

WILSON MUSEUM BULLETIN

Spring 2017

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Research to the Rescue



Small watercolor of the house at 55 Water Street painted by the late Jeanette "Jini" Shaffer. Courtesy of Paul Gray.

When a local person gets lost, community members and organizations spring into action to mount a search and rescue mission. So too, did a group of Castine community members and organizations spring into action to mount a research and rescue mission when it was perceived that a piece of local history was in danger of being lost forever.

This is a tale of the efforts made to save the last remaining Oakum Bay house in Castine.

On September 8, 2016, it was heard at a town Planning Board meeting that a little yellow waterfront house at 55 Water Street had been sold/purchased with the plan of tearing it down in a matter of a few weeks in order to rebuild a new one. This caught the attention of local history buffs as the location of the doomed house was in the section of Castine harbor known as Oakum Bay.

Writing in the 1890s, Noah Brooks described this area the way he remembered it in the 1840s as: "That part of the saline shore... which lies between Jarvis's and Perkins's wharves, sweeping inward with a flattened curve a scant eighth of a mile, was and is known as Oakum Bay." He noted the sailors' boarding houses, the schooners beached for repairs, and the "wide-doored boat-house where three or four old women sat in the sun spinning into

MISSION

Building on the legacy of its founding family, the Wilson Museum uses its diverse collections and resources to provide learning experiences to stimulate exploration of the history and cultures of the Penobscot Bay region and world.

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yarn the oakum picked from ropes and cables that had been weathered by gales off Cape Horn, bleached in the fiery suns of India and the South Pacific or mildewed by the everlasting fogs of the Grand Banks.” Oakum was extremely important - it was what kept ships afloat. For when it was mixed with pitch or tar, it was used to fill the cracks between the planks. Brooks continued, “Water Street here skirts the inner edge of the little bay, dustily or muddily meandering along the bluff bank that overhangs the beach. At odd intervals on the crumbling marge of this ragged bank were dotted the weather-beaten shelters of the oakum-pickers and fisher folk.” Time has made changes in the intervening 170 years: Water Street’s dust and mud are lessened by a coat of asphalt; a retaining wall keeps the “marge” from crumbling; and the ragged bank has been made smooth by lawn and mower. But, behind a perky coat of paint, the little yellow house, perched somewhat precariously between the road and the shore below, still seemed to meet the description limned so long ago by Brooks. In fact, it seemed to be the only little house along that stretch that had not been totally remodeled and gentrified over the years. If it really was the last Oakum Bay house, then it and its importance to the commerce of the region in the age of sail should be saved. Demolition loomed in a matter of two to three weeks. Was it really an Oakum Bay house? Could it be moved? Did anyone care?

Board members of both the Wilson Museum and Castine Historical Society were polled, with thoughts and opinions flying through cyberspace at a great rate. As it turned out, there were those who thought it was, at the very least, worth investigating. Several things needed to be determined simultaneously. Was it really an Oakum Bay house? Could the building be moved? How do you move a building from one place to another? How much would it cost to move, restore, and maintain this little house? With plenty of lead-time any one of these questions might be a good starting point and answering the first would lead logically to the next step. But, in this instance, time was a limiting factor as demolition had been approved and salvageable pieces were already disappearing from the structure.

Could the building be moved?

First, it was determined that the owner would be amenable to allowing the Museum to remove the building from the site as long as it wouldn’t put the construction behind schedule. The Town Manager was consulted regarding the possibility of moving the house to the shore near the Wilson Museum. He noted that, at the town level, it would need Planning Board approval, while at the state level, setback regulations in the Shoreland Zone would need to be met. The Maine Department of Environmental Protection was contacted and their initial response was that unless the primary function of the structure was “water dependent,” then there was no way to circumvent the setback requirements. The Museum asked for further consideration in light of the fact that there would be no water or sewage generated by the building to impact the environment, and hoped that a case could be made for preserving its location near the shore as critical to portraying the era and its original function for educational purposes. Yet, beyond the regulations to be met and the permissions needed to accomplish a move, could this old building literally be moved?

How do you move a building from one place to another?

After considering the narrow streets with utilities and other obstructions, it seemed that a move by water would pose the least obstacles from one end of town to the other. Prock Marine of Rockland was consulted with the idea that barging the building might be feasible. They looked the situation over, estimated that the

building might weigh about 25 tons and gave an estimate of about \$25,000 for the move, but added their own stipulations. They would require that all chimneys, plaster, cabinets, roof and siding shingles be removed before moving (another wrinkle: it was suspected that some of the siding might contain asbestos) and it all must take place within the next two weeks. In two weeks time could a new foundation be ready to accept the old building?

Considering all the pieces that would have to come together in order to put in a foundation such as permits, excavation, forms, concrete poured and cured, it did not seem reasonable to think that it could be ready in the time available. Ken Jordan, a house mover and rigger, was approached to see what it would take to prep the house for the move and then to prop it up to store on-site until a foundation could be prepared. He was willing to take a look at the project and made a cost estimate of about \$20,000 for initial prep and temporary on-site storage. With a ballpark estimate of \$25,000 for a foundation, given by the Museum's Building and Grounds Manager, Sherman Hutchins, it was becoming clear that this would be just the beginning of the costs associated with this rescue. For once rescued, the building would need to be restored and maintained in perpetuity. Did the Museum want to take on the responsibility and financial burden of another historic building? So many questions, so much to discuss, so many avenues to research and so little time available. And the biggest question of all, as yet, remained unanswered:

Was it really an Oakum Bay house?

Starting with the building itself, Sherman and members of the Museum's Building and Grounds Committee visited the house to take a closer look at its construction. They found the framework to be straight with up and down sawn framing which might suggest an early date, except the marks appeared too evenly spaced for hand-sawn timbers. Nails throughout the house were cut and heads stamped with one blow which would indicate a date after 1825. It appeared that the trim was applied at the same time the walls were plastered using wire nails which were generally imported after 1850; however, an advertisement was found showing Castine's Otis Little selling fine drawn nails in the early 1800s. Even if available through Mr. Little, these nails would probably have been too expensive on an oakum picker's salary. The beaded tongue and groove board wainscoting and moulding styles present were popular from the 1860s on and could easily have been a later addition. Found between the first floor ceiling and upstairs flooring were papers dated 1916 and 1924. It appeared that if this house had been built in the 1840s then much of the interior had been remodeled and changed over the years. Unfortunately, the elements that might be identified as being from the 1840s were practices and products that would have continued to be used into the 1900s.

Since it was known that the house had belonged to Carroll and Bessie Mixer for many years, a title search beginning with them and working backwards was undertaken, first on-line, then with a visit to the Hancock County Registry of Deeds in Ellsworth. The first step back revealed that Carroll and Bessie had purchased in 1954 from Rodney Gray:

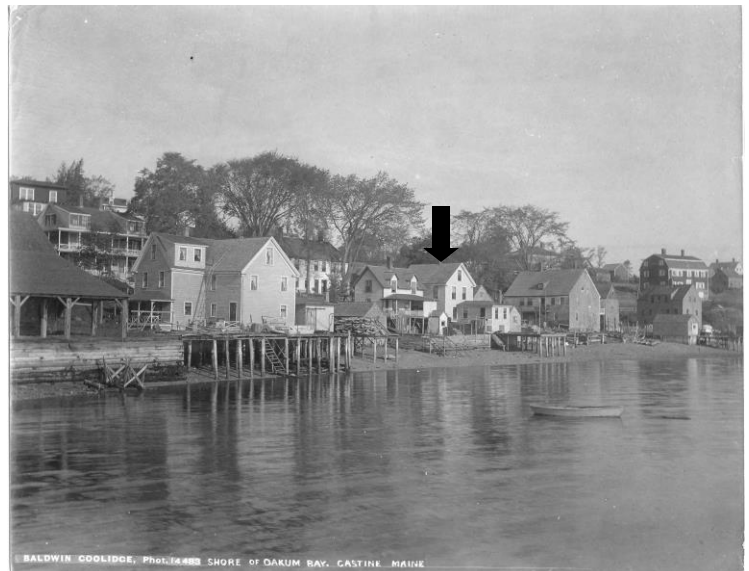




Story and photo courtesy of Paul Gray whose grandmother and grandfather, Ida and Isaac Gray, owned and lived in the house at 55 Water Street.

This is a memory from the 40s. My folks visited with them [my grandparents] at least one evening a week and I tagged along. The living room was heated by a Victorian, wood-burning, cast-iron stove that vaguely resembled a Grecian urn. My grandfather, Ike, could never get the damper right, and on bad nights it was like sitting in a smoke house. My grandmother was partial to rocking chairs, and the living room furniture consisted of five rockers and a day bed. It was a very small room. Often, a neighbor or two would drop in and join the conversation. They didn't bother to knock. They just walked in. It was expected. Mace Eaton, who lived next door, was a regular, as was May Scammons whose house was across the street where Fran Bos lives. At the time, I was bored to tears, but looking back, I am struck by how neighborly old Castine neighborhoods were.

Left photo dated 1891, courtesy Castine Historical Society. Right photo approximately 1915, courtesy Witherle Memorial Library Collection at the Castine Historical Society.

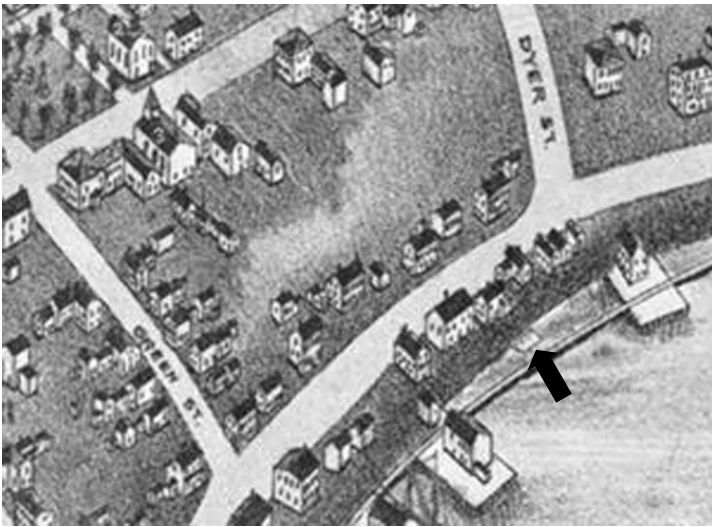


A certain lot or parcel of land, with the buildings thereon, situated in said Castine, bounded and described as follows, viz: Beginning on the lower side of Water Street at land formerly owned by Theophilus Lufkin; thence along said Street southwesterly thirty-five (35) feet, more or less, to a stake; thence at right angles southeasterly to low water mark; thence northeasterly by said low water mark thirty-five (35) feet, more or less, to land formerly owned by said Lufkin; thence northwesterly by said Lufkin lot to place of beginning. Being the same premises described in the deed of Charles L. Gray et als to Isaac E. Gray dated October 5, 1893...

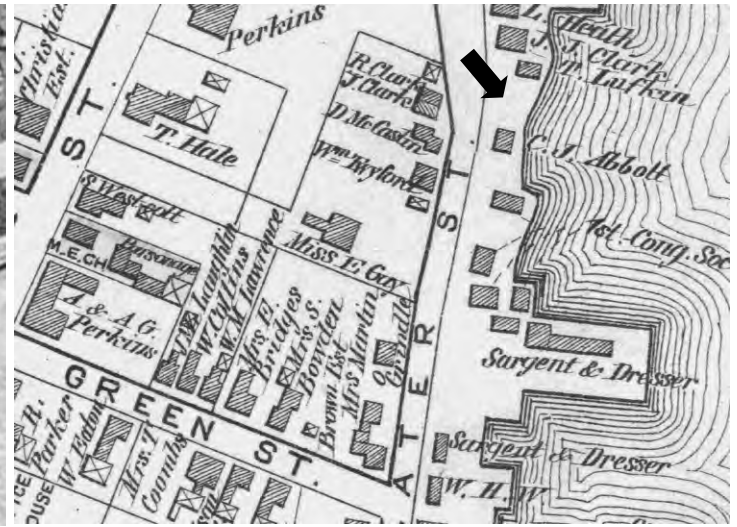
[see side panel for a story about Isaac Gray]

It seems that other members of the Gray family had also owned the property beginning as early as 1884 when the first Gray purchased it from Frank Bowden. However, the 1884 deed did not have the telling phrase “with buildings thereon” anywhere in the description, thus giving the impression that in 1884 the property was a lot with no buildings. It did, however, mention that it was “the northeast half of the Johnson & Little Lot – formerly so called, being same parcel conveyed to said Grantor by Margaret J. Abbot by her deed dated twelfth day of May 1883.” Though it didn’t mean much at first, this turned out to be a vital piece of information.

Paige Lilly, Curator of the Castine Historical Society, found a couple of pictures of Oakum Bay dated 1891 and one circa 1915. All depicted a building with similar features to the little yellow house; however, it appeared larger in relationship to the next building to its west than it appears now, making positive identification more difficult. Could the building have been shortened over the intervening years, or the house next door raised? Besides that, even if a positive identification could be made on the building in the photographs, it could not prove that the building existed earlier than 1891. Comparing maps, however, proved a little more definitive.



1889 map showing many small houses along the water's edge making it difficult to identify which might be the little yellow house.



1881 map showing (near top right side) building belonging to T. Lufkin with the next lower belonging to C.J. Abbott.

An 1889 map of Castine showed a series of small buildings clustered along the waterfront in the location of the little yellow house, though none could be conclusively identified as the house in question. In the same vicinity, an 1881 map of Castine showed one building on the water belonging to T. Lufkin with the next building, at a considerable distance, belonging to C.J. Abbott. Here was a definite connection to the description in all of the deeds from 1893 down to the present which speaks of being bounded by land “owned by Theophilus Lufkin.” Also, the 1884 deed noted that it was the same property sold to Frank Bowden by Margaret Abbot in 1883. Margaret Abbott was the daughter of Charles J. Abbott, and she inherited her father’s estate when he died in 1882.

Conclusions

A timeline of the little yellow house was finally being pieced together thanks to the research, observations, and knowledge of many community members, businesses and organizations. It would appear, according to the 1881 map, that no building was present between the Lufkin and Abbott properties, but that in 1883 Abbott’s large parcel of land along Water Street was divided into smaller lots and sold off by his daughter. It may be surmised based upon the deed, that in 1884 there was still no building on the property, but by 1889 a building had been built and appeared in the 1891 and later photos. This would match with the physical evidence found within the house. Again, many emails flew around disseminating these findings until all agreed that the little yellow house, while a lovely little house situated on the edge of Oakum Bay, was NOT an “Oakum Bay house” from the 1840s. It was also agreed that the resources needed and the hurdles to be overcome would be too great without that very specific time-period distinction of being an “Oakum Bay house.”



Executive Director Patty Hutchins is pleased to announce the addition of Jan Marie Miller to a one-year position on the Wilson Museum's Education Team. Valerie Messana who joined the Team in 2016 will continue for another year.

Jan Marie Miller's broad range of life-experiences including living in Alaska and Slovenia, combined with her experience teaching domestically and internationally, promise fresh ideas and new enthusiasm for Museum programming. Jan Marie lives in Castine.



IN MEMORIAM

We remember the following members of the Wilson Museum who believed in the Museum's mission and gave of themselves to further its outreach.

Their legacy will live on.

Edward Keenan

1936 - 2015

Eileen Morrison

1933 - 2015

Dr. John Blair Webster

1900 - 2015

Col. Alfred Bagot

1921 - 2016

Lois Boenau

1926 - 2016

Paul Brouillard

1952 - 2016

Oliver J. Hart

1923 - 2016

Prof. Brian Robinson

1953 - 2016

Jeanette "Jini" Shaffer

1928 - 2016

Robert Flenner

1923 - 2017

Thomas Miller

1917 - 2017

Heléne Podlubny

1922 - 2017

David Smith

1932 - 2017

Additionally, the Wilson Museum has recently received generous donations in memory of the following members:

Philip L & Doris A. Garland

Harold Hatch

Marion & Arnold Wyman

Around the Campus

Storm Windows

Though it took them a little longer than anticipated (as things often do), the storm windows for the John Perkins house are here! The photo to the right shows them lined up in the Museum, just waiting to be installed. Thank you to all who understood the need and donated to this project for protecting the handmade sashes at the John Perkins House, including the Belvedere Fund of the Maine Community Foundation.



Technology Goes Underground

This spring a project to network the major campus buildings for more reliable and uniform access to data and internet is being undertaken. Thanks to the coordinated efforts of Greg

Bowden and S.J. Rollins, Inc., the network should be up and running by the time you receive this. It's been a regular beehive of activity around campus as everything gears up for the summer season.



Education Center's Floors Get Face-Lift

The floors of the Hutchins Education Center are being sanded in preparation for several coats of varnish. With so many programs scheduled, it was hard to find a block of time to get the job done. See the insert to this Bulletin for a list of all the upcoming events.



Directors need to know how everything works!



Spring crocus blooms at the Doudiet House.

Collections Conversations

Abby Dunham, Collections Manager

Here in Castine, the Wilson Museum is lucky to have great colleagues just a few streets over at the Castine Historical Society. This proximity allows for easy collaborations and sharing of professional knowledge. Last year, the two organizations began discussing ways to reach out and share that feeling with other local historical societies and museums. Castine Historical Society and the Wilson Museum decided to host a day for colleagues from across Hancock County to come to Castine. Ideas for topics to base the day on were considered, and it was decided to focus on collections and share the experiences of the Castine organizations on their respective inventory projects.

Museum inventories are processes and records that track what a museum has in its collection and where it is. Inventories can range in complexity, depending on the needs and goals of an organization. For the Wilson Museum, the inventory was used to create the basis of a computer database of collection objects, archives, and records. It was a two-year project to conduct the inventory and create the basic database, but not all inventories take that long or are at the same level of depth as the Wilson Museum's.



This gathering of colleagues was held at the Museum's Hutchins Education Center toward the end of March. The day was a great success, and, despite an inclement weather forecast, a group representing more than a dozen historical societies and museums from all over Hancock County came together. Everyone contributed as people shared experiences, learned about projects that others have done, and gave advice on projects being planned. The lively exchange of ideas continued through lunch and after. The group that met is eager to plan another local gathering for exchanging professional ideas and has heard similar interest from colleagues who were not able to attend.

Ancient Exhibit Reinterpreted

Beginning this spring, work on a fresh face for an old exhibit has commenced thanks to the expertise of Museum friend, Dr. Riva Berleant. While the themes — the Neolithic, Bronze and Iron Ages of Europe — won't be changed, pieces that have been stored unseen for decades will have their chance to shine. We'll show stone and metal tools, personal ornaments, prestige goods, pottery, and other representations of life in central Europe from about 7,500 years ago (5,500 B.C.E.) through 2,200 years ago (200 B.C.E.). New text and interpretation is being developed that will give meaning and context to the objects on display as well as describing the cultural evolution in central Europe from the first farmers to the sophisticated peoples

who later fell to Rome. The exhibit and texts will also show how J. Howard Wilson, the Museum's founder, acquired the stunning collections from which the new exhibit has been chosen.

Riva Berleant, Ph.D. is Professor of Anthropology (emerita) at the University of Connecticut. Drawing on her teaching specialties in history and theory in anthropology, she has worked with the Nassau County (NY) Museum of Natural History to organize an archaeology and geology library. Dr. Berleant was also the curator of a recent reinterpretation of the Wilson Museum's Paleolithic exhibit.

This coming summer Museum visitors will have the opportunity to see the ongoing exhibit work as a living process and not just an inanimate display. By summer 2018 the transformation will be complete.



WILSON MUSEUM
P.O. Box 196
Castine, ME 04421

WILSON MUSEUM

May 27-September 30
Weekdays 10 a.m.-5 p.m.
Saturdays & Sundays 2-5 p.m.

JOHN PERKINS HOUSE

July & August
Wednesdays & Sundays
Hour-long tours at 2, 3 & 4 p.m.

**THE VILLAGE BLACKSMITH
& WOODSHOP**

July & August
Wednesdays & Sundays 2-5 p.m.

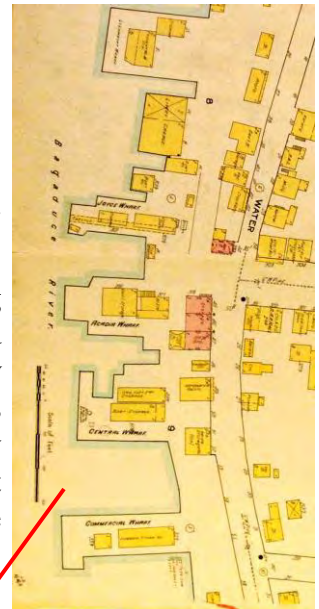
BAGADUCE ENGINE CO.

May 27-September 30
Same hours as Wilson Museum

Castine History 101

So you think you know
Castine history.

View the Wilson Museum’s 2017 seasonal exhibit in the main hall; a timeline “course” highlighting photographs, documents, and artifacts from Castine’s prehistory through recent history. Enjoy this fun way to learn something new or refresh your memory about people and events that have made Castine what it is today.



Castine waterfront from Sanborn Map Company

