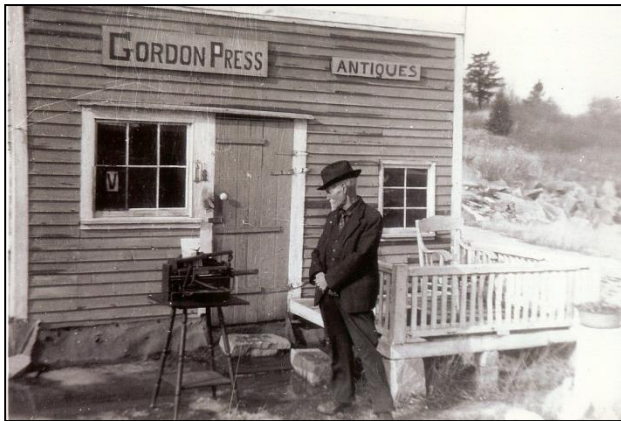


Vinalhaven Historical Society

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Newsletter 2014 John Gordon Printing Press

"THE GORDON PRESS is the smallest Publishing House and printing house in America. Just 8x12 feet in size, a 7x15 Kelsey Hand Press, a 10x15 inch Gordon Press, two cabinets modern type, also antique type. Also stove, bed and cooking utensils etc." – Gordon Press promotional flyer



In 1880, when John Shand Gordon was eight years old, he emigrated from Scotland to Port Dover, Ontario with his mother, Elizabeth Ragg Gordon, five sisters and three brothers. John's father lived and worked in London, never following his family to North America. At the age of fifteen, after a few years of schooling and a brief job with a butcher, he was apprenticed at the Port Dover Maple Leaf newspaper. In those days, type was set by hand by a typographer who stood in front of a large typecase and picked out the letters and symbols needed, word by word and line by line, with everything reading backwards, to make up a column of text. As a "Printers Devil" (a nickname given to a new apprentice at the shop

because he got "black as the devil" with ink), John earned \$1.50 for a fifty-nine hour week sweeping, chopping firewood, mixing lye with ashes and water to clean the type, carrying water and breaking down type after the pages had been printed. In some ways, the latter was more demanding than setting the type, as each letter had to be read backwards and returned to its proper place in the case, being extremely careful not to confuse the p's and q's, or b's and d's. This is where the expression "Mind your P's and Q's" comes from!

After he served his apprenticeship, learned to set type, compose pages, and probably run the presses as well, John qualified as a Journeyman Printer, and was accepted into the International Typographical Union. The ITU had been founded in 1852 as the National Typographical Union, and became the International Typographical Union in 1869 when it began organizing members from Canada. In 1897, the ITU was pivotal in initiating a 48-hour work week and standard wage scale, and then during the Great Depression, introducing a 40-hour work week as a way to redistribute hours among more workers and fewer jobs. Members of the ITU were a proud group, favoring negotiation instead of strikes and living by the idea that the ITU was there to "make the man a better printer, and the printer a better man."

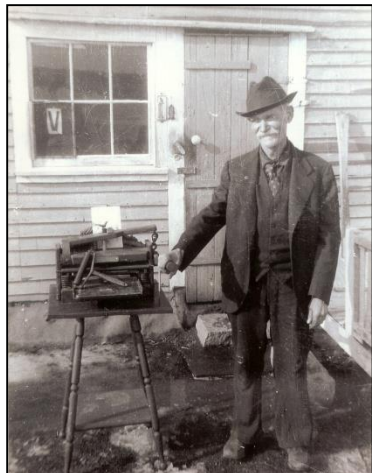
When a journeyman was accepted into the ITU, he was awarded a "traveling card" which gave him a right to work anywhere in North America as an equal to any other journeyman printer. Young printers were encouraged to travel after completing their apprenticeship to learn the ins and outs of the trade. Some chose to make a career as itinerants, moving about from place to place all their working lives. Within the printing trade, they were known as "tramp printers," a label which most of them considered a badge of honor. John Gordon prided himself on being a tramp printer, and used the term after his name, as if it were an academic degree.

"The army of Tramp Printers included thousands of refined, well educated, brainy men, capable of filling the highest position on a newspaper staff, or any vocation that required superior intellect and education. But the 'lure of the road' was so fascinating, and teemed with so many possibilities for leisure, pleasure, sightseeing and sociability that it was simply irresistible." – John Gordon, *The Tramp Printer*, 1927

In 1888, John moved to the United States, going to Springfield, Massachusetts to live with siblings Isobel, Eliza, Peter and James. Later that year, his mother and other siblings joined them. Appropriate of a tramp printer, John took a job with the Holyoke Daily Democrat Newspaper in Holyoke, Massachusetts and jobs in

Bangor and Portland, Maine, moving all over New England. While working in New York City, John became a United States citizen on February 9, 1891.

As linotype machines became available in the late 1880s, typographers had to learn to operate them as well. The operator composed lines of text on a 90-character keyboard. As each line was entered, it was cast in type metal, a mixture of molten lead and antimony. Working in a confined space and around pots of molten metal was detrimental to the health of the typographer and others working around it, many of whom developed "printer's lung," a form of "consumption" (tuberculosis). The condition became so common that the ITU opened a hospital and home in the Colorado Springs area, where the Rocky Mountain air was thought to be good for the lungs. With generous donations, the Childs-Drexel Home for Union Printers was opened in May 1892. In 1899, it became simply the Union Printers Home: "A home for the Aged and Sanitarium for the Tuberculars. Maintained by the International Typographers Union for its Distressed Members." The original Home had 29 acres, but grew to 260 acres including a dairy, farms, gardens and power plant. John spent some years here while "very unwell," and often talks very favorably about his stay in his publications. He dedicated a number of his creations to the Home and his "brothers" there, hoping they would get some enjoyment from reading them.



In 1936, after leaving the Home he found his way to Vinalhaven and lived in what he affectionately labeled "smallest publishing house in America" on the North Haven Road. His tiny abode was an 8' x 12' camp that held his printing press, a bed, wood stove, a small table with soap-box seat, and his rocking chair. Originally he had a Gordon press 1851 model, which took up a lot of room in his quarters, but he eventually sold it for \$50 because he needed groceries. John used his printing expertise and creativity to build himself a new printing press with pieces he had acquired from his sideline in junk dealing. His custom built press (pictured left) was comprised of nineteen pieces of wood, a broomstick handle, four springs, part of an iron, a harness snap, copper pipe, stove-pipe iron, inner tube from a car tire, part of a car air pump, and miscellaneous screws, nuts and bolts. In 1942, he accomplished printing a fifty page book on this press with only a few minor parts breaking. He printed 100 copies of *My First Year as a Printer's Devil*, type-set by hand with twenty-two wood cuts made with a jackknife, and bound in a unique wallpaper cover, in just five weeks. All in all, we know of 16

booklets published by him, in addition to the job-printing commissions he accepted for Vinalhaven businesses who delighted in having his unique artwork on their envelopes and flyers. He even undertook publication of a small community newspaper, but produced only a couple of issues.

In the summer of 1959, John entered the boat parade for the Town of Vinalhaven's sesqui-centennial (175th) celebration. He hand-made a vessel named the *Pioneer*, after Vinalhaven's first steamer (pictured right). It was a small, side paddlewheel vessel, with paddles made of license plates, propelled by converted bicycle parts. Its power was provided by Gordon, who said "*Every circus must have its clown, and I'm going to furnish one for the Marine Parade.*"



The beauty of the island and the kind welcome he received from the people instantly charmed him and he lived on the island for the remainder of his life. Some island residents still remember him.

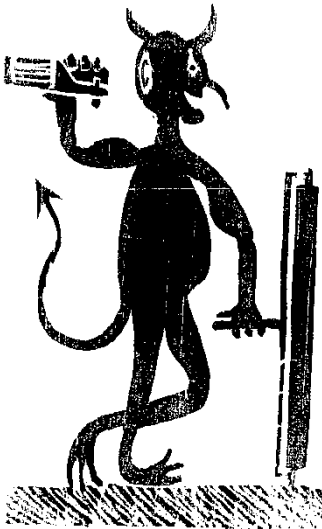
Neighborhood kids recall bringing him loose buttons in return for a few pennies, with which they promptly bought penny candy.

John died at the age of 71, on January 4, 1944. John's son William had joined the war effort during WWII. He returned to Vinalhaven from England long enough to bury his father at Cummings Cemetery. With no time to tend to business the Gordon Press building was boarded up and locked. Over time the small print shop became victim to vandalism and the typeset, printing equipment, his mandolin, and all of his "treasures" were carried away and his story all but disappeared.

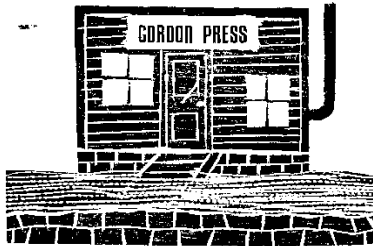
This year we are reviving the memory of John Gordon and celebrating his life and works – You won't want to miss this special exhibit! We would like to thank John's family for all their help, Richard D'Abate for sharing his Gordon collection, and Ken Reiss for his printing knowledge.

Year in Review

The 2013 summer season at the Museum came and went, seemingly, very quickly! We had lots of visitors, gifts, and daily activity. As usual, we had many genealogy questions by email and from visitors. In the spring, we put out a call for slides of Vinalhaven relevance. We asked to scan the images and return the originals to the owners along with a digital copy for easier viewing; Thank you Doug and Donna Carter, Chandler Blackington, Jessica Farrelly, the family of Ellen Hopkins, Roger Young, and Elin Elisofon. Elin also helped facilitate the donation of items from the Don Roberts Estate, including a China doll that once belonged to one of Guilford Young's daughters (ca. 1850s). Liz Carver gave us the opportunity to copy several Vinalhaven deeds, from the early 1870s up through 1940s, and to copy and transcribe ledgers from Reuben and John Carver. Our summer programs all went very well. Lois' art auction of "then and now" paintings was a night of fun for all in attendance. Ken Reiss released his book *The Bodwell and Webster Papers* and Army Armstrong debuted his newest DVD *The Mysterious Mr. Herrmann*, both being well attended at Smith Hokanson Memorial Hall. Our Tuesday mornings were livened up by special volunteer, Tullio Lasanski, age eight, who worked ardently on a Civil War project. This was the first summer of the Old Fire Hall being open to the public as a place to view Old Reuben and other fire equipment. It was staffed three days a week by volunteers who reported having enthusiastic visitors. Harvard Professor Jane Hutton visited this fall to do research for an article she's writing on granite architecture and paving blocks. When it's published we'll have a copy here at the Museum. The guest book was full of visitors from "all over the patch," including Spain, New Zealand, Ireland, Germany, Japan, Newfoundland and many others! In total, 39 states, 17 countries and 3 provinces were represented by roughly 1370 signatures. Among the many visitors was a group of first-years from Bowdoin, making a trip to Vinalhaven as part of their orientation. VHS Senior, Alex Day, had the amazing opportunity to do a Semester at Sea on board the Pilot Schooner *Virginia* and as part of the return voyage was able to visit Vinalhaven and bring friends to the Museum. We are also happy to announce Lucy Bickford as our new Treasurer. We would like to thank Roy for his many years of committed service, and Jake Thompson for filling-in in the interim.



A Printer's Devil.



A few of John's block prints featured in his publications.

In the Works

In addition to all the daily activity, we have been working on a few new books to be published. Sue has been continuing to interview community members about their lives and memories of the island for a follow-up to the 2010 publication *Remember When... A Collection of Oral Histories*. An "encyclopedia" of Vinalhaven people, places, happenings, and facts is also being assembled. It will also include a Vinalhaven timeline, poetry, frequently asked questions, and more. And lastly, but certainly not least, Cynthia Martin is compiling a maritime pictorial to be published through Arcadia Publishing, who also printed Vinalhaven Images, in 1997. Watch the WIND for more information as these become available.

Cemetery Stones

We like to be able to answer the many questions asked daily at the Museum, but we find the one question we often have trouble answering is, “Where are they buried?” After we closed for the season last fall, Elizabeth and Laretta started the task of photographing each stone and recording/mapping the location of plots for Cummings and Roberts Cemetery, with plans to eventually do the same for the other cemeteries on the island. This will help us update our genealogy records and also preserve a digital image of each stone before the effects of time take their toll. With warmer weather on its way, we intend to continue this work over the summer.

Widow’s Island

Situated at the eastern entrance of the Thorofare the 12-acre island formally known as Sheep Island was part of the Winslow Farm on North Haven. When Josiah Winslow died in 1820 the land went to his widow, Penelope Winslow, and became known as Widow’s Island. The island was divided amongst the heirs, changed hands many times, and was eventually procured by the US government in the late 1950s. Originally acquired as a site for a light station, the decision was made to locate the light at Goose Rock instead. In 1884, the US Lighthouse Board transferred the island to the Navy. The Navy thought the island could be used as a quarantine station for sailors who might contract yellow fever; it would replace the aging facility in New Hampshire. By 1888, a two and a half story brick facility was built, capable of holding 50 patients – but no patients came. The change from wooden vessels (whose bilges and rotting planks was believed to be a source of the “poison”) to steel hulls dramatically lessened the need for such quarantine facilities. Regardless, the station was kept ready for nearly ten years, looked after by a caretaker, before the island would be ceded back to the state. In 1905, the property caught the attention of Mr. Chase, a trustee of the Maine State Mental Hospitals. He wanted to use the island as a summer retreat for the “convalescent insane,” where patients could benefit from the sun and air, but still be confined by the sea. The idea was met with skepticism, but Mr. Chase was confident enough that he often let his own children stay there. In addition to the buildings already present, a swimming pool and wharf were constructed. Male patients would come for a month and females the next; including staff, there were roughly 30 people on the island at a time. The home ran for ten years, but closed because of complications brought by WWI. 1915 saw the buildings used briefly as a school for the children of lighthouse keepers, but were ultimately torn down in the 1950s. Later the island was a bird sanctuary, and is now privately owned.



Trench Art and Souvenirs: Relics of the “Great War” (1914-1918)

By Roger Young



One hundred years ago, the first “Big War” of the 20th century began. The Vinalhaven Historical Society is staging a modest display of war related items of the conflict, loaned by American Legion Post #18 of Vinalhaven and private collectors.

Modern war, besides producing “the dead and the damaged,” leaves behind mountains of leftovers such as shell casings, bits of shrapnel, bullets, guns, bayonets, discarded metal and wood, letters, news accounts, memoirs, and novels, etc.

Trench Art is a loose term for “war leftovers” turned into sculpture, rings, letter openers, knives, and other objects by uniformed combatants and even more so, by entrepreneurial civilians living near the fighting. In France, Belgium, and a host of other war ravaged places, cottage industries thrived during (and for years after) WWI, making and selling

trench art. Shown is a picture frame made from an eight inch artillery shell inlayed with brass and surrounded by bullets.

World War One Veterans



Back: David Duncan, Harry Coombs, Joseph Headley. 2nd: James Roberts, Clinton Teele, Ambrose Peterson. 3rd: Irving Joyce, Bruce Grindle, Alfred Creed. 4th: Wilbur Coombs Jr., Allston Roberts, Leo Lane. 5th: Owen Dunlap, Harland Townsend, Eubertus Andrews. Front: George Geary, John Wentworth, Alton E. Libby, Wos Vinal (Civil War Veteran), Albert Carver, Seth Norwood.

Kneeling: Leslie B. Dyer, Newton Cook Sholes

Summer Schedule

June 16 – September 13
Monday – Friday 11-4pm
(Open Daily in July and August)

Summer Exhibit: *Nearly As Good As The Best* - John Gordon, Tramp Printer

August 13: *Observing on Vinalhaven: The WIND since 1885.* The Observer column has been a feature of The WIND for over 50 years. Phil Crossman will share this history, its stories and a history of Vinalhaven newspapers since 1885. In this stimulating talk, Phil will regale the audience with his humor and insight. 7:00pm, Smith Hokanson Memorial Hall. Co-sponsored with the Vinalhaven Land Trust.

August 18: *The Poor Farms of Maine.* Based on the Island Journal article *Caring for Their Own: Penobscot Bay Poor Farms*, by Harry Gratwick. Harry will talk about the need for Poor Farms, in Maine and around the country, and the context in which the island Poor Farms developed, with a more detailed look at stories connected with Vinalhaven's Poor Farm. 7:00pm, Town Office Meeting Room. Co-sponsored with the Vinalhaven Land Trust.

Annual Plea

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

Over 50 years ago a group of year-round and seasonal residents met to discuss their concern that the ever-growing collections of historical artifacts, ephemera, and photos were in need preservation. From that charter group the Vinalhaven Historical Society was founded.

The Vinalhaven Historical Society has operated solely on donations, membership fees, and grants, barely meeting our operational costs. As our collection of artifacts, photos, and genealogical records grow, the need for proper care, preservation, and storage is even greater.

Additionally, major building repairs are necessary. The roof needs to be shingled, two sides of the building remain to be painted, electrical repairs and upgrades are needed, as well as a larger research and office area.

The Museum leases the Boy Scout Hall for storage, and in recent years a climate-controlled vault was installed. This building also continues to need maintenance, inside and out.

Our goal is to expand our exhibits and provide additional space for research materials for our visitors to utilize. An increase in our operational budget is sorely needed; therefore, we once again ask for your help. At this time it is more urgent than ever that we receive your support.

Please consider giving as generously as you are able, to help us in continuing our work in preserving Vinalhaven's history! Any donation, large or small, is greatly valued and is tax deductible as allowed by law.

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