

Vinalhaven Historical Society

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2016 Annual Newsletter

The Little Island



Imagine staying in a house that has no running water, no electricity or telephone, no driveway, and you may need a rowboat to get to it. Sounds ideal, right? That's exactly what Margaret Wise Brown thought of the old, vacant Wharff Quarry manager's home she purchased for back taxes in 1942. She lovingly nicknamed her home "The Only House," maybe because no other lights could be seen at night from this remote location, or perhaps it was the only place she wanted to be. In a letter to a friend, she once said, "isn't it strange what complete faith one can have in a place."

Margaret was born in Brooklyn, New York, on May 23, 1910. Her father, Robert, was Vice President of the successful American Manufacturing Company, that produced hemp rope, cordage, and twine. Even during the Great Depression Margaret's mother, Maude, made sure her three children continued to have a normal childhood; they all finished school and went on to college.

After graduating from Hollins College in Roanoke, Virginia, Margaret struggled to find a serious career. She did some tutoring and worked in a New York department store before briefly enrolling in a Columbia University writing program. She didn't stay at Columbia long, claiming she wasn't good at thinking up story plots. In 1935, she discovered the Bureau of Educational Experiments Cooperative School for Teachers, commonly called the Bank Street School. It was there that Margaret experimented with the "here and now" style of writing; using words and scenarios small children would encounter in their everyday surroundings. This unleashed the incredible, yet sadly short, literary career of Margaret Wise Brown.

Margaret had summered in Maine as a child, but it wasn't until 1938 that she found, and fell in love with, Vinalhaven. Joan MacCormick, a friend from the Bank Street School, invited Margaret to stay with her at a house she rented at Long Cove. Their rental was not far from the home Margaret would later purchase and convert her personal utopia.

In an article written by Margaret's fiancé, James Rockefeller, for the *Island Journal*, he vividly tells of his time spent at The Only House. No electricity meant there was no refrigerator, so perishables were kept in the well, floating in containers attached to labeled pieces of rope. No running water meant that you washed up in a basin at a washstand under an old apple tree with a mirror nailed to its trunk. The journey to the outhouse was worth the hike once you sat and took in the view of the cove and grout piles of Wharff Quarry over the Dutch doors. Inside The Only House, it was crowded, but comfortable. The upstairs

room had a door that opened onto nothing. A sign above the door casing read “Mind the View.” At some point in the history of the house, it had been raised up so as to have a space beneath to pen animals. Margaret used this space as a workshop and guest room.

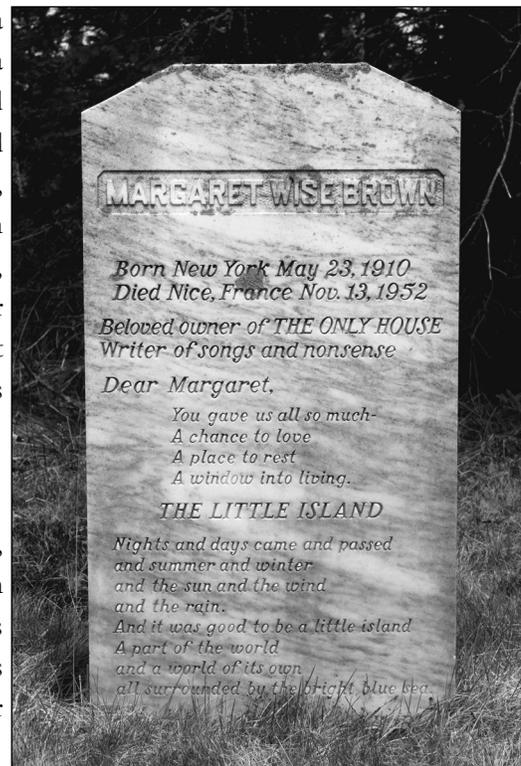
From very early in her life, Margaret had a special fascination with animals. She had many pets, surrounded herself with furs, and often referred to herself as “The Bunny,” even doing her makeup so as to give her eyes an almond bunny look. At The Only House, there was also a cast iron bunny doorstop. She referred to her time on Vinalhaven as her “cat life,” just doing nothing and watching. However, it was also where she did a lot of her writing and got ideas for many of her stories. *Runaway Bunny*, *The Little Island*, and the *Sea Shore Noisy Book* were all written while at The Only House, and she wrote *Poodle and Sheep* after a trip to Leadbetter's Island. Most of her books have an animal as the main character.

Just before her wedding to James Rockefeller, Margaret went to the South of France for some relaxation. James was to sail to Panama where Margaret would meet him for the wedding. They planned to sail the South Pacific together for their honeymoon. While in Nice, France, Margaret complained of abdominal pain and was rushed to the hospital where doctors removed an ovarian cyst and her appendix. After about a week in the hospital, she kicked up her leg to show how much better she was feeling and as she did so, she collapsed. The excited kick had sent a clot to her brain.

In Rockefeller's *Island Journal* article he tells about a specific picnic he had with Margaret at Wharff Quarry, just a short walk from The Only House. Though she had published 72 children's books to that date, she mused “Someday I would like to write something serious, when I have something to say, but I am stuck in my childhood. That raises the devil when one wishes to move on.” While talking about her legacy, James asked Margaret if she didn't want recognition for her contribution to children's literature, what she would want put on her tombstone? She replied, “You will put ‘Writer of songs and nonsense.’”

And he did.

Our summer exhibit will showcase Margaret's rowboat, built by Vinalhaven boat builder Gus Skoog; Golden MacDonald, local caretaker and friend who's name she used as a pseudonym, and the books she published under his name; as well as many of her other publications we have in our collection.



Brud's Paintings

In 2009, our summer exhibit featured the life and work of Ernest “Brud” Clayter. This past August we received an email from John & Mary McGourty, who inherited a large collection of Brud's art. John's uncle, Paul Francis McGourty, was a friend of Brud's and collected over a dozen of his paintings. The McGourty's have generously loaned us their collection, which will be on display at the museum this summer!

In Memoriam

We lost our dear friend, Doug Hall, last summer. Doug had been a member of the Museum from its early beginnings, signing a membership as early as 1964. He was a frequent visitor to the museum, loved to share his many stories of Vinalhaven, and donated many photos of the Arey/Hall family to the museum's collection.

We also were very saddened at the sudden passing of beloved friend and long time board member, Astrid Philbrook. Astrid began volunteering at the Museum in its very early days, and continued to play an active and enthusiastic role as board member until her passing.

Scandinavian Community

Finnish saunas, Swedish fikas, the Scandinavian Athletic Club, along with the births, marriages, and deaths of Vinalhaven's Scandinavian community are currently being compiled by Jeannette (Johnson) and Tullio Lasansky. Their research to date draws from the Vinalhaven Historical Society's vast collection of birth-, marriage-, death-, and cemetery records as well as the Federal census which recorded dates, places of immigration, and occupations in households comprised of family, friends, and boarders from 1850-1940. Remembrances of events—both large and small—are being sought, as well as family photographs and correspondences. The Finnish Heritage Association in South Thomaston has helped to translate some letters in the Museum's collection.

You can join in this Society project by sharing recollections of events, family, and neighbors of Scandinavian extraction who were among our island's mothers and children, sailmakers, boat builders, fisherman, quarrymen, and paving cutters. Scandinavians made up a sizeable portion of the island's workforce and were a vibrant social community. They sought a new life and opportunities at a place that looked and felt quite like their homelands across the ocean.

Coincidentally, this summer we are expecting the arrival of Jan-Åke Karlsson from Malmö, Sweden. He has been doing extensive research on the men and families who left Malmö and came to Vinalhaven during the granite boom. Jan-Åke's uncle, Einar Carlson, was among the many skilled granite workers that made the long voyage to this town. He will be traveling with Swedish film maker Kjell Andersson.

Additionally, and even more coincidentally, we received an email from Sven-Olov Karolusson, who is researching his family. His grandfather, Nels Anderson, bought land from Kristen Kelwick and built a small house. He will be visiting Vinalhaven and the museum in May.

Picture of a Finnish Wedding at Armbrust's Hill Quarry on April 21, 1905. Some guests, numbered and named, include Levi Smith, Daniel Glidden, James P. Armbrust, Elder William Strout, Andrew Lakstrom (Groom) and Alma Wantane (Bride), Jeannie Stein, David Geary, Willard Smith, Albert Holmstrom, Ira Calderwood, John Warren, Mrs. Lizzie Greenlaw, and Mrs. Lettie Moore.



Year in Review

We are very excited to say that our roof has been shingled! Early in the year we asked if the town to appropriate \$20,000 towards our building fund, which was approved at the annual town meeting. In addition, the response from our members was fantastic! We also got an unexpected, but very much appreciated, call from Mr. David Ambler letting us know the Puffin Foundation wanted to make a substantial contribution. Every donation received has helped tremendously! The next phase of our renovation will include deciding the best course of action for the support beams in the basement, rearranging and updating the display area to include a research and reading area, and reconfiguring our office space.

Early in 2015, Roy Heisler had news that Dr. Harold Borns, professor emeritus of the University of Maine at Orono, was working with colleagues to publish the handwritten manuscript of Dr. John DeLaski. DeLaski was one of the first physicians on Vinalhaven and extensively studied the effects of the last glacial period, also known as the Ice Age. Dr. Borns has kindly given a complimentary copy of *Foot Steps of the Ancient Great Glacier of North America* to the museum.

In conjunction with our summer exhibit last year, the Vinalhaven Historical Society presented Capt. Nathaniel W. James III with a plaque in recognition for being the oldest citizen of Vinalhaven. Capt. Nat is 100 years young (born 3/16/1916). Capt. Nat and his wife Alex started coming to Vinalhaven in the early 1970s and bought a house here shortly thereafter. Although currently in an assisted living facility in Scarborough, his 6 children make sure he visits his Vinalhaven home as often as possible.

Brown's Head Light was deeded over to the American Lighthouse Foundation from the Town of Vinalhaven in October of 2015, and they will now assume the responsibility of maintenance and preservation of the keepers house and tower. The museum will be coordinating with the ALF on a possible tour or open house, as well as providing information on the history of the building for signage.

We received a call from David Harris who was in possession of an old sea chest that once belonged to James Willard Crockett of Vinalhaven. Made in the fall of 1861, it was constructed of Maine white pine, and later reinforced with oak. Interestingly, James made the handles from mackerel line. This Crockett family was among the earliest settlers on Vinalhaven. David graciously gave the chest to the museum and it has become a welcome addition to our collection.

Throughout the year we received many great donated items: from Henrietta Winslow, a remarkable amount of newspaper clippings that her late mother, Louise Bickford, had saved; Mary Ann Chapin, five handmade felt animals that were purchased in the 1960s from the Galamander Shop; Tom & Joelle McDonald, a 1951 baseball used by Joelle's uncle, "Brud" Carver, in a game against Camden; Joy Mills, a child's chair built by Mark Smith for his son Kilton, who then passed down to Joy's daughters for Christmas 1978; Lucy Warner Kuemmerle, a fantastic arrowhead found by her mother in the early 1940s; Ed Movitz, a 'haul-in' pulley system for pulling in/letting out a small boat from land.

We are still working on updating our cemetery records and maps. We've created a database that will include the cemetery an individual is buried in, birth and death dates, any military affiliation, and also indicate if we have an obituary and/or photo. Once we get our maps up to date, the database will also include a map/lot number.

After seeing an exhibit at Marshall Point Lighthouse Museum in Port Clyde, ME, which featured a wall of miniature pot buoys painted in each lobsterman's colors, we were inspired to make one of our own. Torry Pratt has graciously offered to take on this enormous project. We would welcome any help remembering colors of past lobstermen and getting paint to complete this project.

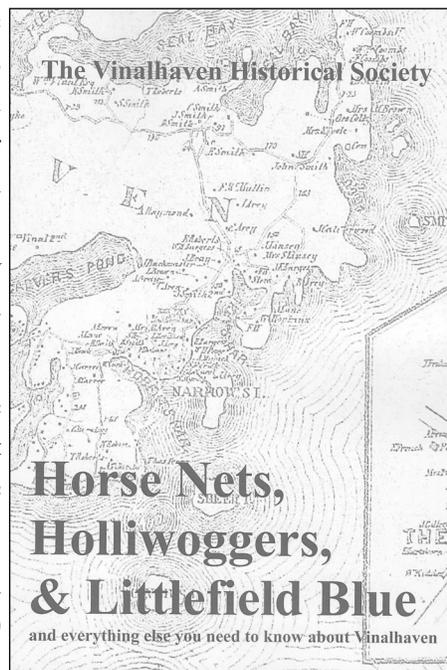
Horse Nets, Holliwoggers, & Littlefield Blue: and everything else you need to know about Vinalhaven

What happens in Vinalhaven stays in Vinalhaven. And stays. And stays. And stays...

That's one of the nice things about being on an island. We've engaged in so many pursuits in our 250 year history, and each has added to what was here before: lumbering, farming, shipping, cod fishing, quarrying, lobstering, tourism. Each has contributed to our history, and each has enriched our landscape, our legends, and even our language. They have given us fish flakes that you can't eat, grout that doesn't go between the tiles, nets that can be used only by horses, and cars just for lobsters. And that's just a sample. You could write a book...

Which, of course, we did! It came out last fall, and is the essential guide to everything anyone would need to know about Vinalhaven. Alas, it sold out so quickly that only the more fortunate among us were able to snag a copy.

You will be pleased to hear that we have been working on a second printing that will be ready this summer! With over 350 topical entries arranged alphabetically, plus a selection of island poems, legends, statistical facts, and chronological timeline, it's a good read and handy reference to have on the shelf. Perhaps you should reserve a copy, just to be on the safe side!



Annual Appeal

Please consider donating so we can continue all of the work highlighted in this newsletter, and much more! The Vinalhaven Historical Society is a non-profit organization. We do not receive any annual operating funds from the Town of Vinalhaven. Our daily expenses are supported solely by donations and memberships.

We received enough funding to shingle the roof, but there are many other matters that need attention including structural issues in the basement. We would also like to create a research and reading area, update exhibits, and enlarge the office to incorporate more shelving/storage space. Your donation, no matter the size, helps us to accomplish our remodeling goals as well as provide visitors with a unique experience when they visit the Museum.

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.

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Milestones

Vinalhaven in WWII - Seventy-five years ago, December 7th, 1941, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. In Sidney Winslow's diary he documented the radio news he received nightly. December 8th he wrote, "4:30 [pm] Congress announces that a state of War exists between Japan and U.S.," and on December 11th, "Germany and Italy declare war on U.S. and later the U.S. declares war on the above nations."

RLDS Church - In 1916, one hundred years ago, a group of granite workers organized a branch of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. For the first few years they met at the Town Hall, the Memorial Hall, or at members homes. In 1920, the group purchased the former home of E. P. Walker on Atlantic Avenue where they remained until 1988.



Summer Hours

June 16 - September 23
Monday - Friday 11-4pm
(Open Monday - Saturday in July and August)

Summer Programs

Celebrate Margaret Wise Brown Week, August 15-19

In conjunction with events presented by the Vinalhaven Land Trust, The Vinalhaven Historical Society will focus it's summer exhibit on Margaret's time on Vinalhaven and her connection to the islanders. Scheduled programs include a writing workshop and talk with Candice Ransom; a tour of The Only House, with Jim Boone; a talk by Army Gary on Brown's time spent on the Maine coast and Vinalhaven; a Read-a-thon/Read along where you can share your favorite Margaret Wise Brown book., and more!

Contact the VLT or Museum for more information.