



## A Piece of Mack Point History Returns to Searsport

**By Cipperly Good, the Richard Saltonstall Jr. Curator of Maritime History**

The sound of the steam-powered cranes at nearby Mack Point created the background music of downtown Searsport from 1905 to 2003. The cranes, with their steam-powered grab buckets, unloaded cargoes of coal, salt, gypsum, and other materials from bulk-cargo ships moving commerce through Searsport. When we got a call recently about a possible donation of one of the grab buckets, we jumped on the chance to add it into our collection.



*The grab bucket arrives in Searsport, where the town crew prepares to unload it. It holds 2 ½ cubic yards of material. Image courtesy of Cipperly Good.*

Sprague Energy, who decommissioned the bucket in 2003, opened the Penobscot Coal and Wharf Company in Searsport in 1905 to operate in conjunction with a newly extended Bangor and Aroostook Railroad line. The Searsport facility was one of the largest and best-equipped coal pockets east of New York City. It handled a quarter of a million tons of coal yearly. Over the years, the Sprague facility expanded to handle other liquid, bulk, breakbulk and heavy lift cargoes. In the last decade, Sprague began importing windmill blades for inland installations.

Sprague's neighbors on Mack Point handled other cargoes. The Bangor and Aroostook pier warehouse stored potatoes, newsprints, and other commodities for export. Shell Oil Company established a marine terminal in 1951, and the next year, the U.S. Government opened a large military petroleum storage facility. The Mack Point docks connect to a transportation network to move the goods inland: railroad and trucking lines and oil pipelines.



*A shore-side boiler provided steam to the three Sprague Energy cranes. Peggy McKenna Collection, LB2915.11.5878.17.*

The ships (up to 750' long!) carrying the bulk cargoes berthed at the 850' Sprague Energy dock. The three steam cranes helped unload the cargo. They could move 35 feet laterally with sliding scissor couplings along the wharf without disconnecting. Suspension cables connecting from the crane to the top of grab allowed the crane operators to lower and raise the buckets into and out of the ship's hold to grab the cargo. The crane operators emptied the contents into hoppers situated next to crane. Originally, the hoppers emptied into a chain of tip cars that ran on a loop back to shore. A conveyor belt system replaced the tip cars in the 1970s. Watch the steam grab in operation in this 2003 video excerpt filmed by Wayne Hamilton [here](#).



*By 2003, when Peggy McKenna took these photographs, the grab buckets emptied directly into awaiting trucks for transport to their next destination. Peggy McKenna Collection, LB2015.11.5438.9.*



*The Anvil Attachments Company of Slaughter, Louisiana made this grab bucket in the 1980s. They welded their anvil silhouette trademark onto the side. Image courtesy of Cipperly Good.*

In 2005, Sprague replaced the steam-powered cranes with diesel-powered mobile cranes to supplement the cranes with which ships came equipped. In 2012, the Port of Searsport acquired a 140 metric ton mobile crane, which can carry 37 cubic yards of material in its bucket. In 2024, Sprague supplemented the large crane with five smaller crawler cranes to unload the wind turbine components from the ships.

If you would like to see the steam grab, it is currently sited on Town of Searsport property at 87 E Main St. Locals have begun sharing stories of hearing and watching the steam cranes in action. If you have a story to share about the cranes or the steam grabs, we would love to hear from you.

Contact us at [cgood@pmm-maine.org](mailto:cgood@pmm-maine.org) or send us a letter at Penobscot Marine Museum, PO Box 498, Searsport, ME 04974.