

Claude Westfall and the Last Presidential Salmon

by Willard P. Greenwood II

WHEN I WAS A novice fly fisherman of sixteen in 1984, my parents moved to Orono, Maine, from Hot Springs, Arkansas. My parents bought a house that was two doors down from Claude Westfall, a notable local angler who would soon become more famous. In the mid-1980s, I was just teaching myself how to fly fish with homemade popping bugs on the Stillwater branch of the Penobscot, which flows through downtown Orono. I mostly caught smallmouth and pickerel. I left Maine in my early twenties, and two decades passed before I learned Claude's story.

I return to Maine a couple times each year to visit family and to fish with old friends. My parents still live in the same house. Over time, the Westfalls and my parents became friends. A few years ago, I stopped by to talk with Claude Westfall about our sport. As much as I enjoy our conversations, I wish that our first meeting had happened twenty years ago. Claude has made it painfully apparent to me that I missed some memorable angling for Atlantic salmon. He said that the 1980s were a great time to fish for Atlantics on the Penobscot. At the time, he did not realize that he would play a pivotal role in marking the end of a salmon-angling era on that river.

In 1992, Claude Z. Westfall became the last man to catch a presidential salmon. He presented his fish to George H. W. Bush, marking the final year that a U.S. president observed the tradition of receiving the first salmon caught on opening day. This tradition began in 1912 when Karl J. Andersen, a Norwegian immigrant, sent the first salmon caught from the Bangor salmon pool to President Taft. A combination of politics, a love for salmon fishing, and a desire to promote the city of Bangor motivated Andersen to start this tradition. What Andersen began continued, with occasional interruptions, until 1992. In 1993, Scott Westfall, Claude's son, caught a presidential salmon, but he never received a call from the Clinton White House (Figure 1).¹

Date Caught	Angler	Weight of Salmon (lb)	President
April 1, 1912	Karl Andersen	11	William Taft
April 4, 1913	Charles Russell	16	Woodrow Wilson
April 1, 1914	Michael Flanagan	18	Woodrow Wilson
April 1, 1915	John Thomas	16	Woodrow Wilson
April 6, 1916	Joanette Sullivan	10	Woodrow Wilson
April 6, 1916	Michael Flanagan	11	Woodrow Wilson
April 6, 1917	John Thomas	15	Woodrow Wilson
May 27, 1918	John Doane	15	Woodrow Wilson
April 2, 1919	Charles Russell	15 1/2	Woodrow Wilson
April 2, 1920	Michael Flanagan	12	Woodrow Wilson
April 2, 1921	Michael Flanagan	16	Warren Harding
April 2, 1922	J. Edward Canning	20	Warren Harding
April 15, 1923	Adolph Fischer	15	Warren Harding
April 1, 1924	J. Edward Canning	16 1/2	Calvin Coolidge
May 17, 1925	Adolph Fischer	20	Calvin Coolidge
April 11, 1926	Frank S. Rand	7	Calvin Coolidge
April 1, 1927	Walter Crossman	12 3/4	Calvin Coolidge
April 1, 1928	Robert Blair	15	Calvin Coolidge
April 1, 1929	Horace Chapman	14 1/4	Herbert Hoover
May 1, 1930	J. Edward Canning	10	Herbert Hoover
April 7, 1931	Horace Chapman	7 1/2	Herbert Hoover
April 12, 1932	Robert Blair	16	Herbert Hoover
April 1, 1933	Walter Crossman	14	Franklin Roosevelt
April 23, 1934	Lathrop Caldwell	7 1/2	Franklin Roosevelt
April 1, 1935	Walter Higgins	8 1/2	Franklin Roosevelt
April 9, 1936	Charles Russell	11 1/2	Franklin Roosevelt
April 1, 1937	Walter Crossman	12	Franklin Roosevelt
April 5, 1938	Adolph Fischer	7 1/4	Franklin Roosevelt
April 1, 1939	Horace P. Bond	13 1/4	Franklin Roosevelt
May 20, 1940	Dan Phinney	6	Franklin Roosevelt
May 22, 1940	Osgood Nickerson	10 3/4	Franklin Roosevelt
May 24, 1941	Robert Weston		Franklin Roosevelt
May 11, 1942	Paul Atwood	9	Franklin Roosevelt
May 11, 1942	Horace P. Bond	8	Franklin Roosevelt
April 18, 1943	Adolph Fischer	20	Franklin Roosevelt
May 15, 1944	Guy Carroll	9	Franklin Roosevelt
May 24, 1945	Harold Hatch	9	Harry Truman
May 11, 1946	Robert Weston	8 3/4	Harry Truman
April 1, 1947	Donald Smith	7 3/4	Harry Truman
May 5, 1948	Adolph Fischer	8	Harry Truman
May 18, 1949	Adolph Fischer	10	Harry Truman
April 15, 1950	Guy Carroll	7 1/2	Harry Truman
April 1, 1951	Horace P. Bond	16	Harry Truman
April 1, 1952	Guy Carroll	8	Harry Truman
May 17, 1953	Walter Dickson	5 1/4	Dwight Eisenhower
May 11, 1954	Guy Carroll	10	Dwight Eisenhower
May 9, 1964	Harry C. Davis	14	Lyndon Johnson
May 1, 1981	Jean Maillet	8	Ronald Reagan
May 2, 1982	Levon Hutchings	7	Ronald Reagan
May 9, 1983	James Coldwell	9 1/2	Ronald Reagan
May 12, 1984	Doug Blanchard	0	Ronald Reagan
May 1, 1985	Carl Small	7 1/2	Ronald Reagan
May 1, 1986	Tom Hennessey	8 3/2	Ronald Reagan
May 2, 1987	George Fletcher	15	Ronald Reagan
May 1, 1988	Charles Cavin	8	Ronald Reagan
May 1, 1989	William Ellison	5 1/2	George Bush
May 1, 1990	Greg Barker	7	George Bush
May 1, 1991	Tom True	7 1/2	George Bush
May 1, 1992	Claude Westfall	7 1/2	George Bush
May 2, 1993	Scott Westfall	7	William Clinton

*Salmon not presented to President Clinton

Figure 1. A list of all the presidential Atlantic salmon presented. From Ed Baum, *Maine Atlantic Salmon: A National Treasure* (Heron, Me.: Atlantic Salmon Unlimited, 1997), 66, with permission.

In spring 2010, I asked Claude if I could interview him for an article about the tradition of the presidential salmon. Claude agreed, and we had a far-ranging discus-

sion about his life, the current state of the Penobscot River, the Veazie Salmon Club, and, of course, his presidential salmon (Figure 2).

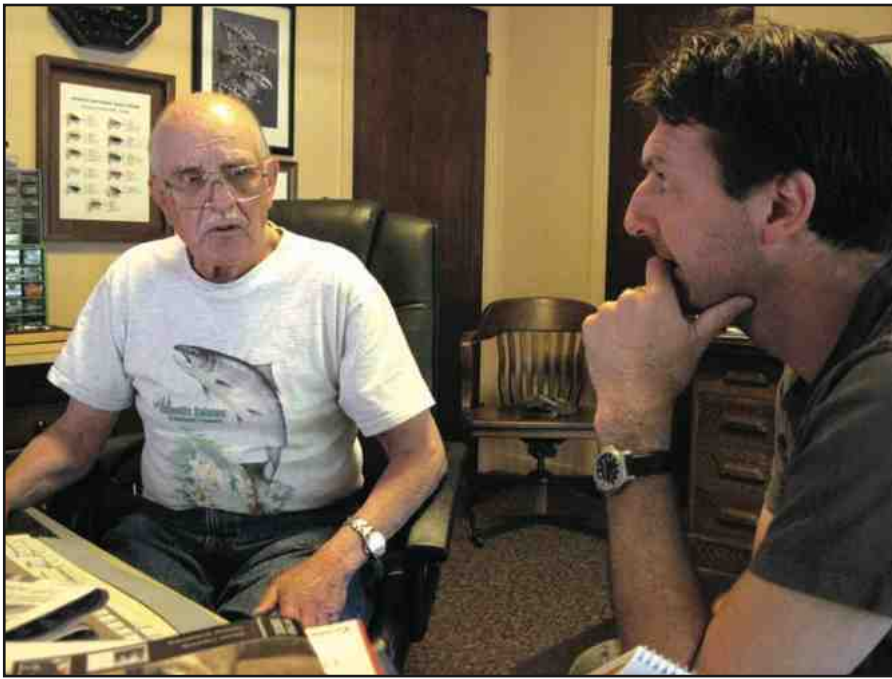


Figure 2. Claude Westfall and the author in Claude's office, May 2010.

TIME-TESTED METHODS

Fishing for Atlantic salmon goes back to the original inhabitants of this area of Maine: the Abenaki. Fly fishing soon followed the arrival of European explorers. According to John Mundt, who has extensively researched the Penobscot and its salmon, Atlantic salmon were being fly caught as early as 1831. Mundt, in an article for this journal, examined the origins of fly fishing on the Penobscot and how the tradition of the presidential salmon began.² Richard Jagels (who lives in the Bangor area) adds that Karl Andersen began the tradition as a way to revitalize the city of Bangor, whose downtown, an area that included Andersen's painting business, had been destroyed by fire.³ Mundt chronicles the origins of fly fishing on the Penobscot River when Atlantics migrated in huge numbers in the nineteenth century and in the early part of the twentieth. Beginning in 1912, the first Atlantic salmon caught on the Penobscot was presented to the president of the United States.

Even though fishing for Atlantics has been put on hold because of the small number of returning salmon, there is a renewed interest in building peapods, a boat designed by Karl Andersen. An article by Jagels in *WoodenBoat* magazine (and reprinted in this issue, page 10) discusses Andersen's boat-building innovation.⁴ Andersen, because of his Norwegian angling heritage, designed a boat called a double-ender (or peapod) specifically designed for harling, a long-forgot-

ten method of fishing for Atlantics on the Penobscot. In this two-person boat, a guide would ferry an angler back and forth across the river while the sport would cast to salmon lies. A few years ago, the original models for these boats were found in the attic of one of Karl Andersen's daughters.

Claude Westfall has been fishing the Penobscot River since he arrived at the University of Maine in 1952, where he worked as a professor of mechanical engineering for several decades. His expertise with the material world can be seen in his streamers, many of which became standards for catching Atlantics on the Penobscot (Figure 3). Recently, a collection of his flies were auctioned at a benefit for Atlantic salmon restoration.

The dam above the historic Bangor salmon pool broke in 1977, and this created more room for migrating salmon. Later, most of the remaining structure was removed. With this obstacle gone, salmon began to congregate below the Veazie Dam. This is where Claude experienced the Penobscot's modern resurgence, which began in the late 1970s.

Claude's boat of choice is the Grand Laker, a design that originated in Maine on Grand Lake Stream. He designed and built the 22-foot canoe himself (Figure 4). He modified the classic design with a fiberglass interior, ash trim, and a casting platform in the stern (Figure 5). Claude's method of fishing for Atlantics from his Grand Laker is not dissimilar to the old mode of harling. Sometimes Claude anchors and casts to lies.

Claude's canoe winters in a detached garage built solely to house it. In early May, Claude wheels out the boat, grabs the trailer, and hooks up the boat to his car to go fishing.



Figure 3. Many of Claude Westfall's streamers became standards for catching Atlantic salmon on the Penobscot. Photo by Claude Westfall.

THE PENOBSCOT'S HISTORY OF POLLUTION AND RECOVERY

The small town of Veazie is about 20 miles upstream from the mouth of the Atlantic and 4 miles away from Claude's house. During several decades over the past 100 years, this section of the Penobscot has offered the best Atlantic salmon angling in the United States. Today, Americans have to travel to Canada or Europe to catch Atlantic salmon.

Because of pollution from logging and other industrial activity, the first drastic dip in salmon runs happened in the 1950s. Claude recalls that during this time, there were very few, if any, fish in the river. Claude was then a lake fisherman; however, after he caught his first Atlantic salmon—a bright 14-pound hen in the Wringer Pool—he made the transition to fishing exclusively for salmon. Claude caught this fish in the 1970s when the Penobscot began to recover thanks to water pollution legislation passed by the state of Maine in 1969.

Claude still lives right across the street from the Stillwater branch of the Penobscot. His attachment to the Atlantic salmon of the Penobscot River exemplifies the connection that we all should have with our local surroundings. For example, in 1983, Claude fought and won a dispute with the Bangor Water District, which had put some riprap along the bank of the Penobscot.⁵ This stone structure took the flow out of the Wringer Pool. Claude filed a complaint with the Department of Environmental Protection and won. The riprap structure was removed. Westfall has helped to preserve the legacy of this fish, advance the modern ethos of fly fishing, and possibly give future anglers the opportunity to fish for this magnificent species in their own neighborhood.

Throughout the years, Claude has kept detailed records about Atlantic salmon on the Penobscot (Figure 6). His methodical record keeping, some of which can be seen on his website, is a unique trove of information.⁶ His charts are interesting, and there is a lot of scientific and environmental information concerning aquaculture, the mixing of wild and stocked fish, predation, commercial fishing, sport fishing, pollution, and global warming. All of these variables make understanding the plight of the salmon complicated and overwhelming.

Claude says that despite these complexities, there is one major problem: dams. As soon as certain dams are removed and others are modified, the salmon (and many other species) will

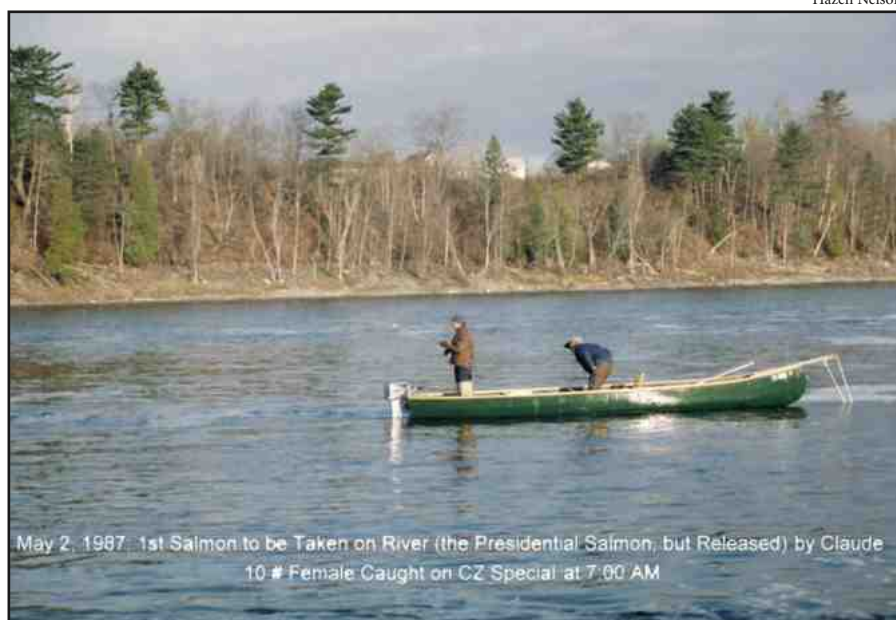


Figure 4. Claude Westfall (left) and Bob Enos in Claude's Grand Laker. This photo was taken the day Claude caught, but released, a presidential salmon in 1987.

Figure 5. The interior of Claude's 22-foot Grand Laker canoe. Claude modified the classic design with a fiberglass interior, ash trim, and a casting platform in the stern.



Rob Robertson

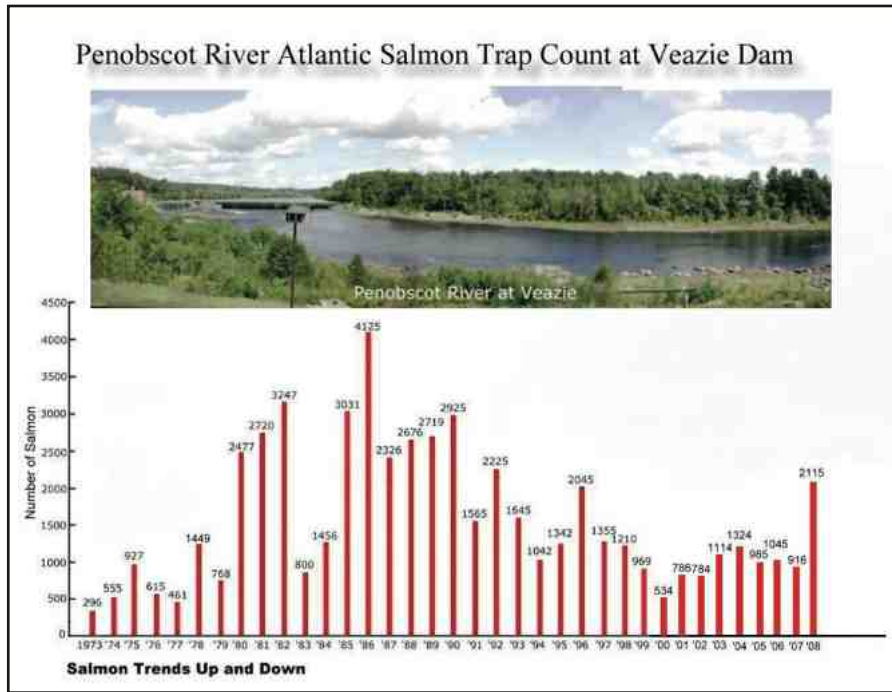


Figure 6. Penobscot River Atlantic salmon trap count at Veazie Dam. Note the up-and-down trends in this chart compiled by Claude Westfall.

Figure 7. An experimental Atlantic salmon season was attempted in spring 2008, during which Claude hooked ten fish, but did not land one.



Fred Heineman

have access to more spawning grounds. Increased spawning territory will help to offset the effects of the aforementioned obstacles. Dam removal and modification are actually under way on the Penobscot. The Penobscot River Restoration Trust has raised \$25 million and needs another \$25 million to complete their

work. How soon this will come to fruition is unknown. At present, there are plans to remove the Great Works and Veazie dams.⁷

Because of low trap numbers, the Penobscot was closed to salmon fishing in 1999, and in 2000, the Atlantic salmon was classified as endangered on the

Penobscot. However, in 2006, with an increase in trap numbers, there was some optimism, and a brief fall fishing season was opened. This was successful, and so another experimental season was attempted in spring 2008. That year, Claude hooked ten (Figure 7), but he did not land a single fish. Still, he recounts that season quite fondly. He said that he had a fantastic time just hooking the fish and that it was “a real joy” to be fishing for his favorite kind of fish again, which he did at the Veazie Salmon Club.

THE VEAZIE SALMON CLUB

Before the current decline of this fishery, Claude and other area anglers founded the Veazie Salmon Club in 1978 (Figures 8 and 9). It is still in existence. Walking through the club and looking at the pictures was clearly an emotional experience for Claude, who is now eighty-three (Figure 10). The passing of friends and the possible end of a kind of fishing for a kind of fish that has such a rich history in North America and Europe is a bit much to fathom on a sunny spring afternoon in Maine.

The walls of the club are covered with pictures of famous (Ted Williams [Figure 11], the last baseball player to hit .400 for the season) and not-so-famous anglers, all catching beautiful Atlantics. Claude served as club president in 1985–1986. The club and this stretch of the river established its own legends, with each pool bearing a name (Figure 12). One pool is named for the club's founder, Gene Guerin. Another is named for a junked washing machine that had a prominent spot on the riverside for many years. The washing machine is long gone, but the pool is still known as the Wringer Pool, and it's the source for one of Claude's most famous streamers, the CZ Wringer (Figure 13).

It was apparent that the naming of the river's pools was an important part of the Veazie Salmon Club's culture. When talking about the river, Claude referred to all the pools by their specific names. Claude was fortunate to experience the resurgence of the Penobscot River. In the mid-1950s, the tradition of the presidential salmon was interrupted because of pollution. In 1981, the tradition resumed, thanks to the effects of the Clean Water Act. Once again, salmon were migrating in significant numbers on the Penobscot.

Claude wistfully recalled the heyday of this fishery, which for him was in the early 1980s. He used to cut the grass, go to the club, visit with friends, catch a salmon, and be home for dinner. In the 1980s, catch-and-release became de rigueur on the Penobscot, an ethos that many of the



Figure 8 (above). The Veazie Salmon Club in May 2010.

Club photos by Rob Robertson



Figure 9 (right). Inside the Veazie Salmon Club, May 2010.

club members welcomed. This shift to catch-and-release was hard for some longtime anglers who fished to stock their freezers. The culture of the fishery changed, which imbued Claude with a deep passion and commitment for securing a sustainable future for the river and its salmon. In fact, Claude caught a presidential salmon in 1987. He decided to let that fish go, because he did not want to kill the fish.

The Veazie Salmon Club overlooks a river in which salmon still migrate (Figure 14).

THE LAST PRESIDENTIAL SALMON

On 1 May 1992 at 4:55 a.m., Claude caught a salmon (Figure 15) on a CZ Special (Figure 16). He was fishing from his Grand Laker and landed it in Beach Pool. This fish was the last presidential salmon. He had no idea that it would mark the conclusion of a remarkable angling tradition. Claude received a call from Governor John McKernan's secretary informing him that they would contact the White House. The governor's office arranged for Claude to present his salmon on 25 May 1992, so, for the next three weeks Claude kept the fish in his freezer. Claude and his wife, Rosemae, met President Bush at Walker's Point in Kennebunkport, Maine. Governor McKernan was also there, as was his wife, Olympia Snowe, who is now one of Maine's senators. John Brennan, com-

Rob Robertson



Figure 10. Claude in May 2010 reminiscing about the beginnings of the Veazie Salmon Club.



Figure 11 (left). A 1985 photo of Spencer King (lower left corner), Paul Higgins, Claude Westfall, and Ted Williams hangs at the Veazie Salmon Club. From the collection of Claude Westfall.

Figure 12 (center). A map of pools of the Penobscot created by Claude Westfall for the Veazie Salmon Club.

Figure 13. One of Claude Westfall's most famous streamers, the CZ Wringer, tied by Claude.

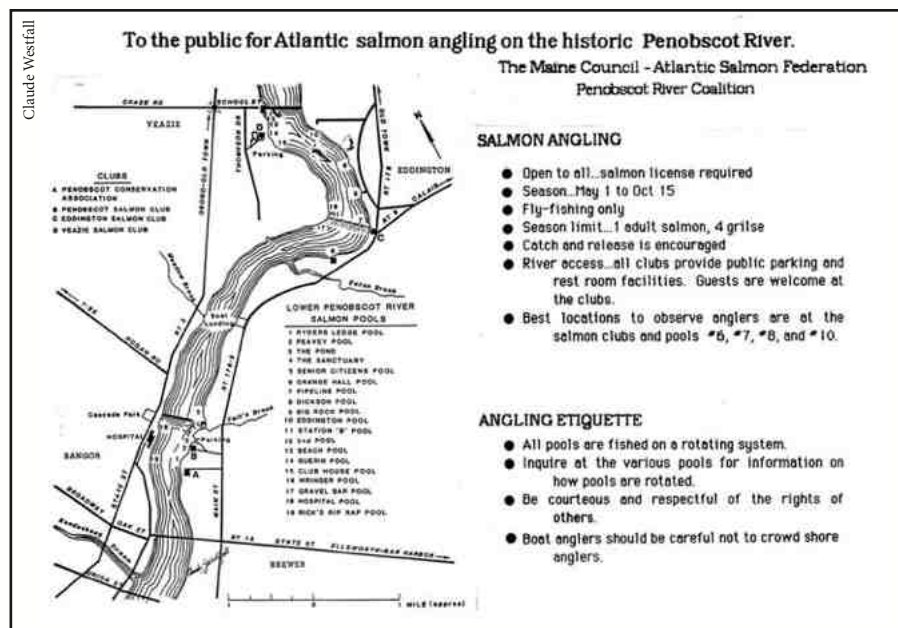
missioner of Marine Resources, also attended the ceremony (Figure 17).

Claude still has fond and humorous memories of the details that led up to the presentation of the fish. He had to go through a road block on Walker's Point, the site of the President Bush's residence. The fish was taken from Claude and "inspected" by the secret service. In the past, the presidential salmon was often eaten and was a distinctly Republican political gesture, but as times changed, the fish was graciously received as a cultural gift only (not eaten), and as an acknowledgment of the greatness of the fish itself.

President Bush also accepted some of Claude's flies and a Veazie Salmon Club cap. Claude socialized with the president for more than an hour. They both have roots in Texas and found that they were distantly related through an ancestor named Henderson Bush, who fought in the Civil War. Claude still has several photographs from the event, which were sent to him by the White House staff photographer.

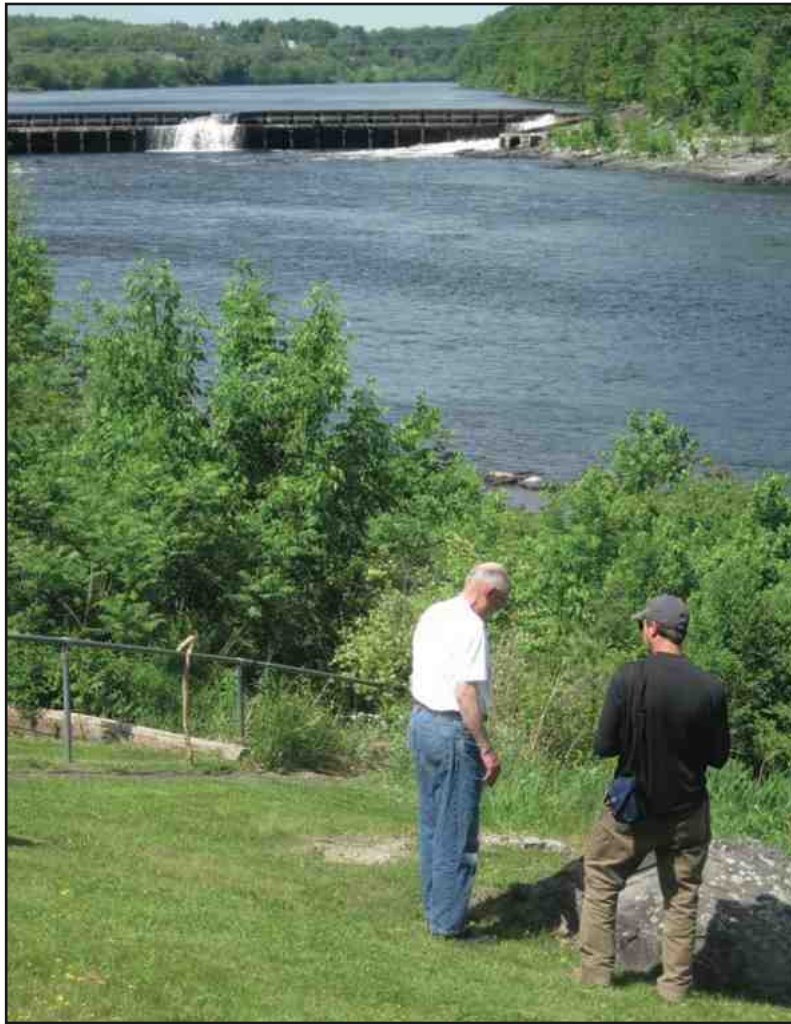
A PROMISING FUTURE

For the native Penobscot Indians and to those of European descent, the Atlantic salmon is a spiritual and majestic fish that confers sustenance, well-being, and prestige to those fortunate enough to catch one. The decline of this fishery is a sad and familiar story in America; however, there is real hope that fishing for Atlantic salmon will, once



Rob Robertson

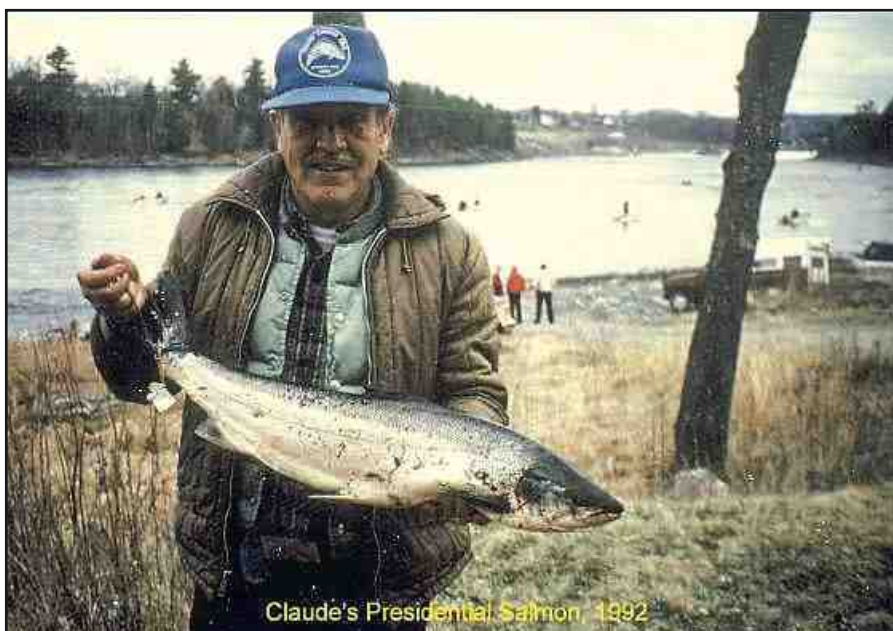




Rob Robertson

Figure 14. Claude Westfall and the author in May 2010 looking at the Penobscot River and Veazie Dam from the grounds of the Veazie Salmon Club.

Figure 15. On 1 May 1992 at 4:55 a.m., Claude caught the last presidential salmon on a CZ Special at the Eddington Salmon Club. From the collection of Claude Westfall.



again, be possible in the Penobscot River. When the Penobscot began to recover from the effects of pollution and logging, there was a renaissance of Atlantic salmon fishing that began in the 1970s and continued into the 1990s. The details and scope of the dam-removal project are fascinating because of the cooperation between industrial and environmental interests. It remains to be seen when and if the planned dam removal will permanently change this fishery.

At present, it is illegal to fish for Atlantic salmon on the Penobscot River. When I was in Orono visiting Claude, there was a front-page article in the *Bangor Daily News* about the returning salmon.⁸ The trap numbers were encouraging. In May 2010, 255 adult salmon had been trapped as opposed to 109, the number trapped during the same time frame in May 2009.

Despite their endangered status, Claude thinks restoration efforts would be helped by a short season that would allow anglers to catch these fish. A fly-fishing-only season with strict catch-and-release regulations would maintain the culture of the club and keep the fishery in the public consciousness.

That experimental 2008 season linked a rich and distinguished past to an uncertain but promising future. Although even the highly regulated practice of catch and release for Atlantic salmon is controversial to some, to have people fishing for salmon is crucial to maintain political momentum for the improvement of the river and for the maintenance of the fish population, in Claude's opinion. The tradition of the presidential salmon is one that should still be alive. Without a relationship between angler and fish, fish, ironically, lose their strongest advocates. Employing strict rules—such as using barbless hooks, not taking the fish out of the water, and limiting anglers to one fish per day—was very successful in 2008. Also, a limited season would help the club create a new generation of members and anglers in general who would continue to act both as stewards for the river and as advocates for salmon.

At one point or another, there have been twenty salmon clubs in Maine, most of which were attached to a specific river, such as the Penobscot, Dennys, or Narraguagus.⁹ This number testifies to the fact that the Atlantic salmon is a remarkable game fish. What gets lost in the political and cultural context is the fact that Atlantics, when they are in a favorable environment, may be the most exciting freshwater fish to catch. Wild salmon have the desirable qualities of size, speed, and power. Their flavor is superior to hatchery or aquaculture



Figure 16. Claude Westfall's CZ Special, tied by its creator.

salmon. These attributes, combined with their history, make them a singular quarry in the world of fly fishing.

At this time, it may be difficult to imagine a Penobscot that has a large run of Atlantics, but with the legacy of Claude and others like him, and with changes being made to dams, the Penobscot could

once again be one of the premier fisheries in the United States. Ideally, the presidential salmon tradition could be continued if dam removal helps to reestablish salmon runs. Claude is proud to have caught a presidential salmon, yet he would prefer not to be the last man to have done so.

ENDNOTES

1. Ed Baum, *Maine Atlantic Salmon: A National Treasure* (Hermon, Me.: Atlantic Salmon Unlimited, 1997), 66.
2. John Mundt, "The Historical Penobscot: America's Atlantic Salmon Fishing Legacy," *The American Fly Fisher* (Summer 1996, vol. 23, no. 3), 2–9.
3. Richard Jagels, "Bangor Pool Peapods: Reviving a Tradition and a River," *WoodenBoat* (January/February 2010, no. 212), 38–43.
4. Ibid.
5. James Butler and Arthur Taylor, *Penobscot River Renaissance: Restoring America's Premier Atlantic Salmon Fishery* (Camden, Me.: The Silver Quill Press/Down East Books), 64. This book contains interviews with many anglers who have fished the Penobscot. In Claude Westfall's interview, he explains his own theory of fishing for Atlantic salmon and how he originated certain patterns, including the CZ Wringer and the CZ Special (see Figures 13 and 16).
6. Claude Westfall, www.geocities.com/salmoczw/mypage.html. Claude's website includes some of the pictures that appear in this article. The charts and tables that appear here are the results of his research.
7. Madeline Bodin, "Freeing a River," *Nature Conservancy* (Summer 2010), 32–41.
8. John Holyoke, "Salmon Return in Record Numbers," *Bangor Daily News* (27 May 2010), A1, A4. Holyoke is an outdoor sports-writer who writes regular columns for the *Bangor Daily News*. Many of his articles have focused on the Penobscot's Atlantic salmon.
9. Baum, *Maine Atlantic Salmon*, 63.



Figure 17. On 25 May 1992, Claude Westfall and his wife, Rosemae, met President Bush at Walker's Point in Kennebunkport, Maine, in a ceremony to present the presidential salmon. Pictured are John Brennan, commissioner of Marine Resources; President George H. W. Bush; Claude Westfall; Olympia Snowe, now one of Maine's senators; Governor John McKernan; and Rosemae Westfall. From the collection of Claude Westfall.