

Kennebec River Ghost

Kennebec River, Maine, 2000

Peter's dream of hiking the entire A.T. was quickly becoming a reality. All the planning, aching muscles, and food cravings would be worth it, though. About 150 miles stretched between Peter and Baxter Peak-Katahdin in Maine, the northernmost point on the trail.

Peter took a swig of water from his bottle and put it back in his pack. The Kennebec Ferry was about to escort him across the river. Taking a moment to relax, the young hiker managed to reach the ferry system in time for the mid-morning pick-up. Eying the river before him, the Kennebec River looked still—from the surface. It's peacefulness could be quite deceptive, and hikers are warned many times over to not attempt crossing the river without using the free ferry service provided to all hikers. Because of the rapid, powerful current, the Kennebec River is the most dangerous river to ford along the A.T. The river's current and depth can rise dramatically given that hydro facilities upstream release water. Since there isn't a bridge, Peter had no choice but to ferry across.

"All aboard!" a voice boomed playfully.

Peter smiled at the man who would serve as his guide across the 70-yard wide river.

"How you doing? I'm John." The eccentric guide wore a red life vest and hat to match. Peter thought he resembled a tomato.

He shook John's proffered hand. "I'm Peter."

John sized up his new passenger, immediately guessing from his unkempt beard, sporty walking stick, and gear that his guest was a thru-hiker. "It looks as if you're the only one who needs a ride."

Peter looked around him. Thankful no one else had arrived, the young man enjoyed being alone. That's what impressed upon him to attempt the trail anyway—the solitude. Although he had met some interesting people on his journey, the interactions were always brief and benign.

"Well, before we sail across the Kennebec, let me give you some quick instructions." John handed the hiker a life vest and proceeded to quickly fill him in on what would be expected of him as a passenger.

"Any questions before we cross?"

"No. Don't think so," Peter replied simply.

"Very well then. Follow me." John led Peter to a red canoe resting on the bank.

Peter placed his gear into the canoe and then got in.

John handed Peter a paddle. "Do you mind?"

"Not at all. It's the least I could do for what you're doing to help me." Peter got comfortable in the front of the canoe. John shoved the boat from shore before quickly jumping in.

Pretty soon the two rowed in a cohesive rhythm. While the river appeared to be somewhat peaceful from shore, Peter noticed that the current was much more swift while in the boat. Appearances were deceiving when it came to the river. He asked, "John, do you know of anyone who dared to ford the Kennebec?"

The guide thought for a moment before answering. "I've been doing this for a while. Can't think of anyone right off the top of my head. Pretty much the hikers or campers or anybody else who needs to get across are cooperative. I've seen these waters flooded. The river is nothing to fool around with."

Changing the subject, John asked, "What are your plans for today?"

"My goal is to reach the Moxie Bald lean-to where I'll bed down for the night. I know it's a good 19 miles to there. But since it's still the morning, I might just make it. If not, I'll set-up camp somewhere."

"You look pretty spry. You'll be on top of Katahdin before you know it."

Hope rose in Peter at John's spoken words. *It won't be long now*, he thought.

The two continued in comfortable silence until they reached the other side of the river.

"We're here." John hopped out and pushed the canoe onto shore.

Peter tucked the paddle he had been using into the canoe and got out. "Much obliged for the ride."

"You're welcome. Good luck with the rest of your journey." John shook his hand.

Peter turned to go when John added, "About half a mile ahead you'll come to a clearing. On your right you'll have a nice view of the Kennebec River."

Peter shook his head and gave John an affirming nod. Peter was never one to turn down a beautiful landscape. Why hike the trail if he didn't enjoy the views it afforded?

The hiker continued on the footpath, while John crossed the Kennebec River back to ferry headquarters to wait for future passengers.

Peter found this part of the trail relatively manageable. Having confronted more challenging areas, he enjoyed a less grueling part of the Maine trail. He might reach Moxie Bald after all, if he kept up a decent pace. Finally arriving at the clearing John had told him about, Peter surveyed the scenery around him. September foliage on the trees boasted peak colors. Rich reds, vibrant oranges, and cheerful yellows painted the land and accompanied the Kennebec River on its never-ending journey downstream. Sunshine bounced off the river. Peter took out a pair of binoculars and held them up to his eyes, following the river south from where the ferry pick-up point was located. He breathed in deeply.

Suddenly, he spied movement toward the water.

Peter removed the binoculars from his eyes, blinking hard. No! It couldn't be! *Are my eyes playing tricks on me?* he thought alarmingly.

Daring to glance through the binoculars again, the hiker's vision hadn't deceived him. From his perch, he saw a man wading into the unpredictable Kennebec River! Tall and skinny, the old man wore waist overalls and suspenders over a drab, woolen shirt. Peter thought he looked like a gold prospector from the late-nineteenth century.

The water reached his knees when Peter yelled out, "Stop! Don't cross the river!" Peter's words sailed through the air.

The figure either ignored Peter or didn't hear him for he waded in deeper.

Not giving up, Peter cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted as loud as he could, "Wait! It's too dangerous." The hiker quickly put the binoculars to his eyes to see if the stranger heeded his warning.

The mysterious man glanced up in Peter's direction. Chills ran up Peter's spine for it seemed as if he looked right at Peter, their eyes meeting through the lens of the binoculars.

The man silently regarded Peter for a moment, and then continued his fording into the river in a steady, slow manner.

Peter inhaled sharply before calling out again, "Don't cross! Wait for the ferry!"

It was no use. Peter hopelessly watched the man. Waist-deep in water, he reached the halfway point of the river. For a brief moment, Peter thought the man might actually cross successfully.

Peter followed the river north through his binoculars and saw heavy rapids barreling down upon the unsuspecting the man!

"Rapids are coming! Get back to shore!" Peter shouted in gasps.

Angry torrents quickly approached the hiker closer and closer. It seemed as if the Kennebec River wanted to punish the trespasser.

"It's not worth it!"

But the determined stranger plunged all the more into the water with a horrified Peter looking on.

Right before the waves crashed mercilessly into him, the old man suddenly vanished!

Then the rapids dissipated as quickly as they had appeared.

A stunned Peter frantically searched the waters through his binoculars.

Nothing. No sign of the man. Did he really disappear before the water hit him? Or was he swept up into the white caps?

Peter scrambled to put his pack on and raced down the footpath back toward the Kennebec River. His heart felt like it could beat out of his chest. He had to find John to begin a search.

Reaching the shore in record time, Peter spotted the ferry guide on the opposite side of the river. Peter snatched up the signal flag hoping to alert John that he needed him.

John saw Peter crazily waving the flag in the air. The guide instantly knew something was amiss. He hopped into a canoe and vigorously rowed toward Peter.

Once John reached him, he noticed Peter's pale skin and quivering lips, "What's wrong?" Clearly, something had frightened the young hiker.

Peter stuttered, "A—a man."

"What man?"

Pointing downstream, Peter finally blurted out, "A man tr—tried to ford the river."

"I saw no one attempt to cross, Peter. Take a deep breath." John placed a comforting hand on his shoulder.

Peter swallowed hard. "I saw a hiker through my binoculars crossing the river. Suddenly these waves came at him, and he disappeared."

"I've been on shore ever since dropping you off, Peter. There has been no surge in the water."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Well, I saw the guy! We have to search for him—now!" Peter shouted.

John asked, "What did the man look like?"

"I got a good look at him through the binoculars. The man was older and wore these funky black boots. He dressed like people did a hundred years ago or so. I shouted at him not to cross. He heard me because he looked directly at me. His dark eyes seemed hollow."

Goose bumps rose on John's arms. "Peter, most everybody who ventures this way knows not to cross the water. There are warning signs posted." John continued, "The man you saw is not of this world."

Peter felt as if he had just been slapped. "What?"

"The figure you saw is a ghost."

The younger man laughed nervously. "Yeah, right. I don't believe in ghosts."

John continued, "That doesn't mean they don't exist. Now tell me what you saw."

"I watched him wade deeper into the water. He ignored my shouts to turn around even though rapids were heading his way. Then the old coot vanished."

"Did the water swallow him up?"

Peter bit his lip, deep in thought. "No. He disappeared before—before the water reached him." Peter got chills again.

"You saw him all right."

"Who?"

"The ghost of Kennebec River. Of all the years I worked for the ferry, I've never seen him," John replied jealously. "I don't know why he doesn't appear to me."

Peter's mouth flew open at the guide's revelation. "Why didn't you share this with me earlier when I asked if anyone ever attempted to ford the river?"

"Because I wasn't thinking about spirits. The ghost has never been identified. People speculate around here that this man lived before the turn of the last century."

"He sure dresses like it."

"People also say that one day he tried to swim across and lost his life to the river. Even in death he attempts to reach the other side, and the rapids always try to stop him. But everyone who's seen him says he disappears right in the nick of time, before the river would sweep him away. He can't even cross the river in death, but the rapids can't drown him like they did when he lived."

"So he's doomed forever—never to cross?"

"Yes."

The two men reflected in silence before John asked, "Are you going to continue with the hike?"

"I've come too far not to. But let's just say that I've had enough of solitude and being alone after what I saw."

"Well, you'll have an interesting story to tell when you go back home. Ghosts are all along the trail. You've just seen the Kennebec River Ghost."