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# The University of Southern Maine



Alumni House  
Portland Campus

1807

**Portland Campus  
A Location Rich in  
Three Centuries of History**

The Portland Campus of the University of Southern Maine was planned with "faith in the future," but the foundations of this campus are sunk into a granite knoll that is rich in more than 300 years of recorded history. The land surrounding this campus was first cleared for settlement during the lifetime of George Cleeves, who obtained it from Sir Ferdinando Gorges in 1637.

Two of Portland's bloodiest Indian forays took place within a gunshot of this site. The first, in 1676, wiped out all nearby habitations and a number of the settlers; but Anthony Brackett and his first wife, Ann, who had inherited this land from her grandfather, George Cleeves, were captured alive, together with one of their five children and a Negro servant.

The Bracketts eventually escaped their Indian captors, found an abandoned birch bark canoe which Ann managed to mend with her housewife's thread and needle, and made their way back to build another home near the present location of Luther Bonney Hall. It is recorded that they planted an orchard on the slope between the site of Luther Bonney Hall and the tidal creek which then extended through the near edge of Deering Oaks, and it was there that catastrophe struck some thirteen years later.

On September 1, 1689, the opening shots of the first major battle of the Second Indian War of 1689-1697 rang out in that orchard. Captain Anthony Brackett was slain and his farmstead destroyed; but the colonists from the other side of Deering Oaks, assisted by troops under the command of Major Benjamin Church, after many casualties succeeded in repelling a party of Indian invaders estimated at more than two hundred strong. The victory was short-lived, and subsequent attacks drove all English settlers from this part of Maine for nearly 26 years.

It was not until 1715 that Zachariah Brackett returned to claim his father's land. Once again a farm was established on this site. The precise location of the dwelling house is unknown, but it was probably close to that of the colonial farm house, the Alumni Office, at the western corner of the campus, a building which was constructed somewhat later in the same century.

The Back Cove Farm, as the place was called, remained in the possession of the Brackett family until 1740, when it was sold by Zachariah Brackett to Joseph Noyes. It then passed by inheritance to Josiah Noyes who, because his wife came from the Lunt family, gave it to Mr. and Mrs. Amos Lunt.

The Lunts eventually sold it to James Deering, the son of a prosperous merchant in 1802.

Under the Deering ownership the Back Cove Farm became transformed into a businessman's country estate, farmed according to best methods of the time by hired hands who tended an acreage embracing almost all the land between the present boundaries of Forest and Deering Avenues from the Deering Oaks area and extending some distance westerly.

By 1804 James Deering had completed the construction of a substantial two-story wooden mansion of Federal architecture, the center of the main house being approximately where the bronze plaque honoring Luther I. Bonney is now mounted. A large wing, also two stories high, extended behind the house and was joined to another slightly lower wing containing the kitchen and service quarters. The main barn designed by Alexander Parris was converted a century and a half later into an auditorium and a gymnasium.

Tradition has it that prisoners were housed in one section of a rear wing during the War of 1812. We know that some forty privateers were registered in Portland at that time and that nearly fifty prize ships were brought into port. It is quite possible that some officers of captured British prizes may have been boarded at the Deering Mansion until they could be exchanged.

Another tradition has it that the site was strongly advocated as the location for the Maine capital building after statehood was achieved in 1820. Augusta was not selected as our official capital until 1827, and the Maine legislature met at Portland from 1820 to 1832.

Be all this as it may, the Deering Mansion was visited by nearly every celebrity who spent much time in Portland during the mid-nineteenth century. James Deering entertained extensively and he had excellent social connections. His only sister was the wife of Commodore Edward Preble who subdued the Barbary pirates and became known as the Father of the U.S. Navy. Such notables as Daniel Webster, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Secretary of War Jefferson Davis enjoyed the hospitality of the Deering Mansion.

It was not until some years after the Civil War that the Deering family was willing to sell any substantial part of the farm land that surrounded the mansion. A "Bird's Eye View of Portland," dated 1875, shows a single railroad track straggling along Forest Avenue, but not a single building lies between that track and Deering Avenue, save the



Deering Mansion and its satellite farm buildings.

Finally, in 1879, the Deerings sold the city of Portland a good portion of Deering Oaks, consolidating the limits of the mansion real estate entirely within the municipal boundaries of the new town of Deering, which had been named in honor of James Deering. When the mansion had been constructed, it was in the town of Falmouth. Then the western part of Falmouth had been set off as Westbrook in 1814. The eastern section of Westbrook had been made the town of Deering in 1871, and Deering remained a separate municipality until it was annexed by the city of Portland in 1899.

The Great Fire of Portland of 1866 had caused many prominent families to move into the Deering area, and the demand for house lots eventually induced the Deering family to sell the outlying sections of the farm. By the time Portland Junior College, under the leadership of Dean Luther I. Bonney and Raymond S. Oakes, the chairman of the board of trustees, started acquiring the Deering Estate in 1946, the total available acreage had shrunk to less than eighteen acres, and the proud mansion had fallen into such disrepair that it had to be torn down shortly afterwards.

When in 1957 the merger between the University of Maine and Portland Junior College was enacted, the university fell heir to its oldest documented linkage with early colonial history, together with its farmhouse, the Alumni Office, that can remind us of the days of the founding fathers of our nation.