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Portland Waterfront Sign: A Dirty History of Casco Bay

Casco Bay Estuary Partnership

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A Dirty History of Casco Bay

By the summer of 1866, Portland was the largest commercial shipping port in the nation. Industries sprouted up everywhere. Much of their **waste was simply dumped into rivers, streams, and directly into the Bay.**

Few realized we were creating **a toxic stew** that would someday endanger the health of the Bay's ecosystems and **threaten to destroy fish, clams,** and the livelihoods of those dependent upon the Bay and Estuary.

1 You are standing in the **SAME PLACE SHOWN** in this 1900 photo. Can you imagine the sounds and smells on the day this picture was taken? RIGHT: This 1914 map shows the **Randall & McAllister Coal Wharf** located here, other industrial shipping piers, and railroad tracks.

“The coal dust from the harbor was so thick we had to sweep up the mess every single morning.”

RANDOLPH DOMINIC, Sulkowitch Hardware & Paint Co., Fore Street
(Historian William David Barry)



SOURCES OF POLLUTION Over the last few hundred years, many industries have come and gone in Casco Bay and Portland Harbor, leaving behind long-lasting pollutants that remain trapped in sediments at the Bay's bottom. While the Clean Water Act of 1972 helped end these "point source" polluters, challenges to keeping the Bay healthy still remain.

● 1840-1899 ▼ 1900-1969 ■ 1970-present

2 Below: Swimmers, East End Beach, 1922. In the 1890s a **new sewer system** carried **human waste** away from homes, but **straight into Casco Bay.** At first, bacteria in the mud could absorb and clean up the sewage.



“During the 1950s and 60s when the weather was warm, the Bay smelled awful. Even on hot days, you didn't want to go into the water for fear you'd get sick from swimming.”

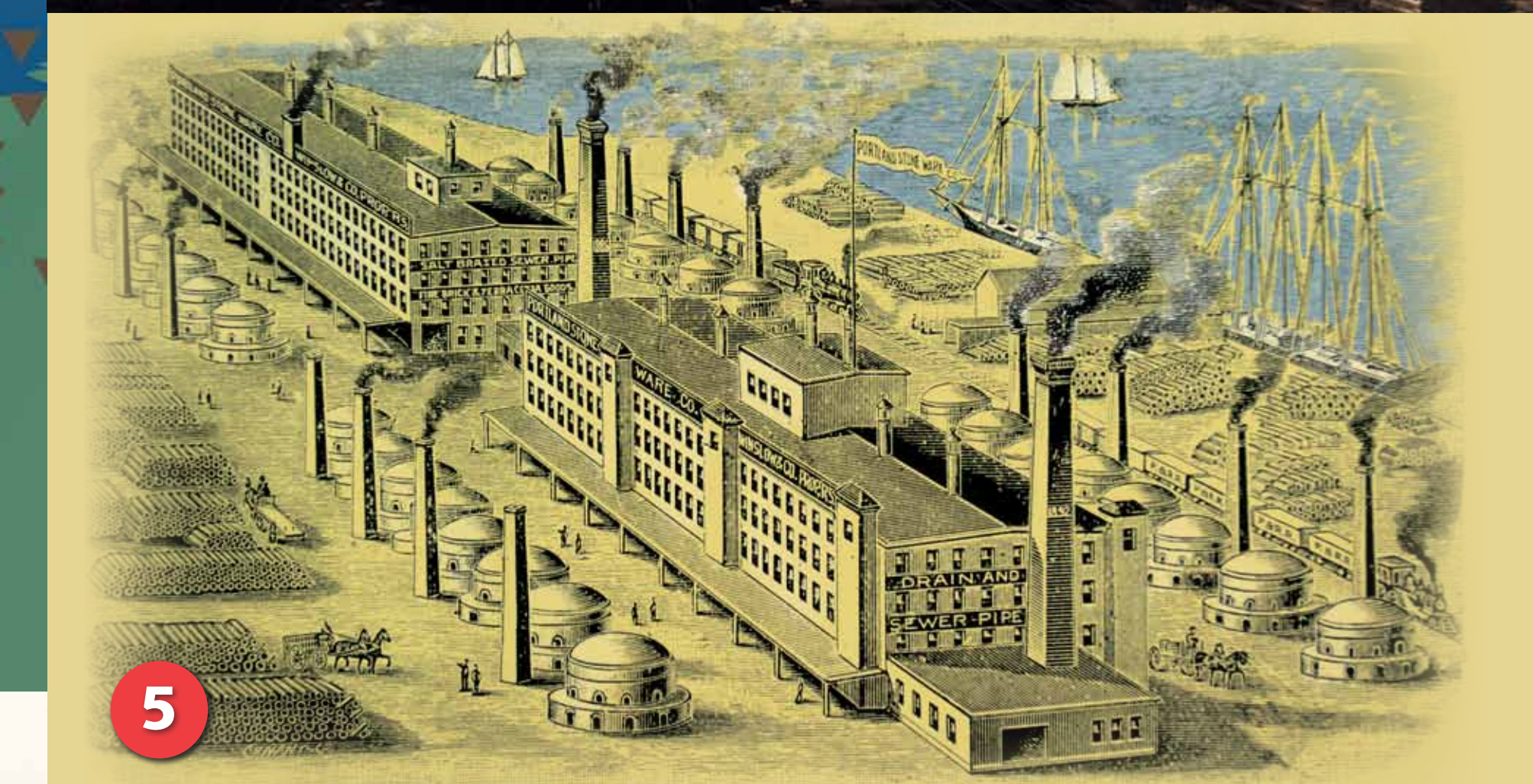
GEORGE FLAHERTY, Director, Portland Public Works 1975-1994



3 PAINT FACTORIES like this one on Munjoy Hill (1899) used lead and mercury. Their waste washed into Portland Harbor.



4 1956: COAL-GAS PLANT on Commercial Street left behind 100 years' worth of carcinogenic coal tars.



5 Dozens of FACTORIES and FOUNDRIES poured heavy metals, cyanide, arsenic, and powerful acids into Casco Bay. Shipyards used copper and toxic paints which also ended up in the Bay. Above: Ten-acre site of PORTLAND STONEWARE CO., 1899.



6 As GAS STATIONS grew common in the 1950s, GASOLINE full of toxics began leaking from corroded tanks into the ground-water, then into the Bay — an ongoing, sometimes hidden, problem.

Casco Bay Estuary
PARTNERSHIP

■ GLACIERS
22000 years ago

■ CLIMATE WARMS, glaciers retreat
Sea levels rise, coastline forms 14500+ years ago

■ PRODUCTIVE ESTUARY
Sustainable rich habitat

■ POLLUTION BUILDS
Industrial era dirty history 1850s - 1970s

■ BAY RECOVERY
1970s - today

