

Swan Island

What could bring Benedict Arnold, Aaron Burr and a beautiful woman to the same place?

The short answer to the title question, of course, is the Kennebec River. The meeting took place on Swan Island—from “swango,” an Abenaki Indian word meaning “place of eagles.”



We all should remember the sad chapter in American history that details the ill-fated Benedict Arnold (*below*) march on Quebec (which wasn’t so much a march as a slog) in 1775. We may not remember that Aaron Burr (*left*) was part of the company that was intent upon capturing the British fort on the St. Lawrence. Those two must have been pretty interesting opponents in the poker games in the officers’ mess. One went on to betray his country in such a dastardly way that no child of the colonies was thereafter named “Benedict” and the other shot the

secretary of the treasury in a dual. .

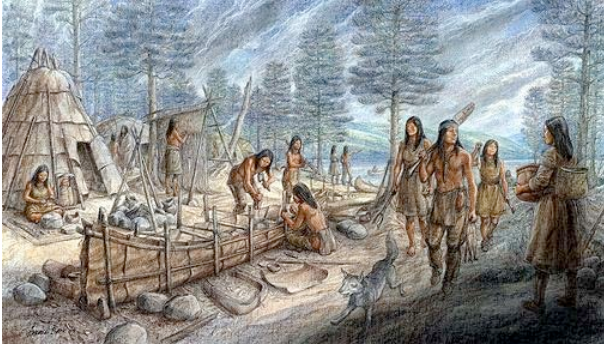
Anyway, the American forces paused at the beginning of their mission up our river to pass a few days on Swan Island, located between Richmond and Dresden, Maine. They were not alone. Their time there coincided with the autumn move of the Kennebec Indians from the ocean, where they had spent the summer, to their winter home at Moosehead Lake, approximately 100 miles upriver. It was a



tradition for the Kennebecs to enjoy a feast on Swan Island mid-move. Arnold and Burr crashed the party and made themselves welcome. Rum, no doubt, made them popular.

While out walking one day during the stop, Aaron Burr met a gorgeous Indian woman named Jacataqua...styled in the few articles about her as “Queen of the Kennebecs.” Burr, being no traitor to his basic instincts, focused his attentions upon the woman who was, in fact, half Kennebec and half French. She, and her very large bloodhound, became companions to Burr and actually joined in the expedition.

To make a wild story short, she and her dog traveled to Quebec with the Americans. She became pregnant enroute. Her dog was the only one not eaten by the soldiers. But the ending of the tale is the best part.



The Kennebec, or Kennebis, Indians would stop at Swan Island as they made their fall trek from the Kennebec Valley to their winter home on Moosehead Lake.

Days before the disastrous battle for the city, Burr was walking in nearby woods. He came upon an equally unarmed British soldier and the two declared a private truce long enough to become friends. The British officer promised to see to the safety of Jacataqua if the Americans should be defeated. And he did so. The child was born in a convent in Quebec, and the Queen returned to America just in time to face the shame of her husband's murder of Alexander Hamilton, not to mention his other misadventures involving the "man without a country", and on and on.

This is what we guides talk about, endlessly, when we roast bluefish over the fire on a rainy day. —*Captain Gordon Gillies*

*Swan Island is located on the Kennebec about 20 miles upriver from Fort Popham and the mouth of the river. Once host to nearly 25 families, the island and its houses, such as the one **below**, were fully abandoned by the mid-1940s.*



*The island now serves as a wildlife sanctuary overseen by the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, as well as home to the Junior Maine Guide Testing Camp. Camping is allowed and lean-tos, such as the one **above**, are available by reservation.*

For more information, take a look at the following Web sites:

Friends of Swan Island
<http://www.fosigroup.com/>

Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife
www.maine.gov/ifw/education/swanisland/index.htm

Junior Maine Guide Program
<http://www.maine camps.org/JMG/index.htm>

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