

# The Growth of a Resort

by Joyce Bibber

South Harpswell was developed as a resort in the late nineteenth century; but the earliest summer residents had come long before, when the area was a seasonal haven for residents of inland river valleys during the centuries before the white men arrived. They wintered in the forest areas where game was more plentiful, but journeyed to the coast during the summers in part to gather and dry fish for their winter consumption. As many as thirty-four shell heap sites located on the shores of the Neck prove that they indulged in a change of diet.



When white settlers first began seeking out the Maine coast as a good spot at which to enjoy summertime is not recorded; but at least a small amount of summer visiting must have preceded an attempt to exploit the attractions of the Potts Point area, underway by 1835. Why else would anyone open a hotel which was so far from a highway? That year Alexander Wentworth bought about two acres abutting the old Pinkham cemetery north of the present causeway in South Harpswell, approximately where the Indians had camped only a decade or so before.

Wentworth's deed mentioned land and buildings. The latter were not described, but tradition says that Charles Bailey was then hired to erect a summer hotel, this borne out by a mortgage given Bailey by Wentworth later that summer, on a two-story building, "known as the Harpswell Mansion House." Bailey's heirs had to foreclose in 1844: and the property went through a variety of owners in the next few decades. Eventually it came into the hands of Frederick Dearborn, of Brunswick. From 1853 to 1860, no matter who the actual owners were, the "proprietor" was Aaron Adams, whose regular

advertisements in the Brunswick newspapers provide information on the hostelry.

The ads, together with editorial comment, leave no doubt that the Mansion House was intended as a summer business. It opened in May or June and closed early in the fall. Adams attempted to accommodate potential guests by leaving a horse at a Brunswick stable for them to use in driving down the peninsula. When *The Brunswick Telegraph's* editor spent a vacation at the Mansion House in July of 1857, he composed a long column for his paper, extolling the pleasures of the place, including its swings and bowling alleys, but mentioning particularly the fishing. Adams also from time to time sent the editor news items about good fishing in the area.

By the time Frederick Dearborn took control of the Mansion House in 1860, South Harpswell was becoming easier for guests "from away" to reach. Brunswick had trains to Bath and to Portland in the late 1840s; and there were connections between Portland and Boston even earlier, by 1842. Mansion House carriages were made available at the Brunswick station daily during the season. A long carriage ride to South Harpswell might be

avoided by travelling from Portland by water. Although steamship lines between Portland, Boston, and towns along the Maine coast were in operation in the 1820s, and although small privately owned steamers may have stopped at fishermen's wharves earlier, the "Harpwell Steamboat Landing Company" obtained its land on Potts Point only in 1856. Rumors of service from Portland were frequent in the following years.

The first positive indication of scheduled service to Potts Point was in an 1864 advertisement which stated that a steamer was making two trips a day to and from Portland. Even that situation did not continue unbroken, as Portland's destructive fire in July of 1866 disrupted operations from the city, forcing local hotel guests to hire sailing vessels to make the trip there. Delays caused by a lack of wind highlighted the value of the steamers.

Meanwhile, interest in summering on the Maine coast sparked the building of hotels like the Ocean House, put up in Cape Elizabeth in 1849 and enlarged soon after, and the Ottawa House, erected in 1853 on Cushing's Island. Farther east, Bar Harbor's first hotel was opened in 1855. It was to be expected that Harpswell, with its rugged scenery and location not too far from the cities, would attract new investors. In 1864 the Mansion House got competition.

That year John T. Smith, of Portland, acquired a plot of four and five-eighths acres, stretching across the near-island of lower Potts Point, from east shore to west shore and almost adjoining the steamboat wharf. On it was erected a large hotel called the Sea-Side. No depiction of this hotel has been found. The structure was probably fairly elaborate, having been designed by Portland architect George Milford Harding, much of whose other work boasted extensive heavy decorative trim. Described by Smith as "the largest establishment, constructed expressly for the purposes of a Hotel, at any Watering Place on the coast of Maine," it could accommodate a hundred and fifty guests and was three stories high, although an 1866 guest reported that its third-floor rooms had not all been finished. The location

provided vistas out to sea to the south and of the White Mountains to the west, and three hundred feet of verandas enabled guests to sit outside to enjoy the views. Advertisements mentioned, and a visitor delighted in being able to see, Orr's Island, "consecrated by the genius of Mrs. Stowe." The Sea-Side establishment also included a bowling alley, which connected the main building with the stable.

The Sea-Side House was not in operation long enough to stimulate much change in the area, although Erastus Simpson purchased a wharf and land for a store next to it. If he anticipated great business from the hotel guests, these plans were doomed on a September evening in 1866, at the end of the hotel's third season, when a "domestic" noticed smoke coming from the stable. Fire proved impossible to contain, as it spread through the connected buildings. Little except some of the furniture from the first two floors could be saved. There was talk at the time of arson, and it need not be precluded, of course, especially since reported vandalism of Smith's next business, a billiard saloon in Brunswick, raises the question of how much he might have tended to antagonize others.

With only partial insurance, and with difficulty collecting on that, Smith did not rebuild. He moved to Brunswick and opened first the billiard room, then an ice cream parlor, and then the Bowdoin Hotel. In 1875 Smith had his Potts Point land surveyed and divided into twenty-nine small lots, reserving one larger section for a hotel (never built). Although eight of the lots changed hands quickly, those sales did not signal a sudden spurt of building in the area, as none of the early buyers made further use of his new property.

As both the Mansion House and the Sea-Side had been reported full in the high season, the destruction of the latter could have meant a great deal of business for the former; and Dearborn planned for expansion. Just a month after the Sea-Side burned, he purchased the nearby house which Sidney Bailey had been using as a boarding establishment; but enjoyment of the expansion was confined to a single summer. The Mansion

House also went up in flames, on July 4, at the beginning of the 1868 season.

The newly bought house was one of two known to be open to boarders later that month. In 1873, Frederick Dearborn deeded the structure to his son George, who had been managing it. The younger Dearborn enlarged the house to three stories in 1875-6 and ran it as a small hotel, called the second Mansion House, for a decade and a half. When he closed it and left the state in 1892, the property was left in the hands of creditors, and eventually became rental housing.

The 1870s, then, began with little in the way of a summer resort in Harpswell. Two early hotels had come and gone. Some people were taking in boarders, but most did not advertise; and it is doubtful if many houses had more than a few guests at a time. Mentioned as among homeowners taking boarders in 1868, were Dearborn and "Captain Blanchard, late Depot Master . . . ."

Others who catered to guests were not named, but the Paul Stover household at Stover's Point probably also had boarders that year. Lydia Dinsmore Stover had herself been a summer visitor when she met her husband-to-be in the 1840s; and she since had entertained boarders regularly. Mrs. Stover's own accounts for 1873-4 show that a few summertime guests paid a dollar a day per person, seventy-five cents more if there was a horse to be boarded, most remaining only a week or so. By 1872, storekeeper Joseph Lawson's farmhouse was open to boarders, also.

Additional visitors came to stay in tents. Some at Potts Point earned newspaper mention as early as 1862. Then, in 1866, about forty boys from the Franklin Family School in Topsham, loaded with their gear into two "monster hayracks," headed for South Harpswell for several weeks of studies combined with recreation. The outing became an annual affair, and the original policy of the boys' cooking their own food was superseded by a system of taking meals at the Mansion House. In 1872, female students were included, although they slept in boarding houses instead of in the tents.



The field day which marked the closing of the school's session came to be considered a spectacle worth observing, especially as the Brunswick newspaper regularly touted the event as the "Harpswell Regatta." One year a few boys greased their borrowed dories with porgy oil to make them slip through the water better: the following year *all* dories were so oiled. By 1875, two to three hundred spectators were present for the event; and the numbers had nearly tripled a year later, with excursion boats arriving from Portland and Yarmouth. At that time one newspaper commented, "We have never seen so many camps on the Neck in any previous year, and we learned that the houses are all full."

Perhaps it was the boarders and the campers who were the anticipated customers for two apparently short-lived restaurants of the early 1870s. In 1871, George L. Randall, of West Harpswell, advertised a chowder house at Potts Point; and two younger men from the area, identified only as "Pinkham and Merrow," announced a similar undertaking two years later.

Events in 1875 provided a boost to the future resort. Even though that year's subdivision of the Sea-Side property did not lead to an immediate influx of cottagers, knowledge of the undertaking must have served as one motivating force for development. Also important was the introduction of a new steamship, owned by citizens of Chebeague Island and put into service between Harpswell and Portland. The *Henrietta's* first trip was announced on May 14, 1875. The little steamer remained in local service for at least six

years and offered improved ties with Portland and the trains.

Indications of expected growth at the Point soon appeared. Within a few weeks of the first sales of Smith's lots in 1875, teacher Charles B. Knapp and his brother-in-law Paul Durgan of West Harpswell acquired the property immediately south of the causeway and east of the road. On its highest point they erected a restaurant, to open the following summer. Soon after that purchase, another West Harpswell dweller, Theophilus Stover, together with his son-in-law, Sinnett Orr Johnson, bought a piece of land south of the restaurant acreage. In one corner of their property Stover and Johnson built a bowling alley with an upstairs hall, the latter completed in time to be used for a dance in the evening following the "Harpswell Regatta" in August, 1876. Durgan and Knapp were reported to be planning rental cottages as well, but those failed to materialize for nearly two decades. Even as the newspaper report on the new construction claimed that "Harpswell is one of the best summer resorts on Casco Bay, and affords ample facilities for sailing, fishing, and other sea-shore sports, and no pains will be spared to meet the wants of pleasure-seekers visiting this place," little in the area below the causeway, except for the new buildings, suggested a resort. Only seven or eight private homes, some of which took boarders; the wharves; a fish dealership; and a general store, together with outbuildings, were there. In the mile or so north of the causeway stood Dearborn's newly expanded hotel; more homes, some open to boarders; and a few small shops. Potts Point was not in 1876 an active vacation spot.

The relative inactivity may have appealed to a few families from Auburn who visited that year. Like many other residents of industrial cities, they were beginning to think in terms of a cooler, quieter life in the summer; and, as merchants and owners or managers of the new mills, they could afford to go elsewhere for the "heated season," to own two homes. Even if only the women and children could be away all summer, the advantages in terms of their health and comfort were believed

to outweigh problems of separated families. If a summer place was close enough, the men could make use of trains and steamships and visit over the weekends. Otherwise, those who could not leave their businesses for long periods spent only short vacations *en famille*.

The twin cities of Lewiston and Auburn had undergone considerable growth in the mid-nineteenth century and were already places from which to escape to fresher ocean air. Consequently, a group of the cities' residents decided on a cooperative venture, the erection of a small seaside



"colony" to which they might repair for relaxation. After investigating other locations, they selected South Harpswell. Ease of transportation played an important role in the decision, as trains connected Auburn with either Portland or Brunswick. A drive from the depot at the latter involved a dozen miles of unpaved, but not forbidding, roads. On the other route, getting from Portland's station to the steamship terminal was relatively simple, while the *Henrietta* was carrying passengers and goods among the islands of Casco Bay to the South Harpswell wharf.

Clara and Davis Blanchard were ready to sell the few acres they owned, sited on an elevation about a mile from the steamboat wharf, with watery vistas to the south, east, and west, and including farm buildings which might be converted to communal use. The purchase was made, and the development was underway. Although technically the "Auburn-Harpswell Association," the enterprise was known as "the Auburn Colony" or just "the Colony" from the first. Most original members

were from Auburn or Lewiston, although one was a relative living in Massachusetts.

Cooperative vacation ventures of the sort were not uncommon in the late nineteenth century. For comparison, Ocean Park, begun in 1881 near Old Orchard, comes immediately to mind, although that organization differed in having a church orientation and a much larger membership. Both developments featured private cottages clustered near community halls. Wishing neither to bring along hordes of servants nor to spend time cooking or maintaining their grounds, the members kept the individual quarters small and planned for communal meals and activities. In Harpswell, the old farmhouse became the kitchen and dining space, the barn housed a few carriages, and an assembly hall was soon constructed. In Ocean Park, an assembly "temple" was an early priority; the first dining room was a tent. In both locations, cooks, waitresses, and managers would be hired by the Association, while each individual family owned and had responsibility for its personal cottage. Somewhat similar combinations of private quarters with communal meals existed in little rental cottages springing up around many summer hotels like the Ottawa House on Cushing Island.

The first cottages of the Colony were identical, planned by a Lewiston architectural firm and erected by a Lewiston-Auburn contractor, using materials from the lumberyard of association members. The seventeen-by-thirteen-foot buildings were all painted white on the exterior and left unfinished inside, "put up cheaply," according to an observer who nevertheless saw them as "conveniently arranged" and "quite attractive." The privately owned cottages did not remain all alike. In following decades, some families installed fireplaces, built small ells, extended their porches, or applied exterior trim.

The addition of twenty families for the summer months may not have affected Harpswell coffers much at first, with the construction crews having been brought in; but like the division of the Sea-Side lots, the Colony spurred further development. Even as the cottages were going up in the summer of 1877, a triangle of land across the road from the

Colony was being subdivided into three lots. Two of the purchasers were Lewiston grocers, both of whom would be living in South Harpswell by 1880. One briefly ran a boarding house, the Bonanza. The third buyer, Eli Alexander, built his family a house large enough to take in boarders. In the 1890s he would also serve as general handyman and caretaker for the Colony.

In 1883, six years after those land sales, part of the farmstead south of the Colony property was also sold and subdivided. The Massachusetts-based purchasers were rumored to be planning a "colony" for Bostonians, with cottages and a large boarding establishment. Twelve lots were sold in the next two years; but buyers were mostly from the Lewiston area rather than Boston, and nothing other than cottages was built there. Thus, even if it did not contribute much to the economy at once, the Auburn Colony's establishment soon encouraged other Lewiston-Auburn people to take an interest in Harpswell Neck as a place in which to spend the summer. In addition, the idea of summering at Harpswell was being promoted by the Brunswick newspaper editor, who saw the area as cooler in summer and warmer in the fall. At least one Brunswick man bought a cottage lot in the 1870s, soon after other development had begun.

In 1878, facilities for staying in Harpswell increased, as two local families opened new hotels at the Point. The Merriconeag House was built on Joseph Pinkham's property just below the steamboat wharf and south of the Sea-Side lots. Austin Pinkham, Joseph's son, was its first proprietor. The Harpswell House was slightly north of the causeway, to the west of the original Mansion House site. Alcott Merriman had bought the land and was identified as proprietor, although some of his brothers were said to have shares in the business and Frank Randall was named as manager. An old photograph, fly-specked and probably used as an advertising poster, depicts a three-story structure with an observatory on the top. It had a short existence: the hotel lot, without buildings, changed hands in the autumn of 1882.

The new establishments had much in common, as they were of similar sizes and shapes, "plainly

but neatly constructed," according to the *Brunswick Telegraph*, with similar black walnut parlor furniture and, "best of all," beds with springs and "new full cleanly mattresses." Clients for the early years included the Portland Yacht Club and various Maine business groups on outings, all of whom patronized the hotel dining rooms, together with guests who came greater distances. (One New Yorker was attracted by descriptions in a New York paper.)

It was a decade after the construction of those summer hotels before any appreciable numbers of cottages were built on the property below the causeway, despite the earlier sale of lots. Litigation tied up some of the former Sea-Side land; but one deterrent during most of the decade after 1878 was the establishment of a lobster cannery on a lot next to Simpson's wharf. After it closed, a newspaper noted that its removal made all of the lower Neck "vastly more desirable." Nevertheless, despite the odors which were concomitant to any summer-operated concern processing shellfish, a few hardy souls began cottage-building on or near the east shore while the cannery was in operation.

Meanwhile, there had been additional changes on the hill near the Colony. The Bonanza House was sold in 1882. Charles Coburn, of Greene, continued to operate the small hotel, renamed the "Harpswell House" by 1887. Postcards from about the turn of the century show it as a two-story building, with attic, under an overhanging gable roof edged with wooden "gingerbread," the whole surrounded by two levels of encircling verandas.

Like many other hotel owners, Coburn sometimes turned the business over to managers. His 1896 choice, though "well endorsed," proved disastrous, not only leaving town owing money to local fishermen and tradesmen, but having done "a poor summer's business" at the hotel. That he was a few months later being sought in connection with a murder in New Hampshire may, however, have made his local creditors feel lucky. Coburn himself opened the Harpswell House in later years; and in 1901, after his death, it was sold at auction and renamed the "Happy Thought." In 1912 it became a

private guest house, owned by an Auburn Colony member.

The other new hotel of the 1880s was the Lawson House. After more than a decade of taking in boarders, Joseph Lawson and his son determined their old farmhouse to be insufficient and in 1885-6 erected a two-story, six-bay, hotel on their property, across the road and up the hill from the Auburn Colony. It so flourished that just two years later, they doubled the hotel's length to twelve bays and added dormer windows, permitting the attic space to be utilized and providing sixty-one rooms in the enlarged building. After the elder Lawson died in 1890, the son turned its operation over to the "Harpswell Hotel Co.," which put in modern plumbing and attempted new marketing techniques, including shore dinner/excursion package deals with the Maine Central Railroad, the Portland trolley cars, and the steamship company. In 1900 the property was sold to a Portland lawyer and became the Oceanview.

One more establishment grew from a boarding house to a hotel in the 1890s. In the early years of that decade, Leander and Therese Merrow took in boarders and also ran a bakery in his family home, which they called the "Germania." However, in 1895, their one-and-one-half-story house with an ell toward the water was dwarfed by a thirty-by-forty-foot, two-story addition, with more rooms in the cross-gabled attic. That summer the Hotel Germania had as many as forty-five guests at a time. During the next decade, the facility grew considerably, getting longer porches in 1896, an eight-room extension in 1898, a new dining room in 1902, additional porches in 1903, and a "summer house" (gazebo) in 1904. Some of the porches extended over Potts Harbor, prompting a claim that at high tide, "fish can be caught from the piazza."

The Germania's name honored Mrs. Merrow's homeland. However, in the early summer of 1915, two years before the United States entered World War I, the "Germania" sign came down and a new one, reading "Sea Gables," went up. A newspaper which mentioned the opening of the Germania in June announced the Sea Gables' closing in the fall. Americans were supposed to be neutral at that time, but the Merrows were prudently dissociating themselves from the nation responsible for the sinking of the *Lusitania* and accused of atrocities in Belgium.



A smaller commercial venture, the Strout House, was built in 1903, perhaps with roomers in mind. Revillo Strout operated a seasonal store, selling ice cream, other edibles, and variety goods, but also offering single rooms or housekeeping units for rent. Although Strout at times advertised "Shore dinners served daily," board was not included with the rooms, either by him or by the Smith brothers, who bought the business in 1919.

Probably most of the Point's residents leased their extra rooms in the summer for supplementary income, as did many cottage-owners; but a few individuals made a business of maintaining boarding houses. Among the frequently mentioned concerns in South Harpswell were the Alexander House and the Morse House. Hannah Morse did not often need to advertise, but was taking boarders well before she married one of them and became "Mrs. Morse." Her house, built in the 1860s, was one of the more capacious residences in the area, even prior to the addition of a two-story ell in 1902. As a boarding house, it was listed in various articles about housing possibilities at the

Point and word of mouth was generally sufficient to keep her busy.

Eli Alexander operated differently. Although he had purchased his land only in 1878, the Alexander Boarding House was one of four local hostelries included in that year's *Maine Register*; and he also had an advertisement in the very first issue of the *Casco Bay Breeze*. As Eli was often occupied with other pursuits, it must have been Arcelia Alexander who kept the business going for nearly thirty years. Their method of operation was not entirely consistent: sometimes they offered rooms, but not meals, other times they fed non-residents. Not long after expanding the building, the Alexanders bought and moved to a West Harpswell farm, leaving the business in the hands of managers until they sold it to Leander Merrow's brother in 1909. As the Merrow House, it burned in 1910.

Other homeowners at times took roomers, rather than boarders. Georgia and George Riley Johnson's large home, called Grand View, was operated that way in 1894. In other years, they either placed it in charge of one of the visitors or simply rented the house out to a family, moving themselves into a smaller cottage for the summer. Johnson owned other property, including a cottage just across the road from his house; and when Grand View burned, just as the 1916 season was about to start, the couple had already settled into the adjacent old schoolhouse, by then converted into a residence. That structure was also destroyed.

Threatened by that same fire was the older home to the south, built for Willoughby Pinkham, but then owned by Mrs. Johnson Harmon Stover. While Stover lived, he and his family had also at times rented their house to summer people and moved into one of their small cottages. After her husband's death in 1912, Lydia Stover became a summer resident herself, staying in Portland during colder months, but arriving in South Harpswell just prior to "the season" and opening her former home, by then known as the Stover House, for guests.

By then, the lower Harpswell Neck was much changed. In 1871, only Dearborn's small boarding house claimed guests as its *raison d'être*. Thirty

years later, the Merriconeag, Oceanview and Germania hotels were flourishing, along with numerous boarding houses. The Merriconeag claimed to accommodate one hundred twenty-five persons, while the Oceanview, with sixty-one rooms, must have fitted in about as many; and the Hotel Germania held over sixty. All three were still in business in 1920. During 1870s, all hotels and nearly all boarding houses were owned and operated by local people; but the Lawson House was leased to others after its builder's 1890 death, even before being sold and renamed; and after 1893 the Merriconeag House also was managed by "proprietors" from out of town. Some proprietors stayed the winter; others found seasonal employment elsewhere, sometimes managing winter resort hotels. The Germania remained a family concern. Boarding house owners were more likely to live locally, although the business did attract a few individuals from elsewhere; and some older homeowners began to leave town during the winter, probably with the income from boarding. Both types of facility tended to introduce people to the area; and for some, the experience led to a desire to come regularly to a place of their own.

Thus, by the World War years, the trend for visitors was more toward owning or renting cottages than patronizing the big hotels. The sale of the Merriconeag House in 1914 was probably the result of a decline in its profits; its owners had left the management in the hands of others for decades. Its new owner immediately had the land south of the hotel divided into lots and began to sell them off. The Oceanview also changed hands again in that period. The era of the summer hotel was waning.