Lemuel Moody and the Portland Observatory: The History

Lemuel Moody wasn't quite eight years old when fighting broke out between the American Colonies and Great Britain in 1775. Nevertheless, he had a role in the Revolutionary War: at the age of ten he was serving as a water boy in the company of Captain Joseph Pride and Captain John Reed. When the war ended, young Lemuel Moody set off to sea to make a career as a sea captain. Moody was from Portland, Maine (a Province of Massachusetts until 1820), and because the coastal city of Portland depended on the sea for its livelihood, a career at sea seemed a natural choice. Easy access to the Atlantic Ocean was one of the reasons people chose to live on the peninsula, which was first called "Machigonne" (giant elbow), then Falmouth, and in 1786 was given the name Portland. Portland's waterfront had a lot going for it, with its deep harbor, protected by the islands of Casco Bay. The safety of the harbor allowed large ships to enter and seek shelter while they loaded or unloaded goods and people at the Portland waterfront. The Presumpscot River and the Fore River were like highways to and from the woods inland, which received and delivered goods from Casco Bay.

As an experienced young captain in one of the fastest growing port cities in the country, Moody understood that in order to keep pace with other seaports, Portland's waterfront had to be managed efficiently. Lemuel Moody had a plan to erect a tower from which he could view approaching vessels and then alert the waterfront so that the wharves could be made ready. He formed the Portland Monument Ground to finance his project, sold 96 of the 100 shares, all of which he eventually bought back. For the site he chose one of the highest points on the peninsula - the crest of Munjoy Hill - which was being used as cow pasture. In 1807 the Portland Observatory was completed, and the "Brown Tower" became a fixture in Portland's landscape.

The eight-sided structure was designed to withstand the harsh winds and weather of the Atlantic coast. The Observatory tower is 86 feet high, and the base measures 32 feet across. Eight white pine timbers form the skeleton of the Observatory, each 64 feet long, braced with white pine and white oak. These logs were cut from Pike's Hill in Windham (near Sebago Lake), floated down the Presumpscot River and into Casco Bay then hauled ashore where the bottom of Hancock Street met the water. The tower's base was filled with 122 tons of granite and heavy crossbeams were installed to further secure and stabilize the structure.

Captain Moody used a large telescope to monitor the channel and identify approaching ships. From his tower Moody could send signals to the waterfront by flying sets of specifically defined flags flown from two (and later three) flagpoles, alerting people on the wharves when vessels were

approaching. The merchants and dockworkers could "read" the groupings of flags to know what type of ship was coming, and therefore how much dock space should be reserved. Some merchants paid Moody to fly their own private signal flags when their ships were identified on the approach to Portland. In later years more signals were added to communicate how far away steamships were, as well.

Moody's Observatory had another role, which helped seafaring Portland - as a weather station. Because he was a man of the sea, Lemuel Moody understood the importance of the weather to shipping and sailors. From the top of the Observatory he made very careful temperature readings and notations every morning, noon and night. He compiled his observations, which he referred to as "thermometerical records," to calculate monthly and yearly average temperatures for publication.

The Observatory was more than a signal tower and a weather station, though. It was the focal point for community gatherings, and was a tourist attraction from the beginning. It may have been the novelty of the hill-top tower that brought people up to see it, but Moody did his best to keep them their by building stables, a banquet hall, a dance hall and a bowling alley at the foot of the Observatory, next to his own house. He even allowed tourists to climb the 102 steps (now 103) to the top, for a small fee.

Lemuel Moody's son, Enoch, carried on his father's work signalizing from the Observatory. The tower remained open to visitors except during wartime, when it served as a lookout tower. In 1879, a telephone was installed in the tower to improve communications to the waterfront. The Observatory was used to identify approaching vessels until 1923, when the advent to two-way radio rendered the communication functions at the tower obsolete. The tower was then closed and fell into disrepair until 1938 when Lemuel Moody's great-granddaughter deeded the Portland Observatory to the City of Portland. The City had help in repairing the Observatory from the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the building reopened on Flag Day, June 14, 1939, as a beloved city landmark and sightseeing attraction. In 1986 more renovations were performed to replace rotting timbers in the tower's base and the Observatory remained open until 1995, when inspections revealed extensive damage caused by an infestation of powder post beetles living in the wood. The restoration was a massive undertaking involving the City of Portland, Greater Portland Landmarks, local school children and expert preservation contractors. The Observatory was reopened in 2000 to the delight of Portlanders. The restoration efforts received national attention again in 2001, capturing an honor award from the National Trust for Historic Preservation, having saved one of America's treasures, the last remaining maritime signal tower in the United States.

Images Slide Show:
The "Images" slide show allows students to place historic images of the Observatory in a timeline. Utilizing their observation skills students will place these images in chronological order by looking for changes within the built environment for clues.

http://www.mainememory.net/ss.shtml?f=lb&user=Lemuel&lb=Images

Maps Slide Show:
The "Maps" slide show explores a series of maps from key eras in Portland's history. Students will answer the questions in the slide show to better understand the topography of Portland, the need for an Observatory and the changes in the landscape and the population centers.

http://www.mainememory.net/ss.shtml?f=lb&user=Lemuel&lb=Maps