

Vinalhaven Historical Society

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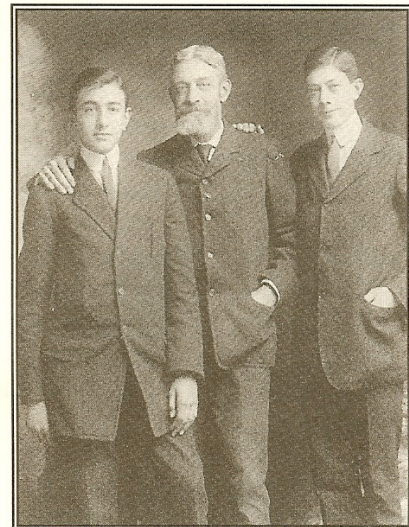
Annual Newsletter 2011

Carving a Place in the Fox Islands: J Murray Howe II

THE FAR EAST DOWN EAST

By Tina Cohen

One morning last summer, a small group of us sat around a table in front of the Harbor Gawker, crowded under an umbrella for shelter from a hot early-day sun. We were there to talk about art, history, and islands, specifically the Fox Islands and Japan. Those were, not coincidentally, the ingredients in an informative and beautiful book that had just been published. The author, Peggy Howe Ewing, and photographer, Jim Smith, were under that umbrella along with artist Lynn Krauss and me. We were discussing the Japanese-style carvings and painted details installed in some houses built along the Thoroughfare over the years 1886-1920. Peggy's grandfather was the creative force who built those residences, and he and his work are the subject of that book, *Carving a Place in the Fox Islands: J. Murray Howe II* (published by blurb.com and available through the website; its cover art happens to feature Howe's scene of people under umbrellas). This particular morning, we were bemoaning the fact that his art was inaccessible to public view, inside homes, private property. Was it possible to actually display some of those objects? And where better to share them than at the Vinalhaven



Historical Society?

Thus, the idea was hatched, to contact Bill Chilles and Sue Radley and see what connection might be made. Other meetings around other tables ensued and came to include the sage Roy Heisler, with support from Lee Howe Howard for fundraising, and Erica Reitmayer as our link to related merchandise. With Jim and Peggy's hard work in place- their research, inventory, and documentation of the oeuvre-Lynn and I raised our hands simultaneously to the question of curating a show. Yes, we'd be delighted. And here we are now, as I write this in March, anticipating the exhibit's installation this spring, set to open when the museum does in mid-June.

Above: J. Murray Howe II and sons, A. Murray Howe II and James M. Howe III

Left: Carving of people under umbrellas at The Chalet



With treasures from Vinalhaven and North Haven on display, the public will for the first time be able to appreciate the amazing Japanesque decoration that has graced some island interiors. Remarkably, Howe was self-taught as an artist and wood carver. His artistry may have had a financial incentive—he thought the ornamentation would enhance the value and appeal of homes for buyers from away; but the designing and carving, done at home in Milton, Massachusetts became a creative undertaking with its own intrinsic satisfaction.

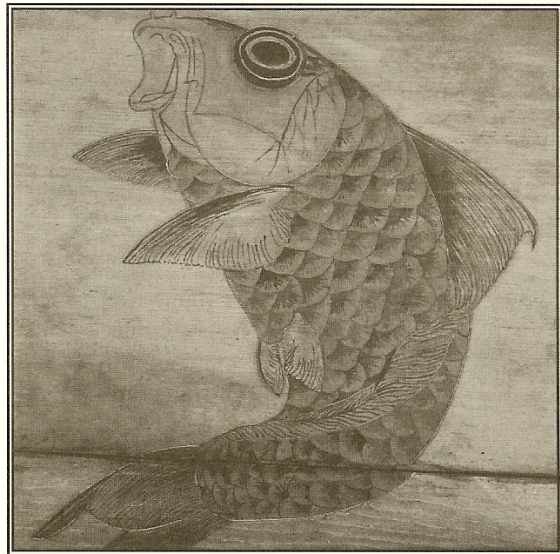
Howe first visited the Fox Islands in 1882, and immediately saw the potential for summer rusticators. With a plan to develop residences along the Thoroughfare for that kind of community; Howe hoped to entice well-to-do Bostonians as buyers. It was the era of industrialization in New England, and those who could afford to escaped their urban environs as often as possible to places less developed, offering clean air and water, open spaces, and peace and quiet. Inside the homes he built or remodeled (nine of which are described in the book) Howe installed, carved and painted decorative details, intensively covering walls, window and door moldings, along with some ceilings and furnishings. They created an unusual ambience, as the designs were derived from pattern books straight from Japan. The texts were obtained from Howe's father-in-law, Dr. George Rogers Hall, who had spent 1859-1862 developing the Walsh, Hall and Company Trading Business in Yokohama.

Beginning in 1854, following Commodore Perry's arrival in Yokohama's harbor, selected ports of Japan opened to Westerners for visits and trade after hundreds of years of exclusion. When Dr. Hall arrived, he was one of the few Americans there; his time in Japan preceded its later popularity as a tourist destination for adventurous New Englanders that began in the mid-1860s. The "curios" brought home from these trips found appreciation among a wide audience. Museums began including Asian art, with notable collections developed in Boston and Salem, Massachusetts. Home interiors boasted vases, dishware, umbrellas, fans, kimonos, and statuary. Dr. Hall had his own assortment, including botanical specimens and books. For Howe, these artistic influences ultimately became translated into his own unique and personalized vision for décor.

What did Howe's work mean to him? What vision was he realizing? In his transfusion of the Northeast with the Far East, was it metaphysical as well as physical? This summer, come see and consider this for yourself: the art and lore of Howe, the lure of his houses, and the art and allure of the Orient for New Englanders in America's Gilded Age.

(For anyone wanting a jump start understanding the Gilded Age and America's fascination with Japan, two books are recommended: *The Great Wave: Gilded Age Misfits, Japanese Eccentrics, and the Opening of Old Japan* by Christopher Benfey (New York: Random House, 2005) and *Longfellow's Tattoos: Tourism, Collecting, and Japan* by Christine M.E. Guth (Seattle: U. Washington, 2004). Peggy and Jim's book is described in an article in the October 2010 issue of *Working Waterfront*, online at www.islandinstitute.org and *North Haven Summers An Oral History* by Eleanor Motley Richardson, (Courier Companies, 1992)

Above: One of the carved panels at "Hiroshima" on North Haven. Right: Koi carving is located at the Brock Guest House.



Vinalhaven Historical Society's Mission Statement and Annual Appeal

"The purpose of our organization is to collect, identify, preserve, exhibit, interpret and make available for education and research, information and artifacts which illuminate the history of Vinalhaven and its families from its beginning to the present."

Many of you may not be aware that we do not receive any funding from the town; we depend entirely on our annual appeal, new memberships, visitor's donations and special gifts to meet our yearly expenses. Your donation makes it possible for us to fulfill our mission statement's goals, thus preserving Vinalhaven's history for many generations. Our annual appeal notice is enclosed. Please take a minute to renew your membership, or if you are not a member, become one now and join those who care about preserving Vinalhaven's rich past. We thank you in advance for your continued interest and financial support.

With your membership or donation of \$50 or more, we will send you a copy of our *Hurricane Quarry Recipe book*. Printed in 2009, the cookbook contains many recipes written by Nellie Philbrook broadcast over her short wave radio during their stay on Hurricane Island in the early 1900s. Also included are great photos and a brief history of Hurricane from its early years to present day.

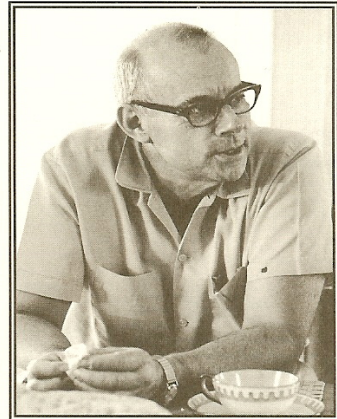
Gifts to the Museum - 2010

As we look back on 2010, we are once again reminded of the generosity of so many. Our collections continue to grow and we are constantly cataloging and inventorying items that are donated to the museum. On behalf of our board of directors we thank you and hope you continue to think of us as you clean out closets, attics and other storage areas. Some of our greatest treasures are actually items that may have been otherwise overlooked or even thrown away. Old photos, letters, ledgers, diaries, dishes, newspaper articles and so on, help fill in gaps of local history. Any item of Vinalhaven interest will be gladly accepted and should you want an original image or document returned, we will make a copy and return the original. Following is a brief list of 2010 gifts:

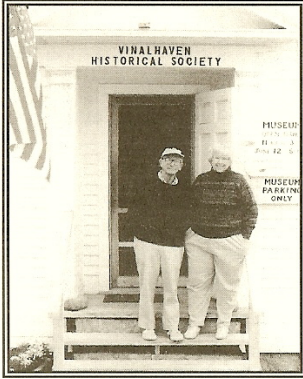


The first EKG machine used on the island by Dr. Earle, donated by Natalie Saxton and family; State of Maine Militia list for 1893, from Kathleen

DesMaisons; Netting needles, mesh boards and old photographs from Dick Healey and Cathy Healey Holmquist; glove and baseball used in the 1933 Chief's championship baseball game, given by the family of Clyde Bickford; large framed painting of the Mary T. Quinby, on loan from Carl Webster; a large collection of Morgan Sutcliffe's photos and negatives, given to us by Lawrence and Leannette Philbrook, and several hundred slides of Vinalhaven lobster boats from the 1980s donated by Joan Wright. We were also delighted to receive a lovely seascape painted and donated by Paul Philbrook to be sold to help in our fund-raising efforts.



In Memoriam Esther Fisher Bissell



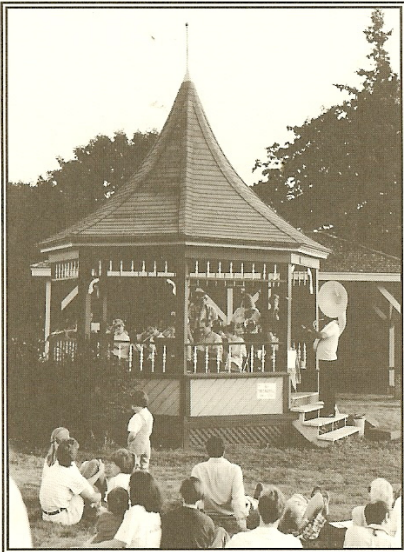
We were saddened to hear of the passing of Esther Bissell who died peacefully in Rockport on May 7, 2011. Esther was a past museum Co-Director and volunteer, and with her husband, Roy Heisler, did much to bring our museum to its present level. We will be forever grateful to her for her vision, energy and dedication to the Vinalhaven Historical Society. We extend our sincere condolences to Roy and her family.

Vinalhaven Bandstand

In 1895, in response to the poor attendance of indoor band concerts, and with a great deal of respect for the newly formed town band, the W-14 Club erected the bandstand on the corner of Main and Water Street. While little is known about the W-14 Club, more is available to us about the band and bandstand. There was a huge gathering for the opening night concert. "The applause in response to the band's efforts was spontaneous and unstinted." During a break in the program, band members passed through the crowd taking a collection to help future expenses of the group. When they returned to the bandstand, a mere sixteen cents had been donated!



A few years later the structure was moved to its present day location on the Village Common, facing the Civil War Monument and the Andrew Carnegie Public Library.



Through the years, our beloved bandstand has been the site of many concerts, enjoyed by those near and far. Today many school and town musicians can boast about playing in the Vinalhaven Bandstand. The bandstand has been a place of refuge and relaxation as well. Many islanders, day trippers and seasonal residents have sought shelter from the hot sun, damp fog or sluicing rain. Young folks meet up with friends under its roof and swap stories or watch as people and vehicles go by.

The bandstand has been an integral part of this community for many generations. Sadly, it has succumbed over time to the ravages of weather as well as damage caused by careless, disrespectful individuals who have torn up boards, pulled out spindles and senselessly destroyed this unique structure.

Fortunately, there are those who find it in themselves to repair such damage, and over the years volunteers have stepped up to the plate to do just so. Whether an individual or several civic-minded people, the bandstand has somehow always been returned to its former self. This year has been no exception. Thanks to a dedicated and determined group of volunteers our bandstand has been restored once again. Soon the sound of music will be back on the Common for all to enjoy.

Red Tornado Strikes Vinalhaven – Twice!

Back in the late 1960s, Sea and Shore Fisheries warden, Lyle Griffin, observed from his home on Lane's Island, a red tornado-shaped object moving across the western side of the harbor. Griffin watched as the long-tailed funnel moved slowly in a southerly direction. After watching the object for several minutes, he called it to the attention of Vernard "Bucky" Warren, engineer at the Vinalhaven Electric Power Plant. Bucky described the object as looking like a saxophone. The two observers thought the funnel was about two miles above the earth's surface. They watched it for more than 20 minutes before it disappeared from view.

Upon reading the newspaper article about the above referenced incident, I. G. (Isaac) Calderwood recalled a similar incident that had occurred many years before when he was but a small boy...

On his return home from mailing a letter for his mother one blustery winter day, young Isaac decided to stop by his Uncle Russell Arey's cobbler shop to pay a visit. A few men gathered there were discussing the high winds of the night before, each trying to outdo the other in velocity. Capt. Ed Robinson, who lived in Snippershins on Clam Shell Alley, said he had gone outside to check the weather, as he did each evening and noticed that while the wind was "blowing and howling" there wasn't a cloud in the sky. "The moon was full and bright and about as clear a night as I ever did see." It was then that he noticed a "queer shaped red cloud" appearing just off Boiler Point on Green's Island. It moved right to the harbor and over Powder House Island. As he watched, he felt particles hitting his face and hands. When he looked down he noticed the snow was turning red.

Well, you can imagine how the other men in the shop felt about this seemingly tall tale and they let Capt. Ed know just how they felt about such a concocted story. Finally, Simon Drew said that if a man comes into Russ' shop with a story like that, than he best be prepared to prove it. Soon all the men were trooping down the street to where Capt. Ed lived. Not one among them believed the story and thought Capt. Ed had had too much elderberry wine the night before. When they reached their destination, there was complete silence. Sure enough! The snow was covered with red dust!

(A possible explanation is that Trade winds from the west may have picked up particles from the plains and carried them for miles across the continent to the Atlantic Coast).

Vinalhaven's Boston Post Cane

According to Barbara Staples, author of three regional Boston Post cane books, the idea of the Boston Post cane originated with Edwin Grozier, editor and publisher of the Boston Post. Sometime prior to 1909, Grozier had ordered a large quantity of ebony from Africa and had commissioned the F. Fradley Company of New York to make 700 gold-topped canes. Letters were sent to the Boards of Selectmen in 700 towns asking them to be trustees for the distribution and safekeeping of the canes.

Each ebony cane had a two inch 14-carat gold head on which was engraved, *Presented by the Boston Post to the oldest citizen of (name of town) – "To Be Transmitted"*. It is not known who the first Vinalhaven recipient was, as records either were not kept or have been lost, but the museum has a partial list of those honored through the years. Guilford Young ("Rabbit Lodge") is the first shown in our records, and perhaps, was indeed the first recipient, as he died in 1919 at the age of 95. There are 10 men and 12 women on our list of Vinalhaven recipients. The last person to receive the cane was Bertha Miller Winslow who received it from town manager Marjorie Stratton in 2004. Bertha passed away in 2008, but our current oldest citizen has declined the cane. So for now, with the selectmen's permission, the cane rests at the museum. It is believed that further recipients will be awarded a plaque and/or a certificate and the beloved cane will be kept here for future generations to see.

2011 SUMMER SCHEDULE

June 14 - September 17
Tuesday-Saturday Noon - 5:00
Sunday & Monday by Appointment (207-863-4410)
Daily July and August Noon - 5:00

SUMMER EXHIBIT

CARVING A PLACE IN THE FOX ISLANDS: The Life and Work of J. Murray Howe II

We are pleased to present the first-ever public display of works in wood by self-taught carver, J. Murray Howe II. The exhibit will highlight carvings, tools, and related memorabilia, as well as nineteenth century Japanese pattern books used by Howe. In conjunction with this display, there will be an illustrated presentation with Peggy Ewing (granddaughter of J. Murray Howe) and photographer, C. James Smith on Tuesday, July 26 at 7 PM in the Smith Hokanson Memorial Hall.



Photo taken from Armbrust Hill prior to 1900. (From the Museum's collection)

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