The Castine Visitor

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Castine Historical Society

The History and Archaeology of Fort George

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Summer 2026

Fort George is a fundamental part of the Castine landscape. It served for two wars and helped build the town itself, but the importance of the fort has been massively underrated, and the fort itself under-researched. In the mid-twentieth century, several excavations took place inside the fort, generating renewed interest in the history and preservation of Fort George. However, we know little about these excavations as the archaeological records and discoveries have been lost.

An Abridged History of Fort George

Fort George was built after the British invasion of Castine in June 1779. The fort was far from complete when the American military force arrived to retake Castine and was subsequently damaged in the attack of August 1779. After the American retreat, the British continued construction of the Fort, which was finished in the summer of 1781.

The fort was occupied by the British forces from 1779 to 1784. When they abandoned the fort at the close of the Revolutionary War, the British burned the buildings and destroyed the fort as much as possible. Afterward, the residents of Castine took bricks from the remains of the fort to use and sell as building materials. The Brick Block on Water Street is thought to be constructed of bricks taken from Fort George.

The British retook and partially rebuilt the fort during their second occupation of Castine, from September 1814 to October 1815. American forces occupied the fort the following three years; after they left, the fort was again scavenged for materials by locals, and by 1843 was recorded as being in a very bad condition with no buildings left standing.

In the 19th century, the fort was used for recreation, as a baseball field, part of the golf course, several tennis courts, and hosted many parades and celebrations. It was even used for two hangings. In 1949, Amy Witherle gave the land of the fort to the state for use as a public park, and the fort was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1969.

Archaeological Excavations of Fort George

Throughout its history, several hundred troops occupied the fort for a total of 10 years. During this time, significant archaeological evidence would have been generated, both of the construction and architecture of the fort and of its habitation. However, the removal of buildings for their materials and heavy sports and town use in the 19th century means much of the possible archaeological evidence has been removed or disturbed.

In addition to accidental archaeological degradation, it is likely that many people dug around Fort George looking for souvenirs. This is evidenced by pieces in the Wilson Museum's collection, reported to have been found at the fort in the 1860s, before any archaeological work at the fort was conducted.



Photo of archeological dig at Fort George, 1962, Charlene Devereux in center, by Gardiner Gregory

The History and Archaeology of Fort George

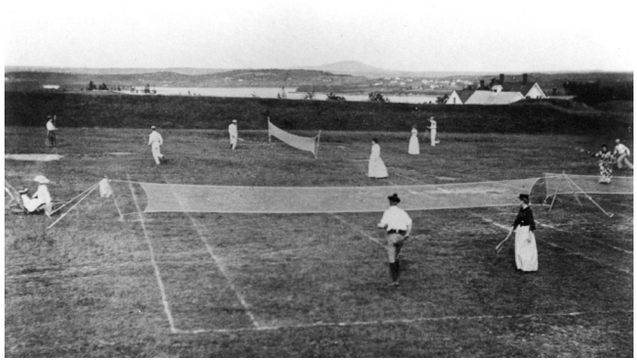
In 1875 and 1896, George Wheeler, author of *History of Castine, Penobscot, and Brooksville*, conducted amateur archaeological excavations at Fort George, but it is unknown to what extent and what, if anything, he discovered.

In the 1950s, following the fort's acquisition by the state, the Fort George Restoration Society was formed, led by Charlene Devereux. At her urging, she was granted permission to conduct an archaeological excavation at the fort in 1959 (alternatively recorded as 1955). At this time, no trained archaeologist or anyone with archaeological experience was working on the dig, which was conducted by Devereux, her husband, and volunteers. The group "tossed earth hither and yon, as none of the volunteers had any knowledge of systematic excavation" according to Devereux's notes.

Upon discovering a wooden platform in the powder magazine, previously called "the dungeon," the state archaeologist, Wendal Hadlock, who had been on call for the dig, stopped the excavation until he could supervise the archeological work. The excavations started again in 1962 (alternatively recorded as 1960) and continued nearly every year until 1965, supervised by Hadlock with several volunteers with archaeological experience joining the work. During these excavations, at least two of the bastions of the fort were excavated. The finds, materials recovered, logbooks, and documentation of these excavations were sent to the state capital in Augusta. The current location, status, and quantity of these finds is not known, nor are the archaeological processes that were followed or any record of the excavation's events. As part of these excavations, masonry restoration work was done on several sections of the fort, restoring them as they currently appear.

In 1964, Stephen Hyatt used a metal detector on the grounds of Fort George to search for artifacts. It is not known whether this metal detection was related to the archaeological excavations. In this process, Hyatt found hundreds of objects, but during this work he did not record where the items were found in the fort. As Hyatt exclusively used metal detection, very few non-metal objects were recovered, meaning further information is missing from the archaeological record. These items, in addition to some of the artifacts gifted to Hyatt by someone involved with the archaeological excavations, were donated to the CHS in 2002 and were featured in *The Castine Visitor* article "After the Smoke has Cleared: What the Artifacts Tell Us," written by Hyatt.

Today, the Castine Historical Society holds the majority



Tennis at Fort George, c. 1885, 1996.72

of the known objects recovered from Fort George, most of which were donated by Hyatt. The Wilson Museum holds a small number of objects, which were almost entirely received before 1960. None of the locations these objects were found in were recorded, meaning objects have been separated from their archaeological context and relation to any other artifacts found at the fort. Context and proximity can reveal significant information about habitation and use patterns of sites, and are a significant part of modern archaeological practices. While plans were made in the 1960s for a complete restoration of Fort George, no known archaeological or preservation work has been conducted since the 1960s. Today there is renewed interest and desire to preserve Fort George in the face of a changing environment and ongoing degradation of the site.

Author's Note: Many of the dates of the 1960s excavations cannot be verified as they are recorded differently across sources.



Image of Charlene Devereux and others, looking at powder magazine at Fort George, May 15, 1955, 2002.01

Sources:

Devereux, Charlene. My Fort George Story. Manuscript.

Gray & Pape Heritage Management. Fort George Properties Management Plan, Castine, Hancock County, Maine, 2021.

Hyatt, Stephen. After the Smoke has Cleared: What the Artifacts Tell Us. The Castine Visitor, Spring 2003.

A View from the Common

Executive Director's Letter

Kate McMahon, Ph.D.

The Castine Historical Society had an amazing summer in 2026! Between the opening of *Francis Hamabe's Maine: A Life in Art*, a variety of exciting programs, and of course our Castine House & Garden Tour, it was truly a season to remember.

In this issue of *The Castine Visitor*, you'll hear more about what we have done so far in 2026 and catch a glimpse into what our 2027 season has in store. If you did not make it to the CHS this year, we hope to welcome you back in 2027.

Our 2026 season kicked off with a printmaking workshop on June 6 related to our exhibition. Forty attendees, ranging from age 4 to adulthood, previewed *Francis Hamabe's Maine* and then used their inspiration to create their own prints using printmaking blocks. The art generated in this program was incredible and is on display in the Mitchell Room. We are looking forward to offering this program, and others like it, again in 2027.

We had over one hundred attendees at our open house reception on June 20, with folks from across Maine coming to Castine to view *Francis Hamabe's Maine* and hear a few words from curator Carl Little. Our volunteers brought some wonderful snacks and refreshments, and it was great to see both familiar faces and new folks come out to the CHS to enjoy this happy exhibition.

We spent much of 2026 preparing for the House & Garden Tour on July 24. CHS staff and volunteers dedicated hundreds of hours to preparing for this event, which included a benefit preview dinner on July 22 for our sponsors and patrons, a fantastic talk about Castine's lost architecture with Jerome Magnifico on July 23, and finally the tour on July 24. We welcomed over 1,400 people to Castine for the tour, our largest turnout ever, and the event netted over $100,000 for the CHS! This event would not have been possible without the amazing leadership of Ruth Scheer and Mary Dearborn and, of course, our more than 250 volunteers. You can learn more about this fantastic tour later in this issue.

We have also been very busy this summer with new collections related to the archives of Moss Acre, the rusticator cottage owned by Mary Dewson and Polly Porter and their family. This archive offers a unique look into LGBTQ+ experiences in early 20th-century Maine, as well as the incredible contributions Dewson and Porter made to American history. We are thrilled to announce that all twenty-eight albums will be digitized over the winter and will be available on our website in mid-2027. You can learn more about the additions to this collection and our conservation efforts in Collections Corner.

Looking forward to 2027, we will be rotating some of the artworks in *Francis Hamabe's Maine*. Our community offered us loans of over one hundred pieces for this exhibition, but we could only fit around forty for display, so we'll be bringing in some new works for the second season of the exhibition. We also have a fun slate of programs in the works for next year, so we look forward to welcoming you back to the CHS when we open Memorial Day weekend in 2027.

As always, we are grateful for your support through membership, financial donations, and volunteerism. In the current economic climate, your donations, no matter the size, have a huge impact on us. You'll learn later in this issue that we've had to undertake some significant expenses this year to continue maintaining our historic buildings and collections. We hope you will consider making a donation to our Annual Appeal before the end of 2026 and continuing your support by renewing your membership. We are so grateful to you for all you do for the CHS throughout the year!

With gratitude,
Kate McMahon, Ph.D.



Our 2026 Open House was a huge success, with over one hundred attendees joining us to see Francis Hamabe's Maine: A Life in Art.

CHS Gift Shop: History Makes a Great Holiday Gift

The Historical Society's Gift Shop enjoyed one of its best seasons ever in 2026. New gifts featuring the art of Frank Hamabe have been especially popular with guests of all ages. We continue to live up to our reputation as "the best little gift shop in town."

Mark your calendars as once again, we will host our popular Sip 'n Shop Night in the Abbott School on December 10 from 3 to 6 p.m. Enjoy hors d'oevres, a beverage, and holiday music while selecting unique items for all your gift giving needs. Participants will have their names entered into a raffle to win a Castine Market Bag. Current members receive 20% off in our gift shop for the months of November and December!

Online shopping is still available. We can ship your gifts, or you may choose local pickup. Holiday offerings include:

- Fleece-lined knit beanies with vintage Maine flag patch in orange, red, gray, or green
- Maine-made slingback bags
- Hamabe inspired totes, tea towels, mugs, and t-shirts
- Castine baseball caps

Purchasing items in our store or online helps support the work of the Castine Historical Society, which is greatly appreciated.

Shop at our website's homepage:
www.castinehistoricalsociety.org

Click on SHOP in the menu. We can ship anywhere in the U.S., or you can arrange for local pickup. You can also order by calling us at 207-326-4118.

*And don't forget the **10% member** discount for current members, and a special 20% discount for November and December 2026. Just type* **MEMBER** *in the discount box at checkout and the discount will be applied.*















Castine Historical Society

Collections Corner

Jules Thomson
Collections Manager

Over the last two years, our collecting work at CHS has been characterized by major donations from large local estates.

In 2024-5, we were busy processing materials from a multi-box collection donated by the Hatch family of Turner Point. This theme continued in 2025-6, with the donation of a large amount of material from Moss Acre, the rusticator cottage in North Castine which was most famously the home of Mary "Molly" Dewson, lifelong political organizer and indispensable aide to Franklin Roosevelt's presidential administration. We borrowed some of these items and records for CHS's 2017-2018 exhibit on Molly and her life partner Polly Porter, whose father William Porter commissioned the building of Moss Acre. The Bourne family, who inherited the property from Molly and Polly, generously elected to donate these along with a treasure trove of other, mostly archival, materials to the CHS permanent collections.

Two good summaries of the Porter-Dewson story already exist in our Summer 2017 and Summer 2018 editions of *The Castine Visitor*, which are available via the CHS website, so I will not repeat their biographies here. However, many of the newly accrued items speak for themselves, demonstrating the historical interest and import of the collection as a whole. Choosing only a few to highlight was difficult!

One of the more visually appealing objects in the new donation is a colorful tin bluebird from 1915, which the pair kept in their possession their entire lives, as a memento of the struggle for women's suffrage to which they had both been unfailingly dedicated while resident in both Maine and Massachusetts. The token was one of 100,000 produced as tangible reminders to encourage the passage of "votes for women" in a 1915 Massachusetts state referendum. (The symbol of the bluebird was apparently popularized by a 1908 fairytale play of the same name, in which it represented joy and fulfillment). Unfortunately the ensuing referendum failed, but happily for Molly and Polly the 19th Amendment was ratified five years later.

Another treasure from these halcyon days is an entire box of records pertaining to the couple's service in France during the First World War, when they worked for the American Red Cross, assisting refugees who were fleeing the front. This undertaking frequently entailed scenes of wartime misery and deprivation, as well as logistical roadblocks. Molly grimly opined that "the only solace is work until you can't think and then sleep," but she later described the experience in a letter to her friend Lucy Stebbins as "the great adventure of my life." This archival series includes official correspondence with supervisors and colleagues as well as with family and friends back in the U.S.



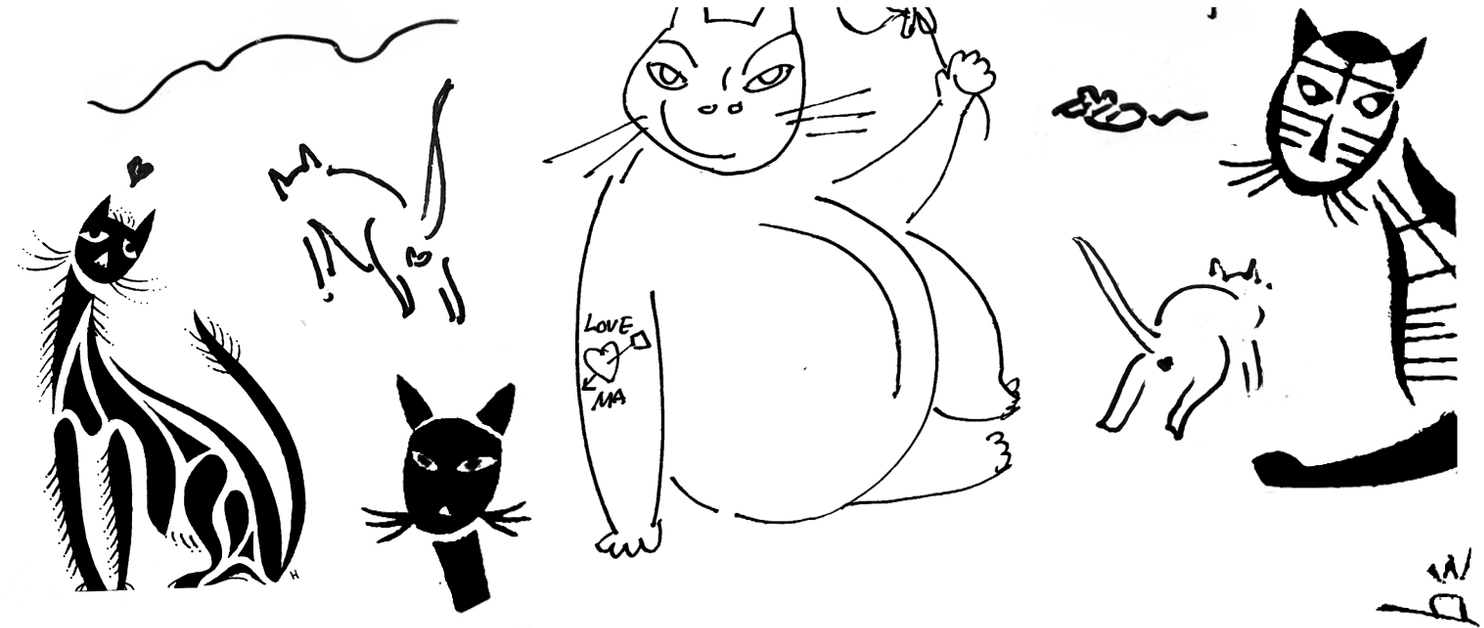
The most intriguing items from the Red Cross era are Polly's letters to Molly — they were stationed for a time in different districts — in which both her manifold frustrations and her stalwart sense of humor are equally evident, as is her profound and playful affection for Molly, whom she frequently refers to as M.O.R. — "my one romance." These are some of the only letters between the two women to still exist. Partly this is because they were not often separated, however family lore also indicates that Molly's letters to Polly, at least, were intentionally burned after her death in 1962 — not a particularly surprising decision in light of McCarthyism and the related Lavender Scare of the 1950s, which possibly influenced Molly's concerns about how her own legacy would be interpreted by subsequent biographers. Polly, happily, flew under the political radar, which may account for the survival of her side of the correspondence.

Inevitably, there are also records related to Molly's illustrious career. The majority of her official papers are held at the FDR Presidential Library and the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe, but the new CHS career series differs slightly in character from these. It consists largely of scrapbooks, manuscript drafts, and collections of framed letters from various presidents (and her friend Eleanor Roosevelt), which would have hung in Molly's wood-panelled Moss Acre office overlooking [continued on p. 8

Votes for Women Bluebird sign. Made in 1915 for "Suffrage Blue Bird Day". The sign is in the design of a Bluebird and reads "Votes for Women Nov. 2, Mass Woman Suffrage Ass'n. Gertrude H. Leonard, Teresa A. Crowley," 2025.21.11.5.

Castine Historical Society

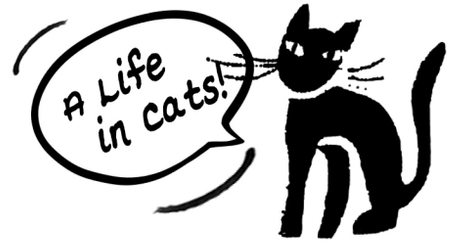




Francis Hamabe's Maine:
A Life in Art

castinehistoricalsociety.org

Francis Hamabe's Maine:
A Life in Art



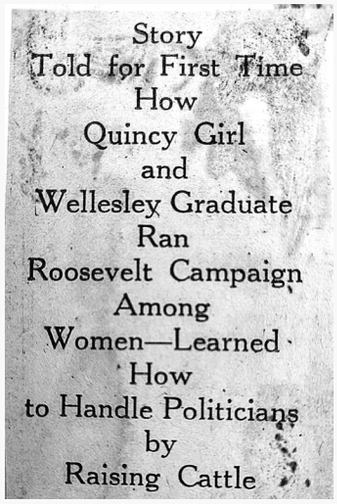
2026 – 2027 Exhibition

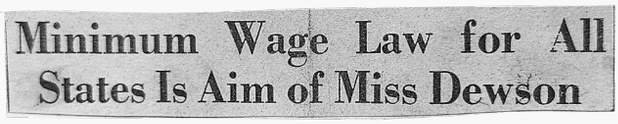
the Penobscot River estuary. These materials showcase her active working process as well as a more personal, self-curated memorialization of her political biography. One imagines her showing these items off to visiting family, or flipping through them herself during the odd nostalgic moment. In one vanishingly rare inscription to Polly on the cover of one of her biographical manuscripts she wrote "read this at your leisure and return when convenient. It will give you an idea of life in New England in the old days..."

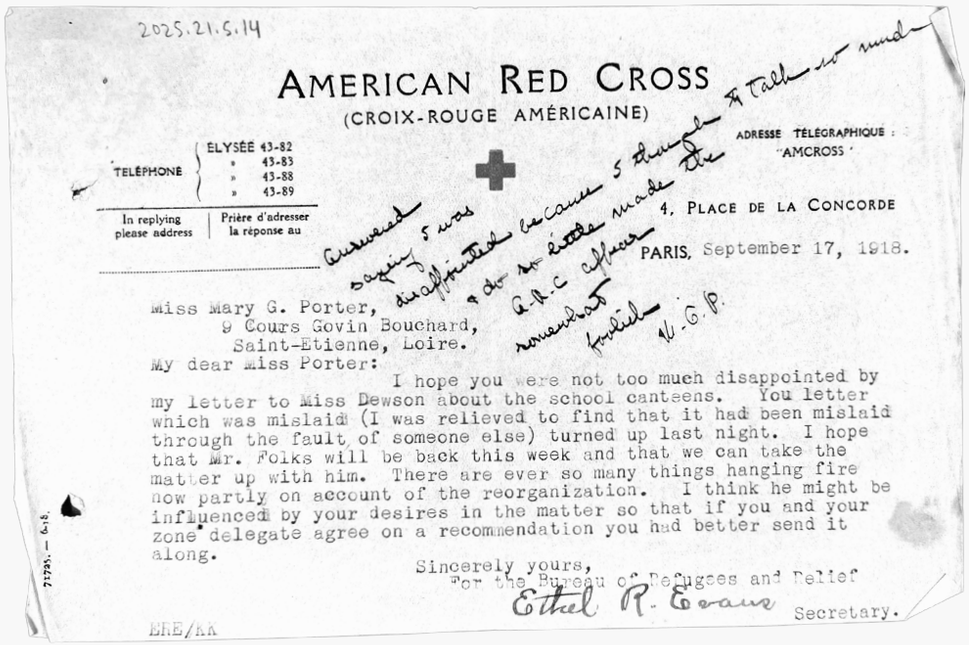
Molly's existing papers at the above-mentioned libraries focus almost entirely on her career and writings. The Moss Acre collection at CHS, in contrast, provides a more interior perspective, evidencing the ongoing ebb and flow of her and Polly's familial and social lives. It has immense value as a rare record of early 20th-century LGBTQ+ history, dovetailing with an impressive array of 28 photo albums and scrapbooks previously donated by the Bournes in 2016, to which this latest donation adds significant context.

And that's not all! We received another accrual of material from the estate in August of 2026, so the processing and cataloging of the collection will continue over the next few months. Although we haven't thoroughly inventoried the new items yet, there appear to be some real gems, such as Molly's diaries from much of the 1910s.

As always, you can peruse the latest catalog entries for these collections on our online catalog, available via www.castinehistoricalsociety.org.


Story
Told for First Time
How
Quincy Girl
and
Wellesley Graduate
Ran
Roosevelt Campaign
Among
Women—Learned
How
to Handle Politicians
by
Raising Cattle


Minimum Wage Law for All
States Is Aim of Miss Dewson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4, PLACE DE LA CONCORDE

PARIS, September 17, 1918.

Miss Mary G. Porter,
9 Cours Govin Bouchard,
Saint-Etienne, Loire.

My dear Miss Porter:

I hope you were not too much disappointed by my letter to Miss Dewson about the school canteens. You letter which was mislaid (I was relieved to find that it had been mislaid through the fault of someone else) turned up last night. I hope that Mr. Folks will be back this week and that we can take the matter up with him. There are ever so many things hanging fire now partly on account of the reorganization. I think he might be influenced by your desires in the matter so that if you and your zone delegate agree on a recommendation you had better send it along.

Sincerely yours,
For the Bureau of Refugees and Relief
Ethel R. Evans
Secretary.

ERE/AA

A letter to Polly during her time serving in the American Red Cross during World War I.


Strategist


"We'll Win"

Newspaper clippings and ephemera from scrapbooks kept by Molly Dewson and Polly Porter.



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2026 House & Garden Tour

2026 was an exciting year for your historical society, as one of our most notable events we host took place: our House & Garden Tour! This year, we featured eleven homes and three beautiful gardens. We welcomed over 1,400 guests to our tour this year, a new record for the CHS! The week was an incredible one, showcasing the best our small community has to offer. We are incredibly proud of this event and grateful to the over two hundred volunteers who made this event such a huge success.

Benefit Preview Dinner

House & Garden Tour Sponsors and Patrons were invited to attend a benefit preview dinner on July 22 at the incredible historic home of Ellie and Doug Benjamin. Two hundred guests attended this event, which included food catered by the incredible Bar Harbor Catering. The beautiful event was co-hosted by Lisa Haugen and Karen Koos, whose team of volunteers thought of every detail. Our Sponsors, Patrons, and Corporate Sponsors raised over $100,000 for the CHS alone, and we are incredibly grateful for their generosity!

House & Garden Tour Day

Over 1,400 people from across Maine, New England, and elsewhere came to Castine for the House & Garden Tour on July 24. The day was really a showcase of our idyllic coastal village: the temperature was in the mid-70s, the sun was shining, and a gentle breeze kept everyone cool. Our visitors were treated to the incredible architecture—historic and contemporary—of our town, along with the thoughtful landscaping in our community. The town as a whole really showed up to make sure this event was a huge success: over two hundred people volunteered, local businesses and individuals supported our visitors by providing food and water and places to rest, and others drove their own vehicles to shuttle folks around.

We are especially appreciative of all of our attendees who came to the tour, which is our most important fundraising event. Together, we raised over $170,000 for the Castine Historical Society, which is more than half of our yearly budget! Our organization thrives on the support of our donors and community members, so thank YOU for making this event possible.

Thank you to Co-Chairs Ruth Scheer & Mary Dearborn, Preview Party Chairs Lisa Haugen & Karen Koos, all other committee chairs, and the more than 250 volunteers that made the Castine, Maine House & Garden Tour 2026 a resounding success!





Benefit preview dinner guests were treated to a signature blueberry cocktail in the incredible backyard of Ellie and Doug Benjamin's historic home in Castine.



CHS Executive Director Kate McMahon and Board President Dabney McKenzie honored the amazing leadership of Tour co-chairs Mary Dearborn and Ruth Scheer.



Thank You to
Our Generous Community

Town of Castine,
particularly the staff in the town office
Castine Golf Club
Castine Inn
Castine Touring Company
Castine Yacht Club
Maine Maritime Academy
Pentagöet Inn
Witherle Memorial Library

Our Benefit Preview Dinner Hosts

Ellie and Doug Benjamin

Our Homeowners

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Attendees were able to shop our local Kids and Maker's Market on the CHS lawn, and grab lunch from a variety of local food trucks.





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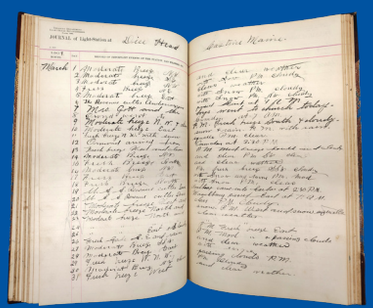
Dice Head Light logs kept by the Spurling family: Edward T. Spurling (lighthouse keeper from 1911-1930) and his wife Gertrude "Gertie" Spurling. Generously donated by the couple's granddaughter, Gail Spurling Delano King, the logs record not only weather conditions but also journal-style entries detailing day trips, social visits, town events, and notable births, marriages, and deaths, painting a rich picture of Castine town life in the early 1900s. The family kept the logs going for many years, even after they had vacated Dice Head!



Dice Head Light logbooks ca. 1905 to 1964, 2026.20. These logbooks feature major events in town as well as the Spurling family.

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