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# Bath, Maine: Maine's Cool Little City



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The city of Bath sits along a three-mile stretch of the Kennebec River in coastal Maine which, in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, held more shipyards than any comparable waterfront in America. Bath earned its moniker, “City of Ships,” from the reputation of its wooden ships. Shipbuilders across the nation knew that “Bath-built is best-built.” Today, Bath’s shipbuilding heritage remains part of its flourishing culture and economy. The Maine Maritime Museum, a short stroll from downtown, offers interactive exhibits to captivate visitors and innovative programs to educate Bath’s youth. Bath Iron Works (BIW), the one shipyard that survived through two world wars by building tough battleships, frigates, cruisers, and destroyers for the U.S. Navy, is now the largest private employer and taxpayer for the city.

The maritime economy wasn’t enough for downtown Bath at the turn of the 20th century, however. The decline of the shipbuilding industry and the construction of malls and shopping centers on the periphery sent downtown’s businesses in search of greener pastures. To make things worse, construction of the Route 1 viaduct over the Kennebec in the 1920s zipped east-west traffic through the community. By the time drivers spotted Bath’s picturesque downtown, it was too late—they had already crossed the Sagadahoc Bridge.

Urban renewal in the 1960s seemed to promise a bridge over troubled waters, but not all of Bath was convinced. The *Bath Daily Times* reported on April 18, 1963, that “30 merchants spoke against urban renewal, saying ‘the project would get rid of all the little fellows.’ It would call for the removal of 77 of 102 stores...with no provisions for renovations.”

Local community leaders and small business owners bucked the nationwide trend and successfully resisted the urban renewal plan. The historic Greek Revival, Italianate, Federal and neo-Classical buildings that give downtown Bath its distinctive charm owe their survival to the vision of these preservation pioneers.

## Finding Main Street

When the Bath Business Association was formed in 1991 to entice shoppers downtown, the occupancy turnover rate on Front Street was still high, and many of its architectural treasures remained empty. The association achieved much, but felt like it needed to expand the scope of its downtown projects beyond retail events. To take the next step, the association’s board decided to explore the Main Street Approach, and invited the National Trust Main Street Center to conduct a formal assessment of the city’s revitalization efforts.

The Main Street Approach found fertile ground in Bath. At this point, Bath had already been listed as a National Register Historic District in 1973 and received the National Trust’s President’s Award in 1977. Along with strong preservation values, the “support local” ethic had also sunk deep roots in Bath. As long-time Bath resident Darreby Ambler remarked, “our independent bookstore has survived the coming and going of two large chain bookstores, and

*Bath’s shipbuilding history remains a part of its flourishing economy and heritage, which includes distinctive 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century buildings that give downtown its charm.*

our small pharmacy held on while Rite Aid came and went right down the street.”

Exhibiting its pioneering spirit once again, the city of Bath successfully lobbied the state legislature to launch a statewide Main Street coordinating program. With the broad support of the local community, Bath was selected as one of Maine’s first four Main Street communities in 2001. Main Street Bath was formed to lead a new, comprehensive effort to help the “little fellows” compete with the big-box retailers and malls. At long last, there was a how-to strategy that matched the town’s can-do spirit.

## Transforming Bath’s Image

Main Street Bath began transforming its image by giving out simple “I Love Bath” buttons, bags, and flags. By promoting events downtown through press releases, the Internet, and social media, Bath built a steady presence as a tourist attraction while



*Sailors stationed in Bath, waiting for their newly built ship to be commissioned, help welcome crowds atop Bath City Hall during Heritage Days. Main Street Bath honors every crew with a ship's celebration dinner before each launching.*



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strengthening community pride. The city takes a comprehensive, innovative approach to marketing that is a model for Main Street communities everywhere. One example is “So You Think You Know Bath,” an annual quiz-show fund raiser that pits teams from local nonprofits against each other to show off their knowledge of Bath history. This live show makes Bath’s historic past relevant again to young people.

Bath’s schedule of events boasts 18 annual promotions that leverage its ability to bring together local business owners as a single community. “Gift of Bath” certificates, which are accepted at over 70 businesses, allow Bath locals to easily spread the word about their favorite downtown shops to friends out of town. In 2011, the city sold more than \$7,000 worth of certificates, money guaranteed to stay in Bath. And for the winter holidays, Main Street Bath organizes more than 40 businesses to produce a cooperative multi-media advertising package.

On a more regular basis, Main Street Bath’s “Business Barometer” program brings local merchants to a quarterly roundtable discussion where they share sales information and collaborate on promotional plans. By joining forces, Bath businesses are better able to compete against department stores and category killers.

Main Street Bath has combined promotion and design elements to combat that other threat to downtown—the Route 1 viaduct. “It isn’t the viaduct that keeps people going on to Camden,” said City Planning Director Jim Upham in 2010. “It’s what Route 1 looks like before the viaduct.”

The way to allure commuters into the city, therefore, would be to change the view. Main Street Bath teamed up with the city, the Department of Transportation, and the

Bath Garden Club to renovate the crossing area that runs under the viaduct. With new plantings, a new granite crosswalk, and strategically placed Downtown Business Directory signs, the crossing is now an inviting entryway into downtown for both pedestrians and motorists.

A branding effort in 2010 unified Main Street Bath’s diverse marketing strategies under a sleek new logo with a stylized sailing ship on white waves that reflects the city’s nautical heritage. The “City of Ships” of the 18th and 19th centuries has become “Maine’s Cool Little City.”

### Three-legged Stool

“In a state that has lost much of its traditional economic base,” says Maine Governor Paul LePage, “Main Street Bath’s brand of grassroots, volunteer-driven economic development effort is needed.” Indeed, the organization’s ability to mobilize residents to step up and work for the betterment of their hometown has made Bath a thriving center of commerce and the envy of small towns all over Maine.

This community support arises from the consistent care that Main Street Bath has taken to ask residents what they want from their city. Twice a year, downtown shoppers are asked to complete consumer surveys by Main Street Bath volunteers. In 2010, this effort was expanded to a residential survey mailed citywide and made available online.

The results of these surveys, which are professionally analyzed, help business owners fine-tune or expand their inventories to cater to their target audience. The survey findings also help Main Street leaders determine what kinds of businesses they need to coax into Bath to meet the needs of

townsfolk and visitors. Downtown shoppers have been delighted to see the ice cream shop, shoe store, toy store, and coffee shop with wireless internet that were high on their wish lists move into Bath.

Main Street Bath’s strong partnerships with local and state organizations complement this ground-level attention to the community’s wishes. Bath’s first downtown rehabilitation effort in 1971 was spearheaded by a tripartite partnership that consisted of the Bath Chamber of Commerce; Sagadahoc Preservation Inc.; and an ad-hoc committee of city council, property owners, and merchants. It was funded by Bath Iron Works, and did important work in renovating downtown streets according to preservation guidelines with wide brick sidewalks and period streetlights. Main Street Bath still follows this “three-legged stool” approach that makes sure business owners, residents, and city government are represented equally on its board.

### Heritage Days

Bath’s signature summer festival, “Bath Heritage Days,” was on its last legs when Main Street Bath took over and transformed it into a hugely successful celebration that draws more than 50,000 people downtown every year. This year, the 40th Heritage Days kicked off with a Fourth of July parade led by Grand Marshal Clayton Grover, who has built ships for Bath Iron Works for 60 years. Because the festival coincided with the 50th birthday of the Maine Maritime Museum, its theme was “Celebrating Our Maritime History,” and it featured many events held on the waterfront, including a tug-of-war competition, fireworks, and outdoor concerts.