a simple question: “What happened?” Before talking about impacts and feelings, who is responsible, and what repair might look like, people need to hear the simple facts of each other’s experiences. Moving toward a restorative mindset in philanthropy might include an equally simple question: “What made this wealth possible?” This question opens an exploration into how historic extractions of land and labor continue to impact communities today. Honest reflection and grappling with this question can reorient philanthropic giving toward healing. Organizations can begin to take responsibility for past harms and their present repercussions. Critically, this opens a conversation that is not about blaming people or organizations managing wealth today, but instead a reckoning with the historic reality of the systems, people, organizations, and structures that allowed that wealth to be accumulated in the first place. The first step in the process is the same in all restorative contexts: a transparent, open reckoning with what has happened.

As Villaneuva outlines in his seven steps to healing, accountability is key. We must “grieve,” acknowledge, and feel, and then “apologize” for the harm that has been caused.<sup>148</sup> A restorative context views accountability differently from its conventional definition. As one interview participant shared, *“I think that there’s an assumption that being responsible or being accountable means to be punished. And for me, you can be accountable by engaging in truth*

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I think some people mistake wanting to understand the facts with an accusation. I have no interest in accusing anybody. To me, blame and shame and guilt are really unhelpful, I just wanna understand where it comes from so, we can be responsible, and **I think that we often ignore history and therefore continue to make the same mistakes.**

— INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT

*seeking and truth telling.” This shift is not an easy one to make, in a culture that is built on systems of power, violence, and judgment, but as restorative justice practitioners have shared, the shift toward taking accountability is also liberating.*

Transparency and accountability also extend to the ways philanthropic organizations make their giving decisions. Another participant stated, *“If we’re not transparent about our history and we’re not transparent about our criteria, our process, our decision-making, that means we get to hold onto that power... So, we try to share as much information as we can very openly, as a way of shifting that power dynamic.”* Ceding power in this way may feel like a loss, but several interview participants also noted how their wealth can also feel like a burden, especially when they see suffering in the world and feel pressure to invest their funds in the most optimal way to alleviate it.

Not knowing the truth, or avoiding thinking about it, also contributes to a widely shared feeling among interview participants who are wealth holders, of alienation and disconnection from others in their communities. One said, *“I think that the problem we are dealing with... from my perspective, what we have here in this region is such a deep psychological alienation from truth, the truth of our history and a deep emotional and psychological attachment to these notions of moral innocence, and superiority.”*

## REIMAGINING PHILANTHROPY AS A COMMUNITY-BASED PRACTICE

Several new models and frameworks for community-based philanthropy are currently being explored and put into practice across the U.S. and in Maine. In **trust-based philanthropy**, philanthropic organizations develop lasting, trusting relationships with the organizations they fund, generally giving consistently over years and often with fewer or less prescriptive evaluation requirements.<sup>149</sup>

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We try to right-size the power and recognize that **philanthropy doesn’t do the work, our partners do the work.** So, it is in our best interest actually to make our partners be very successful in their work.

–INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT

**Collective impact** models of philanthropy include facilitation of collaborative efforts across service organizations to improve outcomes and drive deep systemic change.<sup>150</sup> While implementations vary, some philanthropies are starting to build a sense of community among the organizations that they fund by convening organizational leaders to understand each other’s perspectives and work. This can result in less duplication of effort and more effective system-level change, for the long-term benefit of communities served.

Taking the community-based approach a step further, some philanthropies and service organizations are collaborating to incorporate the voices of the communities they serve into their program design and funding decisions. By including members of communities receiving services in participatory decision-making or grantmaking processes, philanthropic funds can be more effectively allocated to meet the communities’ needs.<sup>151</sup> In Villanueva’s seven steps, the concepts of listening, relating, and representing, emphasize the need to listen to the wisdom of the people who have been exploited and historically excluded, sharing space to build understanding, and creating decision-making structures that are led by those who are directly impacted.<sup>152</sup>

“ If philanthropy wants to make change, they need to **study how social change actually happens and then try to work towards social change as opposed to trying to impose programming** because programming does not create social change.

–INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT

These strategies strike a strong contrast with the traditional philanthropic approach, which is characterized by top-down decision-making, centering on the priorities of funders and board members, who are often wealthy and rarely share lived experience with the communities that they serve. In addition, more traditional approaches include an arms-length relationship between philanthropies and the organizations they fund, with interactions typically limited to grant applications, notifications of awards, and evaluation reports, all on an annual basis.

## COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT

### Maine Initiatives

#### A MAINE-BASED MODEL OF COLLECTIVE, PARTICIPATORY GRANT-MAKING.

Almost every interview participant highlighted Maine Initiatives as leading the way in participatory practices among Maine funders. Maine Initiatives uses a collective, place-based model of philanthropy that is grounded in racial justice. The Grants for Change initiative engages BIPOC led and serving organizations in a participatory, retreat style, grant making process to collectively make decisions about funding work that aims to dismantle systemic racism and colonialism in Maine. The process emphasizes relationship and capacity building offering a mutually beneficial experience for all involved.

For more information visit their website  
[maineinitiatives.org](http://maineinitiatives.org)

## BUILDING A RESTORATIVE AND RELATIONAL PHILANTHROPIC MINDSET

Similarly, many philanthropic organizations across the country are moving towards a restorative, healing, reparations-focused mindset in their giving strategies. While the mindset of philanthropic organizations since the time of Carnegie and Rockefeller was that of the benevolence of the wealth-holder whose wealth was unquestioningly derived from hard work contributing value to people and the economy, there is now more recognition of the damage and harm that has often accompanied the accumulation of wealth. Today, **reparative philanthropy** models aim to build authentic relationships that recognize and take accountability for harms and promote reciprocity and relationship building in acts of giving.<sup>153</sup> From environmental degradation, exploitation of labor, and societal externalities, philanthropies with a restorative mindset are beginning to reckon with these harms and inform their giving decisions with an objective to heal those harmed, restore relationships, and balance power.

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Giving money in more of a partnership way and **trusting the organization** to know how to spend the money to **have the biggest impact and best meet the mission** rather than how it's historically done.

-INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT

The clearest example of this restorative approach to philanthropy may be the **land back movement**, which encourages the return of lands to the Indigenous People from whom it was taken over the last six centuries. Other philanthropies are working to repair environmental harm, provide various forms of reparations to the descendants of enslaved people, and give back to specific communities who have been adversely impacted by labor exploitation and economic decline. Some are working to remove barriers and create pathways for historically excluded groups to access financing to purchase homes or start businesses. Some are developing collective strategies such as land trusts where land is either donated or purchased to be held in a trust for conservation, public use, or farming.<sup>154</sup> The forms that these restorative philanthropic efforts take are varied, but they share the common aim of acknowledging harm and attempting to give communities and ecosystems the resources they need. Funders can prioritize funding initiatives like these to advance reparative strategies and community-led healing.

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**Land return**, like having serious conversations about land return and, I know **reparations** means many things to people, and it means many things in practice, but **actually using those frameworks as an opportunity to get at some of what we're talking about**, these kind of fundamental cultural, deeply held beliefs about land and wealth.

—INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT

## COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT

### Bomazeen Land Trust

**AN INDIGENOUS-LED LAND TRUST FOCUSED ON RESTORING WABANAKI STEWARDSHIP AND HEALING OF THE ANCESTRAL LANDS.**

The Bomazeen Land Trust is a Wabanaki community-led initiative that is working to protect and heal ancestral Wabanaki spaces through land return and land access projects. Programs focus on food sovereignty, land return & relationships, and cultural transmission.

For more information visit their website:  
[bomazeenlandtrust.org](https://bomazeenlandtrust.org)

### Somali Bantu Community Association

**A COMMUNITY-LED COLLECTIVE FOCUSED ON ADVANCING LAND ACCESS FOR HISTORICALLY MARGINALIZED FARMERS AND COMMUNITIES IN MAINE.**

The Somali Bantu Association operates culturally relevant programming and services to increase access to land for immigrant and historically marginalized groups to farmland in Maine. They focus on reciprocal relationship building, and work in solidarity with the Wabanaki people to advance their mission of food and land justice in Maine.

For more information visit their website  
[somalibantumaine.org](https://somalibantumaine.org)

## A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO TIME AND LEGACY

Moving even further than a restorative approach to philanthropy, some are leading larger systems change by employing transformative approaches to their philanthropic endeavors. A high profile example, Mackenzie Scott made headlines in 2020 when she gave a record \$5.8 billion in donations to a wide range of organizations.<sup>155</sup> As one of the wealthiest people in the world, Scott has decided to use her vast wealth to make a difference now, in contrast to the way that many philanthropic organizations work, with an endowment approach that sets a **maximum giving threshold** (often 5%). Giving five percent, which is the federal minimum requirement for private foundations, is effective at sustaining the wealth of philanthropic funds and organizations.<sup>156</sup> It also serves to maintain the legacy of donors and their families, as well as their power to shape the world in the ways they see fit. This is in sharp contrast to the way that wealth is gained through business enterprises, as well as how it is traditionally maintained through investment in equities. In both of these cases, profits, especially short-term profits, are the key indicators of success. In other words, the wealth coming into a philanthropic fund is accumulated as quickly and efficiently as possible, while the funds are very conservative and judicious about the way that they pay out the funds to invest in the work happening in communities they are designed to serve.

Beyond making larger and more widespread donations, another trend that challenges the endowment approach is seen in the **sunsetting of foundations**.<sup>157</sup> In May 2025, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation announced that they would double their rate of giving, aiming to give all of their funds in the next 20 years.<sup>158</sup> They expect to give roughly \$200 billion in that time, with a focus on child and maternal health, infectious disease, and poverty. Sunsetting a foundation (also called spend out, spend down, or time limiting) gives philanthropy the power to have more impact in the short term.<sup>159</sup> In combination with a strategic, systems-based approach to investment, this can result in an even greater lasting impact for people and their communities. Multiple interview participants had experience helping to sunset foundations either in Maine or other places in the U.S., and some of the private donors talked about goals of giving away all of their wealth in their lifetime. One participant recalled, *“The most fun I ever had was when [NAME REDACTED] Foundation, after five years, decided to devolve, and we gave all the money away. It was so much fun, and it wasn’t that easy.”*

Another way that philanthropic stewards are rethinking their use of wealth is through **mission-aligned investing**. This practice includes considering environmental, social, and governance (ESG) practices of corporations in which a fund invests as well as impact investing, where money is invested in small enterprises that do work aligned with an organization’s mission. In 2020, U.S. based philanthropic investments in the global financial markets totaled \$1.2 trillion, while in that same year foundations gave out \$88.6 billion in grants, meaning they contributed 13 times more to the global stock market than to charitable giving.<sup>160</sup> Even simple personal banking has been shown to

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I spent a lot of time talking with high-net-worth individuals that are very philanthropic. And we often end up spending our time talking about the need for a more progressive tax code, the richest people in our state. And the large property owners should be taxed more than they are now. **I think it’s impossible to talk about the power of philanthropy without talking about the need for a more progressive tax code and a more equitable way of thinking about the distribution of resources.**

–INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT

have significant climate impacts, as funds held by banks provide capital for investments in industry including fossil fuel extraction. A 2023 report<sup>161</sup> states every \$1,000 held in savings generates a climate impact equivalent to a flight from New York to Seattle each year. As one participant noted, *“Until we begin to invest more locally. Until we think more about a solidarity economy, until we begin to make some of those moves, we’re stuck. So, there’s no way at this particular moment in time that even if philanthropy starts doing a larger payout, that the bulk of the money isn’t gonna be sitting in driving the stock market and the stock market is immoral.”* The **Just Transition Investment Framework** offers strategies to help philanthropic organizations divest and redirect capital into community-controlled institutions.<sup>162</sup> One interview participant talked about the potential for the other 95% of assets to advance wellbeing in Maine, *“So, if you have a mission to advance, say human wellbeing in Maine why stop with just the 5% of your assets annually that you make in grants... we’re leaving 95% on the table every year. How could we invest some or all of those resources in ways that also benefit Maine, that also advance our mission.”*

## COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT

### Examples of Maine Foundations moving towards mission and impact aligned investments.

Multiple foundations in Maine have made a pledge to move towards more mission-aligned and values driven investment strategies, with some setting goals of having 100% mission aligned investments.

- ▶ **Maine Initiatives** uses a fully mission-aligned investment strategy to reinforce their values and also places up to 10% of endowed funds in local investments.
- ▶ **Maine Community Foundation** has allocated 2% of its primary investment pool (\$14 million in 2023) to make investments in Maine industries.
- ▶ **The Sewall Foundation** has pledged to become 100% mission aligned by 2028, including about 10% (\$18 million) in local impact investments.

## Key Resources for Deeper Learning

- ▶ **Decolonizing Wealth (Villanueva, 2021)**  
A foundational book that explores the colonial structures and power dynamics that influence philanthropy and finance and offers a seven-step framework for repair and healing.
- ▶ **Solidaire Network**  
A global network focused on advancing knowledge and practices of the solidarity economy framework.
- ▶ **Justice Funders**  
An organization working to help guide philanthropists in reimagining practices to transform philanthropy through narrative change, resources, and events. **The Just Transition Investment Framework** offers a comprehensive guide for shifting investment strategies.
- ▶ **Resource Generation**  
A collective working to organize young people with access to wealth to become transformative leaders working towards redistribution of wealth, land, and power in the U.S. They offer programs and events and also have a resource library that includes tools to create social change focused assessments and giving plans.

# Conclusion: A Call to Action

There are an overwhelming number of challenges and issues around the world today that could be addressed through philanthropic funding. From climate change, to war, food insecurity, and human rights crises, it may feel hard to know how to make the biggest impact as a philanthropist.<sup>163</sup> However, starting local and focusing on community-driven efforts can feel more approachable and often have a greater, more direct impact on an issue. It starts with a better understanding of the historic, systemic causes of the inequities and environmental damages that we see in the present day. Then using that knowledge to inform how to best engage local communities and change practices to better serve those who are most impacted. We hope that with this report and reflection tools you have been inspired to learn something new about Maine's history, your own family or foundation's legacy, and that you will seek more truths and work towards a more equitable and reparative future system of philanthropy.

“ It's gonna take 10 years or longer, 'cause change doesn't happen quickly. **And that's one of the things that philanthropy does not have, a lot of patience, philanthropy changes.** ”

-INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT



# Reflection Tools

Use these questions to reflect on your own history and/or the history of your foundation. Not all of these questions will apply to you, so use what resonates.

## PROMPTS FOR EXAMINING HISTORY & YOUR OWN STORIES

- ▶ What do you know about the history of any land you have owned or places you have lived connected to land ownership and Indigenous history?
- ▶ What stories have you been told about your own history and how your family may have contributed to or been affected by colonialism? What is the truth in those stories, and might there be more hidden history?
- ▶ What do you know about the rivers and connected waterways near your home? Is there a connection to the forest products industries or a mill near your home? What about a connection to other industries that rely on waterways like fishing, shipbuilding, trade ports, etc.?
- ▶ Do you (your family, your community, your foundation) have any connections to these industries in Maine? Where did the land or business come from, and how was it first acquired? Who owned it previously?
- ▶ What do you know about the history of the place you live and the connections to the global slave trade and slave economy? What is the legacy that persists today connected to that history in these places, if any?
- ▶ What do you know about your family's (or your foundation's) historical connections to the global enslavement of Africans and Indigenous People? Are there direct connections that you are aware of?
- ▶ Where might there be indirect connections or hidden histories related to the industries that your family worked in (e.g. shipbuilding, sugar, textiles, etc.)? What stories have you been told about this history and your ancestors? Do you think this is the whole truth?

## PROMPTS FOR UNDERSTANDING SYSTEMS & CONNECTING TO HISTORY

- ▶ Who "owns" the water in Maine and what does that ownership or lack thereof mean for the rights of everyone else, the earth, and our communities?
- ▶ Who "owns" land in Maine? Who might be excluded from land ownership, and what barriers may be contributing to that exclusion?
- ▶ How should decisions be made about land and water use in Maine and who should be a part of those decisions, especially when it impacts the health and access of the surrounding communities?
- ▶ How does pollution from Maine's industrial past and present impact our communities today? Who is responsible for cleaning up and minimizing environmental devastation caused by industries in the past?
- ▶ What do you know about environmental pollution related to the land and waterways near your home? Can you safely consume fish from local waterways, animals from local forests, or food grown in local soil?
- ▶ What have you been taught about labor organizations and the role they play in the system of employment in the U.S.? Whose perspective has been centered?
- ▶ Who are the people working as laborers in Maine's industries today (manufacturing facilities, farms, service industries, lobstering, etc.)? What kinds of wages and benefits do they receive, and in what conditions do they work?

- ▶ How has history shaped your relationship to, and accumulation of (or lack) wealth today? Can you draw any direct connections to your family's history and your wealth (or lack of) today? If you own land, a business, a home, how did you acquire it and where did the money come from to purchase it in the first place?
- ▶ How do you tend to think about your/your family's heritage, legacy, or image? Has that changed over time? What prompted that change?
- ▶ What do you know about your investment portfolio and the companies you are investing in? What history or industries are they connected to? How do they treat their employees? How do they lobby for legislation that protects their interests?

### **PROMPTS FOR IDENTIFYING FEELINGS + MOVING TO ACTION**

- ▶ What is the legacy of the mills in Maine and our current connections to these buildings and places? If your town was losing its primary industry, what would you want the owners to do?
- ▶ Do you feel different about a mine in your backyard or your neighborhood than you do about a mine across the state, across the country, or across the world?
- ▶ What do you know about land conservation in your local area? How do you feel when thinking about Wabanaki objections to Baxter State Park? How can philanthropies and public agencies partner with Indigenous communities to respect Indigenous heritage, repair harms, and maintain public access to Maine's most cherished landmarks?
- ▶ How does it feel to know that much of Maine's fish and seafood are too contaminated to consume? What will it take to clean up our waterways and whose responsibility is it to do so?
- ▶ If you know of or found a connection between your family or your community's history and some of the topics identified in the previous section such as land dispossession, colonization, enslavement, environmental degradation, etc. how does that make you feel? What context are you aware of that might be influencing your feelings about this connection (is it direct vs. indirect, did it result in wealth, etc.)?
- ▶ Are you inspired to take action based on this new knowledge or understanding? What short- and long-term goals do you have related to this action? What are some steps you might take to start?

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