

The Wheelers: Castine's Literary Dynasty

by Andrew Kendall
2022 Archives and Public History Intern

Editor's note: Each year, thanks to a generous donation from the Boyer Family, CHS hosts a graduate school intern for eight weeks over the summer. The internship is designed to provide experience to future history museum professionals working with our collections. Andrew's main project was to inventory a large collection of archival material donated by the descendants of Dr. George Wheeler. The multi-generations who lived in the Wheeler home at the corner of Perkins and Pleasant were not only Castine historians, but avid writers. Andrew became fascinated with their literary achievements, which resulted in this article.

The sheaf of papers I pull from the storage box is unassuming, to say the least: typewritten pages on faded paper in a yellow office envelope. My first thought is that I have another stack of papers for the growing pile of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation's newsletter drafts from the 1980s; organizing and processing them is beginning to look like a Herculean task. Only as I read the first page and begin to skim the contents do I realize what I'm holding: a typescript of an autobiography by George Augustus Wheeler, M.D.

Residents and frequent visitors to Castine will recognize the good doctor; Wheeler's name is synonymous with Castine history. When people say that "so-and-so wrote the book" on a subject, they typically mean it metaphorically, but George Wheeler did just that. He was the first person to contend that Castine's history mattered, not just for Castine itself but for the rest of Maine, even the rest of the country. But exploring and organizing the Wheeler Collection, now safely housed in the archives of the Castine Historical Society, made me realize that the Wheeler-Castine story is bigger than George and his book. The Wheelers certainly have a claim to being one of the important families of letters in Castine, and indeed deserve their place in Maine literary history at large.

"No Bad Compiler": George Augustus Wheeler (1837-1923)

Civil War veteran and country doctor, George A. Wheeler served the people of Castine for over 50 years, mending their bodies and giving them a history to call their own. In 1837, George was born in Standish, Maine.¹ When he was two years old, his family moved to Topsham so his father, Amos, could take a position as Unitarian minister. George's earliest memories were of childhood pranks: pelting passersby with snowballs from a perch in an elm tree, pinching his brothers in church, and running away from



Dr. George Wheeler in his Civil War uniform c. 1915. George served as a surgeon during the war and was later a member of the Charles L. Stevens Post 76 of the Grand Army of the Republic. Castine Historical Society collection, donated by Sherry Culves

school to go fishing. George never lost this mischievous side to his character; his grandchildren nicknamed him "Foxy," meaning cunning or sly. After schooling in Topsham, George went to Bowdoin College in Brunswick, where he earned his degree in medicine. Following three years in partnership with a doctor in Orland, George headed to Presque Isle where he served as town doctor for a year.

continued to page 4

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Closed for the 2023 season
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of membership.*

Karen V. Lyons, Editor

Director's Letter



by Lisa Simpson Lutts

Our 2023 season is over and we closed our exhibits for the season on Indigenous Peoples' Day (October 9th). This was another season filled with exciting community projects, including a newly refreshed exhibition, our "Hidden Legacies" educational programs on African American history, and exciting donations to the permanent collection. People from all over the world visited CHS, and we're also thrilled that we hit a new milestone: TripAdvisor now ranks us number 1 for "Things to Do" in Castine!

The second year of the "Clark Fitz-Gerald: Castine's Sculptor-in-Residence" exhibition was a huge success. From visitor comments we learned that return visitors enjoyed this year's sculptures even more than last year's. We will be sorry to say "good-bye" to these lovely sculptures, but the staff and the Exhibits Committee are hard at work on next year's exhibition tentatively called "A History of Castine in 30 Objects." The exhibit will display never-before-seen objects from CHS's permanent collection that tell the story of Castine's long and varied history. The exhibit is an exciting outgrowth of a volunteer-led project to inventory and photograph CHS's object collection which also will help us look into the future for the proposed permanent exhibit on Castine's history.

This summer, we hosted four stakeholder meetings with residents and members. In-person attendees toured the second floor of the Abbott School, which is slated for renovation. After

their tour, they gave us suggestions for themes, topics, and techniques we could use in planning this future exhibition. Next year, the project will focus on researching and hiring an architect and exhibit design firm and creating final design plans and costs. The goal of this transformative long-range project will be to create a welcoming and accessible second-floor space filled with an exhibition that tells the full story of Castine past and present.

As 2023 comes to a close, I want to remind you that you will be receiving your Annual Appeal request letter in early November. We hope you will consider making an additional donation above your annual membership support. The Annual Appeal helps us with day-to-day expenses that keep the Historical Society running smoothly and lets us offer top-notch exhibitions and educational programs. Your gift supports everything from creating new history curricula for the Adams School children to paying for the buildings' heating and cooling so our collection is cared for in a stable environment to hiring professional art movers to move the large Clark Fitz-Gerald sculptures safely back to their homes this October.

We can't thank you enough for considering this year-end gift and for all you did during the 2023 season to make it a success! Your attendance at exhibits and programs, words of encouragement, volunteering, and financial support make the Historical Society a vibrant community institution we can all be proud of.

continued from page 1

The Wheelers: Castine's Literary Dynasty

When the Civil War broke out, George left his stable salary and enlisted in the 18th Maine Regiment. He served in a number of hospitals during the war, including Annapolis General Hospital, the nearby auxiliary hospital in Annapolis Junction, and a hospital in City Point, the Union headquarters during the Siege of Petersburg. In Annapolis Junction George met his future wife, Margaret, and her daughter from a previous marriage, Elizabeth. Although she was never officially recognized, Margaret worked in hospitals, tending the wounded; she also tended George, when he was temporarily delirious with scarlet fever. George received his final promotion, to brevet (or honorary) Lieutenant Colonel, at the close of the war in 1865.



The Wheeler home on the corner of Perkins and Pleasant Streets, c. 1875. This photograph, taken by the professional photographer A. H. Folsom, depicts the Pleasant Street side of the house and shows Dr. Wheeler driving his carriage. Castine Historical Society collection, donated by Sara and F.D. Foote

After the war, George and Margaret initially settled in Maryland, close to Margaret's family. While there, George served as a government surgeon with the Freedman's Bureau from 1867 to 1869.

In 1870, George was invited to be the town doctor for Castine, and after visiting with Margaret and their now two daughters, George readily accepted. Despite local interest in acquiring a town doctor, George had difficulties paying the bills from his medical practice for the first few years, and opened a small printing office (and briefly edited a newspaper, the *Castine Gazette*) to make ends meet. During this time, George also published his *History of Castine, Penobscot, and Brooksville*, the first edition of which appeared in 1875. The work was paid for by subscriptions which George acquired from his former newspaper subscribers; one of the first was George Witherle, in whose honor the Witherle Memorial Library was named.²

While the *History of Castine* was George Wheeler's most famous work, it was not his only one. In 1878, George followed his history of Castine with a *History of Brunswick, Topsham, and Harpswell*, which he co-authored with his brother, Henry Warren Wheeler. In light of the new crop of upper-class tourists, or 'rusticators' arriving in Castine in the late 19th century, George also published a pocket guide, *Castine – Past and Present*, in 1896, giving visitors both a brief history of Castine and a listing of local houses to let, hotels, and entertainment.

George was a lifelong learner. Over the course of his life, he acquired reading fluency in eight languages, including Greek,

Latin, Esperanto, and Russian. He remained active throughout his life, going on long walks and snowshoeing with his grandchildren. George passed away in 1923, at the age of 86, just before the publication of the second edition of his *History of Castine*, revised and expanded by his daughter, Louise Wheeler Bartlett. While later historians who have access to more primary documents have revised some of his assertions, there is little doubt that, as he wrote in the preface to his *History*, "I shall deem it no discredit to have it said of me ... that I am no bad compiler."

"The Goal of My Ambition": Louise Wheeler Bartlett (1864-1945)

Louise Wheeler Bartlett is best known today for writing "Later Annals 1872-1922" in the second edition of the *History of Castine*. However, she states in the preface to the previously-mentioned book that "fiction not history is the goal of my ambition." Despite her aims, Louise never managed to escape the shadow of history. Her published works were primarily historical fiction, relating tales of Charles Tilden, General Peleg Wadsworth, and the ins and outs of Castine families. One story of the Baron de Saint-Castin, "The Baron's Letter", was even mistaken for a genuine letter by the Baron by Ontario historian Roscoe B. Miller!³



Louise Wheeler Bartlett, c. 1910. Castine Historical Society collection, donated by Sherry Culves

Louise put her literary talents to good use, serving as record keeper for Castine's Unitarian Universalist Congregation and contributing two stories to *Maine in History and Romance*, a collection of historical fiction by members of the Maine Federation of Women's Clubs. Louise was also a regular contributor to collections by the Maine Writers Research Club, a group she helped found. Like her father, Louise tried her hand at the newspaper trade, serving as local editor of the

Castine Gazette in 1883 and running the paper with Jeanette E. Hooke from 1884 to 1885. Her work with the Castine Woman's Club including raising money and making surgical dressings for the Red Cross during World War I. In 1915, she also helped to bring a wider awareness of Castine's past with Castine Historical Field Days, featuring lectures and historical reenactments.

Louise was keenly aware of her position as both woman and author in an age of suffragists and fierce opposition to the movement; she served as presiding officer of Castine's Suffrage League, which existed from 1916 to 1920. In the foreword to her "Later Annals" in the revised *History of Castine*, just 3 years after women's suffrage was achieved, she writes, "The women of Castine's past—we can count them by the score. If the men have struggled to earn the daily bread, their wives surely baked and brewed, swept and garnished...and between times, by their hospitality, their native wit and their integrity have gained for the town its fair name."⁴ In the 1920 register of Women Voters,

housed in the Castine Historical Society archives, Louise Wheeler Bartlett was one of the first to be recorded as a registered voter.

Tenant at Will: Elizabeth Louise Wheeler (1912-2005)

The daughter of George Wheeler's first son, Clarence Albion Wheeler, Elizabeth Louise Wheeler (known as Louise) was a prolific poet and writer. Born in Castine in 1912, Louise spent much of her early life far from Maine, living first in Queens, New York, and then Belmont, Massachusetts. Like her grandfather, Louise was an excellent student, graduating from high school at 17 with honors in Latin. After graduating from Wheaton College in 1933, she completed a Master of Arts from Radcliffe College in 1934. For the next 40 years of her life, Elizabeth worked in a variety of administrative and medical roles at Massachusetts General Hospital, becoming an expert in electrocardiograms and helping to author a textbook on interpreting them. Upon retiring, she moved back to Castine, where she lived until her death in 2005. Like her aunt, Louise Wheeler Bartlett, Louise was



Elizabeth "Louise" Wheeler, 1963. Louise is shown at her desk at the Massachusetts General Hospital. Castine Historical Society collection, donated by Sherry Culves

also an active member of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Castine, editing and contributing to its newsletter in the 1980s and 1990s.

There was another side to Louise: poetry. Many of her early poems won gold and silver awards and cash prizes from *St. Nicholas Magazine*, a publication for children which printed fiction, poetry, and art,

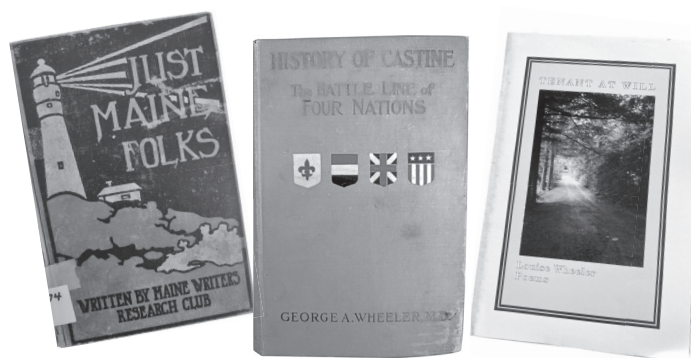
including works by E.B. White, William Faulkner, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. While her poetry slumbered after high school (following a failed attempt to break into literary circles with *The Atlantic Monthly*), it never died away; Louise continued to write scattered poetry throughout her life, sharing it with family and personal friends. After moving back to Castine, she began to publish her verses here and there, in the *Castine Patriot* and various local newsletters. Louise's poetry was finally published in a locally printed collection, *Tenant at Will*, in 1994. The collection received high praise from poet and long-time Castine resident Philip Booth, who called her works "splendidly knowledgeable, witty, and resilient."

This reader's close review of Louise's poetry shows growth, particularly in societal awareness. While her early poetry is marked by careful, formal rhyme and meter, her later poetry in contrast, indulged in freer line lengths and rhyme schemes, close to free verse. Her poetry shares some features of the confessional style of her fellow Castine poet, Robert Lowell: deeply personal and tied to local people and events, though it reflects a style all

her own. Among the people and places her poetry references are sculptor Clark Fitz-Gerald ("Out of Applewood") and local places like Perkins Street, Hatch's Cove, and the British Canal. Her subjects oscillate between timeless ones like love ("My Fantasy") and loss ("Grief," which won a gold award from *St. Nicholas Magazine*) and timely issues like environmentalism ("Death of a View") and commercialism ("Strawberries in December"). Even on such heavy subjects, Louise's poetry is marked by a wry sense of humor; in "On Learning That The Cockroach Is The Only Creature To Survive Nuclear Fission," the real "Cold War" is not between the United States and the Soviet Union, but between humans and the insects which will outlast both.

Roots and Branches: Other Literary Wheelers

While George may be the most famous member of the Wheeler family, the earliest documents in the Wheeler Collection come not from him but from his father, Amos Dean Wheeler (1803-1876). A Unitarian minister, Amos never lived in Castine, but there can be little doubt that it was he who awakened the literary talents in his descendants. Apart from a few minor legal papers, Amos is represented in the Wheeler Collection by his poetry: short, metered verses, often with classical or biblical flourishes, which he recited at clubs, college events, and family gatherings. He also seems to have awakened an "archival bug" in his family, without which most of these papers would be lost; while some of the poems are clearly in his own hand, many were preserved in copies made by his step-granddaughter, Elizabeth D. Wheeler (1862-1944). While I have found no evidence that she ever became a published author, Elizabeth also exercised her literary muscles; a short story in imitation of German Romanticism, "Hermann and Dorothea," is preserved in the Wheeler Collection, and appears to be in her hand.



Endnotes

1. Most of the following is based on George Wheeler's autobiography in the Castine Historical Society collection, donated by Sherry Culves.
2. "Subscription List," Castine Historical Society collection, donated by Sherry Culves.
3. Louise Wheeler Bartlett, "The Baron's Letter: A Romance of Pentagöet," in *Maine in History and Romance*, Lewiston, ME: Lewiston Journal Company, 1915. p.199-214. For Roscoe Miller's mistake, see Roscoe B. Miller, "Baron of Saint Castine - American Pioneer," in *Americana* 28, 1934. p. 92-97.
4. George A. Wheeler, M.D., and Louise Wheeler Bartlett, *History of Castine, Penobscot, and Brooksville, Maine*. Second Edition. Cornwall, NY: Cornwall Press, 1923. p. 347.

Collections Corner

by Jules Thomson, Collections Manager

I chuckled to myself today while looking at one of our recent ‘deeds of gift’ (the legal document that people sign when they donate items to our collections, transferring custody to CHS). A line on the document asks for a ‘donor’s appraisal’. Instead of a numerical amount, this donor had written “Priceless!” on the appraisal line. And I thought to myself, *how true is that?* Very true for most of our collection items, regardless of monetary worth. Knowledge and research value are the real currencies we deal in, especially with regard to the archival collections that comprise the majority of our holdings. In a literal sense, they are priceless - that is, they defy any sort of cost breakdown - because we never know how they will be used in the future, or whose lives might be altered by the knowledge they provide.

Over the last few months, we have added many such “priceless” records to our collection, including substantial material from the Eastern State Normal School, and the full complement of *Castine Patriot* newspapers from 1980 onward. In both cases, these donations (from the Maine Maritime Academy and Witherle Memorial Library, respectively) have meant that CHS is now the primary access point for these records. We also recently received a donation of the original Trinitarian Congregational Parish records, which hold reams of fascinating information about 19th-century life in Castine.

The Historical Society’s collections are a combination of donated items, and less often, items purchased at auctions or antique stores. Purchases can come with a hefty price tag. CHS has a small collections acquisition budget which allows us to acquire some archival records, objects, photographs, or books to add to our permanent collections. But occasionally we must prevail upon the generosity of financial donors, especially those who have a special interest in a new acquisition.

This was the case when we were alerted to the existence of an antique dealer’s collection of 33 cased photographs (daguerreotypes, ambrotypes, and tintypes from about 1850-1900) depicting members of the Whitney, Whiting, and Hatch families of Castine and Massachusetts, as well as several



Sarah Perkins, Frances Whitney, and Phebe Whitney, c. 1849 Daguerreotype, Castine Historical Society collection, donated by Elizabeth Macdonald and Richard Ames



Frances Abigail and Leonard Jarvis Whiting, c. 1850 Daguerreotype, Castine Historical Society collection, donated by Elizabeth Macdonald and Richard Ames

file-folders worth of their family papers. These interrelated families were major citizens who affected Castine’s history. The Whitneys and Whiting’s are notable for producing several ships’ captains and merchants during the golden age of sail in the mid-1800s. Their story is inextricably tied to the shipping economy of that era, which was featured in the Historical Society’s 2019 exhibit *Risky Business: Square Rigged Ships and Salted Fish*. And Mary Kidder Whiting, who married into the Hatch family, was the mother/grandmother of Frank Hatch Sr. and Frank Hatch Jr. who contributed so many theatrical performances, poems, and songs to our local repertoire.

The case for purchasing these families’ photographs and papers seemed obvious, but they cost more than our annual acquisitions budget. To our delight, CHS members Richard Ames and Elizabeth Macdonald, descendants of the Whitney/Whiting/Hatch families, came to the rescue and covered the entire cost between them.

After receiving the photographs, we were eager to have them assessed for conservation. We sent them to Northeast Document Conservation Center in Andover, Mass. Thanks to yet another generous monetary donation from various members of the Hatch family, we were able to have most of the photos professionally cleaned, stabilized, and even digitized as high-quality images. The process was an inspiring example of family descendants coming together to ensure the long-term preservation of their ancestors’ records.

Not only are the photographs a fantastic visual record of bygone Castine residents, they also represent the largest single collection of cased images held by the Historical Society to date. They’re already getting some use, too. We’ll be showing them to students at Maine Maritime Academy as part of their photography class, so they can see what these early photographic processes actually looked like. I also suspect that the high-quality scans will (eventually) provide striking visuals for our planned permanent exhibit on Castine’s history. And remember, you can view them, along with the rest of our collections, in the online catalog. To access it, go to our website (castinehistoricalsociety.org) and click on the “Collections” tab.

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Henry Whitney Jr.

Henry Whitney was born in Castine in 1810, the second of 11 children of Captain Henry Whitney and Lucy Perkins. He grew up and attended school in Castine, and when he reached age 13, went to sea with his father as cabin boy on the ship *Canova*, visiting Southern and European ports. However, it seems Henry preferred dry land, as he eventually moved to Liverpool, England, where he created the partnership of Williston and Whitney, a ship chandlery business. He never married, but remained devoted to his family, often spending summers in Castine, and returning to Liverpool in the fall.

In his mid-fifties, when his health began to fail, Henry sold his interest in the Liverpool business and returned to the family home to Castine for the remainder of his life. He kept busy investing in Castine-built schooners including the *Goldfish*, *Annie Whiting*, and *Bagaduce*. Henry died in Castine in 1868 and is buried in the Castine cemetery.

Unknown Liverpool artist, *Portrait of Henry Whitney Jr.*, c. 1850
Castine Historical Society collection, donated by Richard Ames

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