

<https://www.sunjournal.com/2022/07/24/over-the-years-at-least-129-people-have-drowned-in-the-androscoggin-river-in-maine>

## **Over the years, at least 129 people have drowned in the Androscoggin River in Maine**

Nine out of 10 known victims were male, often boys, and about half of those killed in the river were 18 or younger.

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Four-year-old Paul St. Jean and two friends played in his Oxford Street yard in Lewiston in January 1949, digging in the snow with tiny shovels until they got bored and wandered down to the bank of the nearby Androscoggin River.

The trio of tiny boys plodded out onto the ice near the shore, where they made “little tracks” in the snow together, enjoying a reasonably nice winter day together.

After a few minutes, St. Jean told a reporter, they heard a crack and suddenly all three found themselves immersed in the river’s freezing water, clinging desperately to the edge of the ice.

“We all yelled ‘help,’ St. Jean told the Lewiston Evening Journal.

He turned around and noticed that Roger, 4, and Normie, 3, were gone.

“The water took them away,” St. Jean said.

Three boys fell through the ice in January 1949. Two of them drowned. *Lewiston Evening Journal*

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St. Jean managed to grab a rope thrown to him and held tight as William Vaillancourt pulled him to safety. His two playmates drowned.

“I’ll never go back in the river,” St. Jean told reporter Arch Souter.

It was just one of many occasions over the years, detailed in the yellowing pages of old newspapers, when the Androscoggin lived up to its description by novelist John Irving as a documented killer.

Delving into the two million-page digital archive of the Sun Journal, which stretches back for generations, it’s possible to say definitively that at least 129 people have drowned in the river in Maine alone since one of the first settlers of Lewiston Falls perished in its waters shortly before delegates in Philadelphia issued the Declaration of Independence.

The dead in this ongoing disaster have skewed heavily male. They are usually young.

But everyone suffers.

Consider what a Lewiston Evening Journal editor wrote back in 1894 as he viewed a sad scene from a perch along its banks.

“In the gray of early Sunday morning, a woman lay on the dusty planks of North Bridge, gazing down into the eddying waters of the Androscoggin and sobbing as though her heart would break.

“Far below, a boat drifted slowly and a man groped in the water mechanically with his grapples. He was engaged in the gruesome task of searching for one drowned.

“At times, the boat paused, the grappler pulled up his iron to dislodge some bit of bark or sodden log and the woman would hush her cries and stare down with tense interest and dilating eyes.

“But what she feared to see did not appear. The searcher re-commenced his weary work and the prostate form on the bridge again wept and sobbed piteously.

“The scene was a pathetic one – a mother’s hopeless vigil above the waters that covered her boy.”

She hoped to find the body of her 11-year-old son, Archie Croteau, who had been bathing with a dozen other boys on the Auburn side of the river, upstream from the North Bridge. Archie walked out on a bar consisting of sawdust and sand before suddenly vanishing beneath the surface, probably from stepping in one of a number of deep holes along the river bottom.

Archie popped up to the surface several times flailing his arms, but did not know how to swim and quickly succumbed, according to the Journal.

It is a scene that has recurred time and again, though it is far less common today than in days past, when the Journal would occasionally note the first drowning of a new year, sure in the knowledge that more would follow.

Of the 129 drownings found among the newspapers' pages, an incomplete tally, 115 of the victims were men or boys, 14 of them women or girls.

Academic studies of drowning rates find that males make up between two-thirds and 80% of drowning victims, a significantly lower rate than the tally for the Androscoggin. But it is possible that local newspapers were simply more apt to mention boys who perished, skewing the percentages for cases appearing in their pages.

Experts say that boys tend to drown more because they engage in riskier behavior than girls, something more true in the past than it is today. Adult men drown more often in large part because they drink more than women, the studies show.

Among those who drowned in the Androscoggin, there were at least 37 boys and girls who perished before they hit their teenage years. Half of the dead were 18 or younger.

That is typical. Young people often make up a disproportionate percentage of drowning victims.

Only about one in six of those drowned in the Androscoggin River were older than 35.

About 10 percent of the victims likely intended to die in the Androscoggin's swift and unpredictable currents, some of them leaving notes and others in obvious despair before their plunge into dangerous waters.

The overall total doesn't count 25 of the 27 people that George Augustus Wheeler tallied in 1878 as having drowned in the Androscoggin near Brunswick.

In his 1878 History of Brunswick, Topsham, and Harpswell, Maine: Including the Ancient Territory Known as Pejepscot, Wheeler figured that eight of them drowned in Topsham, 10 in Brunswick, five in Merrymeeting Bay and a few others in streams beside the great river.

Moreover, at least a dozen people have drowned over the years in the New Hampshire section of the Androscoggin, including one awful day in 1803 when four people died in the river.

Add them in and it's clear that more than 150 people have drowned in the Androscoggin in the years since white settlers forced their way into a territory where natives had lived for many centuries, no doubt occasionally seeing some of their own claimed by the river as well.

Though most drownings occur during warmer months, many have also occurred in winter.

Back in December 1884, the Journal noted that “many an anxious parent in Lewiston and Auburn furtively embezzled the boy's skates and hid them in the garret or some out-of-the-way corner” after a period that saw a pair of boys both Lewiston and Auburn perish after falling through the ice to drown in the chilly river.

“The thin ice of early winter always produces a lot of casualties,” the paper noted, “but the community has been allotted an unusually large share this season.”

“It is not easy to see how they could have been helped,” the Journal said. “Foolhardiness is a part of a boy's nature, and how many generations of training will be required to eradicate it is problematical.”

The paper expressed hope, though, that “the recent sad fatalities will have a wholesome influence on the boys themselves and they will be inclined to surrender the fun of today for the prospect of surviving to partake of the fun of tomorrow.”

“These warnings, these lessons of experiences, are had at an awful cost,” it added.

*Here is a list of those known to have drowned in the Androscoggin River over the years. It is as complete as possible but no doubt falls short given the difficulty of finding all the available names, let alone ones that were never recorded clearly. Links are provided to archived copies of the Lewiston newspapers that mentioned the incidents.*

1773 – Asa Varnum, one of the first settlers in Lewiston Falls, drowned attempting to pass Dresser's Rips in a boat, a spot near Mount Hope Cemetery.

June 1, 1832 – Poland native Tillson Waterman, 25, drowned in the Androscoggin River, according to old family records citing his tombstone.

July 1, 1868 – “Boys should be careful when and where they bathe,” the Lewiston Evening Journal said. “Only last Saturday a boy was drowned just below the falls and today another above.” The second was the “little son of Mr. Maney” and could not swim.

July 18, 1868 – “The little Dunn boy” drowned in a canal and was found in the river the next day, the Lewiston Evening Journal reported.

Oct. 11, 1869 – The mutilated body of a long-missing, unnamed French boy was found floating in the river near the poor house in Brunswick.

July 3, 1870 – Rebecca White, sister of a shoe manufacturer, was discovered drowned in the river near Riverside Cemetery, her clothing on a nearby shore. She had been seen weeping earlier. The Lewiston Evening Journal said she “must have been suffering from temporary insanity.”

May 31, 1871 – Charlie Moulton, 8, “was playing on a log in the mill stream near the head of the canal” when a couple of other boys stepped on, causing the log to roll and dump Moulton in the river, the Journal reported. Moulton could not hang on to the log, and drowned.

Aug. 21, 1871 – “A lad named Cobb was drowned in the Androscoggin River at Brunswick . . . while bathing,” the Journal reported.

June 30, 1873 – Johnnie Sullivan, 7, “undertook to play river driver” but lacked the requisite log rolling skill. His feet slipped, the Journal said, and he wound up in the river. “There was no help for him,” it added, “and after clutching in vain at the slipping logs, he sank and was drowned.”

Sept. 26, 1873 – Mitchell Blake, 6, fell in the canal as he played on some timber and drowned.

Dec. 17, 1873 – “The little son of Charles Gagnon” slid over the bank of the canal near the Hill Mill, which has no railing or other obstruction, and was drowned. His body was recovered in the river the next day.

1876 – A father and son named Hooper drowned when their boat sank.

Dec. 26, 1877 – E.B. Robinson drowned near Barker’s mill.

July 26, 1879 – “A Bellevue boy, eight years old, was drowned in the river below the Continental Mill,” the Journal reported. He was the son of a mill worker.

1881 – Leavitt Holmes drowned in the river. He was a grandson of the founder of the Maine Farmer, described by the Augusta Journal as “remarkably bright, interesting and active.”

July 13, 1884 – Daniel Donovan, 10, fell from the planking beneath Main Street into the swift current and drowned.

Oct. 2, 1884 – “A fully developed male child was found tied up in an apron floating in the water” near the Androscoggin mills. The coroner said the child drowned and had the unidentified body buried.

Nov. 22, 1884 – Willie Stratton and Elmer Litchfield, 13, were last seen “sinking through the ice” in the river not far from Riverside Cemetery, the Journal reported. They had been warned not to go on the ice but ignored the advice.

Dec. 2, 1884 – Elmer Haskell and Willie Jordan drowned when the ice on the river broke under their feet as they tried to cross from Auburn to Lewiston, the Journal reported.

Jan. 3, 1885 – “The list of drownings [in 1884] has been very large. Eight young boys have been drowned in Lewiston and Auburn, mostly through the ice.”

July 3, 1885 – John Legree, 23, drowned in the river in Livermore Falls while bathing. He could not swim, the Journal reported.

July 30, 1886 – “A lad by the name of Beaudoin, 10 years of age, was drowned in the river near the ice house on Chapel Street,” the Lewiston Evening Journal reported. “He went to the river to fish, and fell in.”

May 17, 1887 – William Parker of Durham drowned in the Androscoggin, according to Everett Schermerhorn Stackpole’s 1899 History of Durham, Maine.

1888 – Mrs. William A. Paul drowned in the river.

June 3, 1888 – Henry Paine of Durham drowned in the Androscoggin, according to an 1899 Durham history book.

June 8, 1892 – Joe Desjardins, 11, lost his footing and sank below the water near Riverside Cemetery.

Lewiston Evening Journal account of the 1894 drowning of Archie Croteau, 11.

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June 23, 1894 – Archie Croteau, 11, was bathing with a dozen other boys on the Auburn side of the river, upstream from the North Bridge. He walked out on a bar consisting of sawdust and sand before suddenly vanishing beneath the surface, probably from stepping in one of a number of deep holes. He popped up several times flailing his arms, but did not know how to swim and quickly succumbed, according to the Journal.



July 8, 1894 – Anthony Clutchy, a 25-year-old French Canadian, drowned in a canal beside the Androscoggin River in Rumford. He had been drunk, the Lewiston Daily Sun reported.

June 21, 1895 – Ernest Matthieu, a Canadian, drowned while bathing with friends in Livermore Falls near Roscoe Island. He and two companions, none of whom could swim, ventured into deep water to a point where the current is swift and the bottom drops off sharply, the Lewiston Evening Journal reported.

March 1, 1896 – Ruel Gordon of Auburn drowned during a flood in Turner.

March 21, 1896 – William Allen drowned in the Androscoggin River in Lewiston.

June 18, 1896 – Bates College student Charles Wells drowned after swimming in the river.

Sept. 3, 1896 – John Tierney of Auburn, “a pleasant old gentleman” who had been crippled in a mill accident, went out in a little boat late in the day to search for driftwood. The Journal reported that the boat was found floating upside down, with Tierney nowhere to be found, after several people reported seeing it overloaded and low in the water.

Aug. 8, 1901 – The 8-year-old son of F. W. Gilmore of Turner drowned in the Androscoggin.

June 24, 1904 – Thomas Lawler Jr, 13, drowned in the Little Androscoggin near Barker’s Mill. Swimming alone, he got out too far and “went down.”

July 17, 1904 – Ray Hildred Smith, 19, who worked for the Lewiston newspapers after a stint at Dartmouth, drowned in the river while swimming with friends. They told the Journal they saw two upstretched arms as Smith sank under the muddy water, never to reappear.

Nov. 1905 – William Rose of Leeds drowned in the river while trying to avoid police.

Oct. 24, 1908 – Charles Parker of Greene drowned in Lewiston, his body found near the railroad bridge.

July 16, 1909 – Louis Theriault, 30, fell into the river while working at a paper mill dam.

Jan. 22, 1911 – Emile Stickman, 12, drowned in the Androscoggin.

Sept. 18, 1911 – Stanley Stowell drowned while attempting to cross the river in a canoe in East Peru. His cries for help caused some men to rush to his aide, but he went under before they could reach him.

Feb. 12, 1912 – “Unknown young man committed suicide by drowning in the Androscoggin River.”

May 5, 1912 – Two men drowned trying to shoot the rapids in Turner: J. Osborne Faulkner, the sporting editor at the Lewiston Evening Journal, and William Lovell, a Bates College senior.

June 8, 1912 – Mary Cunion, 9, was playing in a boat near the Avon Mill and accidentally tipped it over, dumping her into the river, where she drowned.

Sept. 15, 1912 – Thomas Duncan, 35, a shoemaker from Auburn, stopped midway across the Grand Trunk Railroad bridge, declared “I’m tired of this,” put his hands over his head and jumped into the river, where he drowned in an apparent suicide.

Aug. 13, 1913 – Shoemaker Henry Lawless, 24, fell off the Grand Trunk railroad bridge, swam a few yards and then disappeared.

July 1918 – Everett Burnham drowned in Jay after crossing over to an Androscoggin River island on a ferry boat. He was leaning on a rope that broke, pitching him into 14-foot-deep water.

Dec. 23, 1918 – Two boys – John Derochers, 11, and Archille Garant – were drowned near the railroad bridge.

1919 – Edward Thibodeau, 12, an Augusta resident, drowned in the river.

March 30. 1920 – Three men were drowned when their small boat overturned near the Pejepscot Paper Co.: Charles Stevens, 46; his son, Joseph, 18; and 17-year-old Ralph Griffin. Officials think one man fell overboard when an oarlock broke and the others fell in trying to rescue him.

April 16, 1924 – Emile Gagnon, 13, fell off the Maine Central railroad bridge while playing with friends. He drowned in the river below.

May 3, 1924 – Henry Rich, a Bates student, drowned in the river when his canoe overturned near Deer Rips. A governor’s daughter survived.

Dec. 20, 1924 – George Bean, 5, drowned after he hit an obstacle while coasting on a sled near the outlet of the Little Androscoggin River. He was thrown over an

embankment and rolled into the swift current of the river and carried away.

June 3, 1925 – Ovilva Levesque, 9, drowned after being “tempted by the cool waters of the Androscoggin near Chapel Street, failed to heed the warning of his mother and waded in” in the river so far that he went under and was swept downstream by the swift current. “He could not swim,” the Journal noted.

Dec. 19, 1926 – Patrick Marshall, Jr, 14, drowned after falling through the ice. The swift current dragged him under. Two other boys barely escaped.

May 29, 1928 – Three boys from Jay drowned when the craft they were paddling got caught in a strong current and swept over a dam. The dead were Dean Bowie, 18; Urban Morse, 14; and Donald Coolidge, 12.

July 7, 1929 – Charles Collins, Jr, 11, drowned while swimming upstream from the falls. He entered the water near the pumping station and swam out to an island. On his way back, he suddenly stopped, grabbed a piece of driftwood and floating down to the dam, where he held onto a ring until the force of the water swept him over the falls.

Oct. 26, 1930 – George White, 29, and Thomas White, 34, drowned after an all-night party, probably after wading into the water on a cold morning.

June 6, 1932 – Albert DeRoche, 11, slipped off a rock and drowned in the river in Rumford.

June 12, 1933 – Marco Limosani, 8, drowned at the foot of Chapel Street after reaching for a stick and falling into the swift current.

July 31, 1933 – A 42-year-old woman, Georgianna St. Pierre, jumped into the river and drowned in Lewiston. It was ruled a suicide. She was apparently despondent about her health.

June 2, 1935 – Two Lewiston men, Lucien Ouelette, 21, and Frank Oleehowsky, 18, drowned after their boat sank in the middle of the river.

June 8, 1935 – A 53-year-old Lewiston man, Oswald Jolicoeur, fell off the Grand Trunk railroad bridge while walking across with his family in the evening. The Journal said he suddenly screamed and then there was a splash. His body was recovered the next day floating a few hundred yards downstream.

April 30, 1936 – Guy Wilbur drowned when a coffer dam in Livermore Falls gave way and plunged him into the waters. Six other workers managed to get out of the water.

July 17, 1937 – Bertrand Audet, 17, drowned near Barker Mill in Auburn.

Oct. 6, 1937 – Alfred Ouellette, 59, drowned in a canal in Lewiston with a small black notebook full of Spanish messages in his pocket.

Nov. 29, 1937 – Hilaire Madore, a 53-year-old woodcutter, drowned near a steep embankment on Lincoln Street. He had been drinking and told youngsters who asked if he needed help, “See you tomorrow. Go to hell.”

May 25, 1938 – Everett Mailhot, 15, died when he slipped while trying to recover a lost baseball. He fell into a canal after hanging from a bridge and trying to pick up the ball with his feet. He didn’t have the strength to pull himself back up. A friend tried to hold him up but eventually Mailhot fell into the water and drowned.

Sept. 10, 1938 – Etienne Dionne, 68, drowned in the river. He was apparently upset about the death of his wife.

Oct. 5, 1938 – Catherine Paul, 52, found floating about 20 feet from shore off Switzerland Road by her father, a police captain. She left a suicide note.

May 10, 1939 – A Lewiston High School sophomore, Albert Kushnir, drowned when he leaped off a raft that had become adrift above the falls. He could not swim and was carried over the rapids to his death.

June 1939 – Guy Wilbur Jr drowned after going to fish in the Little Androscoggin near Barker Mill.

Aug. 16, 1939 – Oliva Laberge, 56, drowned near Barker Mill in Auburn after drinking too much.

Aug. 28, 1939 – Mary Caldwell, 10, drowned after falling into a deep hole in the Little Androscoggin while bathing with friends.

July 20, 1940 – David Saucier, 27, of Byron, drowned in Rumford when he slipped while unloading wood pulp into a canal beside the Androscoggin River.

July 1941 – Merle Wadsworth, 28, of Wales drowned after leaving a morose letter to his wife in his pants on the shore of the river.

April 22, 1942 – Raymond LeBlanc, 6, drowned near the municipal sewer outlet.

Aug. 16, 1943 – Richard Turgeon, 12, of Auburn, “was swept to his death in the Androscoggin River” when a boat in which he was a passenger struck a rock and capsized, the Lewiston Daily Sun reported.

July 21, 1945 – Albert Nason, 13, had been playing by the river with his dog when he vanished, leaving a handkerchief and his dog behind. His body turned up in the water a week later.

Nov. 2, 1945 – Howard Hyer, 36, a painter, slipped and fell while working on North Bridge. The Lewiston Daily Sun reported he fell on his back, disappeared beneath the surface, came up again and “began to swim desperately.” But he couldn’t reach the shore, perhaps because the fall robbed him of his strength, the paper said.

May 30, 1947 – Francois Xavier Bolduc, 13, was swept over the falls near the pumping station when he tried to swim ashore from a raft he had launched shortly before. He tried for a time to swim against the current but ultimately failed to make headway as the water carried him off to his death.

June 2, 1947 – Ten-year-old Antonio Noel drowned in a canal when he slipped while trying to recover a ball.

Aug. 14, 1947 – Abel Rousseau, 33, drowned in the river in an apparent suicide.

April 2, 1948 – Richard McLoughlin, 6, drowned in the Androscoggin in Brunswick after he toppled off an abandoned seaplane ramp.

Jan. 27, 1949 – Two little boys drowned in the icy river. Roger Rioux, 4, and Normand Castonguay, 3, perished when they broke through the ice. A third boy survived.

April 18, 1949 – Robert Shibles, 15, a homeless Auburn youth, drowned while fishing in the Little Androscoggin River, after an apparent epileptic attack.

Feb. 21, 1951 – Richard Painchaud, 8, drowned in Brunswick when he fell through the ice on the Androscoggin River.

March 15, 1952 – Leonard Waite, 5, slid down a 300-foot bank into the icy waters of the Androscoggin River, where he drowned.

Oct. 24, 1952 – Nellie Goodwin of Brunswick drowned after leaping off a bridge in an apparent suicide.

Aug. 24, 1953 – Frank Tapley, 72, who lived in an Auburn nursing home, apparently committed suicide by throwing himself into the river and drowning.

Aug. 12, 1956 – Leonard Bourgoïn, 66, toppled into the river and drowned.

Dec. 26, 1956 – Edward McCarthy of Auburn, a 46-year-old bookkeeper, fell through the ice on the Little Androscoggin and drowned.

Jan. 19, 1958 – Dale Craig, 5, fell through the ice in Lewiston and drowned in the Androscoggin River.

Sept. 1958 – Edward Welch of Lewiston drowned in the river.

Sept. 2, 1961 – Arthur Morin, 59, drowned in the Androscoggin.

May 5, 1965 – Stanley Spooner, 37, drowned in the Androscoggin River.

Aug. 18, 1967 – Richard Bradbury, 31, an Auburn resident, drowned in the river.

Nov. 19, 1976 – Two men drowned in the river while duck hunting in Durham, Roland Short of Mechanic Falls and Ingram White Jr. of Durham.

May 3, 1978 – Two sisters, Norma and Norine Morin, drowned in the river. Norine, 10, died while trying to save her 7-year-old sister.

Oct. 20, 1980 – Neil Pemberton, 23, drowned when a rush of water from an opening gate upstream swept him away.



April 6, 1981 – As John Thibodeau, 15, rode his bicycle across the railroad trestle, he hit an obstacle and fell into the river below. Auburn Patrolman Rodney Bonney, one of several officers who sought to save the boy, wound up drowning along with the teen.

Jan. 8, 1984 – Paul Smith, 13, fell from a pipe overlooking a canal and was swept into the Androscoggin River all the way to the Auburn side, but he couldn't get a grip on the icy shore and disappeared under the water.

Aug. 1986 – Gary Hart, 28, was found, fully clothed, floating near the railroad trestle, behind Florian's Market in Auburn.

Sept. 1, 1996 – Joseph Wallace, 34, was drinking beer with friends when he decided to go for a swim. He jumped off the railroad trestle, did a belly flop and was carried away to his death by the current.

April 8, 1992 – Daniel Dutton, 48, drowned just downstream of the railroad bridge in Lewiston.

March 1994 – 19-year-old Belinda James crashed through a fence on Main Street into the canal while driving. Police believe James, who had just obtained her driver's permit, hit the accelerator when she meant to step on the brake. She came down Lisbon Street to turn onto Main Street and the car swung in a wide arc. Panicking, she apparently moved to step on the brake but hit the accelerator instead, her father, Roger James, said at the time. James' mother, Paula, survived the plunge.


Aug. 1997 – Jeanette Rose Nadeau of Lewiston drowned in the river. Her body was found floating a few days after her disappearance.

July 2001 – Shane McEnery, 12, drowned at River Park in Durham.

March 3, 2007 – Sixty-six-year-old Jeannine Morin of Lewiston was driving when her car slid into the canal near the Bates Mill Complex. She died later in the evening at Central Maine Medical Center. Police said Morin survived for at least three hours in the car as it was partially submerged in the water after crashing near the intersection of Ash and Canal streets. A man plowing at the Bates Mill Complex just before 9 a.m. Friday was credited with leading rescuers to Morin as she was trapped in her car.

April 24, 2018 – Valerio McFarland, 5, fell in the river while playing at Bonney Park in Auburn with his older brother. Both were swept downstream, but rescuers were able to grab 10-year-old Maxim, who survived.

June 7, 2021 – Isha Ali, a 13-year-old Lewiston girl who had been playing in the water with friends and family in Greene, drowned in the Androscoggin River when she went under.

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