



Main Street, Northeast Harbor, 1935. The Pastime Theater is on the right, and Bain's store is behind it. *Courtesy of the Northeast Harbor Library*

Northeast Harbor in the 1940s: *Nothing Gold Can Stay*

By Louisa Newlin

“Nothing Gold Can Stay”
Nature’s first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf’s a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.

—Robert Frost¹

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Is it because I came to this particular Maine village when I was a baby that it has always had a powerful hold on my feelings? I was sent to Northeast Harbor in 1936, when I was three months old, to stay for the summer with my grandmother “Muzzie” Foulke. She had hired Miss Smith, a young English nanny, to look after me for the summer. (Miss Smith, called “Yan”—no one remembers why—ended up staying eleven years.) My young parents, twenty-one and



The author, Louisa Foulke, now Newlin, circa 1941. *Courtesy of the author*



Gladys Smith, the author’s nanny, known as “Yan,” holding Walter Foulke, 1939. *Courtesy of the author*

twenty-three, had sailed off for England to be in the wedding of one of my father’s best friends, and I was thought too little to make the trip and too inconvenient to have along. I have been coming to Northeast Harbor for at least part of almost every summer since then. Not during most of the World War II years, and not during some of my husband Bill’s Foreign Service postings, but mostly.

After Muzzie died in 1951, her house was sold, and it passed through the hands of several owners over the next twenty-six years. When it came up for sale in 1976, Bill and I bought it back, and now, astonishingly, we have had it for longer than Muzzie did. I am



Four Winds, circa 1900, given to the author by a previous resident, thought to be the little girl holding “her best doll.” *Courtesy of the author*



Four Winds during its restoration, 1928. *Courtesy of the author*

unreasonably attached to it. The dry pine scent of wood fires in the fireplace and the damp smell wafting up from the earth floor of the basement when you open the cellar door to the steep stairs down take me back six and more decades. The house has been called “Four Winds” since Muzzie acquired it in 1927 as a dilapidated wreck and restored it.

The name is not very original, but it’s accurate; Four Winds sits at the edge of the village, in a meadow on a bluff overlooking the ocean, exposed on all sides. One of the oldest houses in Northeast Harbor, it was built in the style of many New England farmhouses, although the man who built it in the 1860s, Sans Whitmore, was not a farmer but a sea captain. For me, it’s an irresistible example of Maine vernacular architecture: white clapboard, green shutters, sharply peaked roofs and gables. It’s not quite “big house, little house, back house, barn,” but close. It has small rooms with fireplaces, old doors with latches, and painted wooden floors. Its rambling floor plan evolved over 140-some years, and we don’t know for sure which rooms are original. Looking over the meadow where lupine and daisies bloom in spring, there’s a small covered porch with nasturtiums spilling onto it. We added a deck on the sea side where we watch the sunsets—a structure and an activity that Capt. Whitmore no doubt would have found frivolous in the extreme.

Not surprisingly, the village has gone through as many changes as the house since I was a child, more, in fact. But the Northeast Harbor in my mind’s eye is always the one that was there in about 1945. My father was still an officer on a naval ship in Curaçao, a Dutch island off the coast of Venezuela, and my mother and Yan brought me and my younger brothers, Walter and Billy, up from Philadelphia on the Bar Harbor Express. I was nine, Walter six, Billy three. We hadn’t been to Maine since before the war, and I barely remembered it. The overnight train ride was so exciting that, for a while, it eclipsed the anticipation of the August that lay ahead. Dinner in the dining car! Sleeping in an upper berth! Ringing for the unfortunate porter!—until Yan put a stop to it. The phrase “Bar Harbor Express” is, for many in my generation, emotionally charged, and even writing the name evokes nostalgia.

We did not stay in Four Winds that year. My mother needed her own space, and three active young children at once were “too

much for Muzzie's nerves," or so Yan said. Ahead of time, I had been told we were going to stay in a "cottage," which I was looking forward to. I knew what a cottage looked like from my fairy-tale books: one story, white, thatched roof, red door centered between two windows, chimney. When we arrived at a large, brown-shingled house surrounded by tall spruce trees that made it quite dark inside, I felt bitterly disappointed. I did not know yet that any building lived in by a summer person is known as a "cottage" no matter what it looks like or how grand it might be.

So what was the village itself like in 1945? To be truthful, many of my memories of the '40s and '50s are jumbled together, and I can't be entirely sure about just which buildings were where. In the last act of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, Emily Webb, who has died in childbirth in her twenties, is allowed to come back from the land of the dead to visit her village, Grover's Corners. She chooses her twelfth birthday and is astonished to see Main Street as it was then—there is so much she had forgotten. Being still living, I lack Emily's opportunity to see Northeast Harbor whole at a certain moment in time. All I can say is that this is how I remember our own Main Street the summer I was nine. This is not a history paper.

Gas was rationed, and there were few cars on the roads, and it did not occur to anyone to require their children to wear helmets while bicycling. I was allowed to ride my bike alone all around the village. Walter bicycled too, but he was accompanied by my mother on her own bike, with a seat on the back for little Billy. With my new freedom came responsibilities: picking up both the mail at the post office twice a day and Muzzie's newspapers at Bain's News Service store, now McGrath's Variety Store. Presiding over the counter was Mrs. Bain, with one arm permanently in a sling. I never knew why. I had been taught to say politely, "May I please have Mrs. Walter L. Foulke's *Bangor Daily News*?" which I did, religiously, every time, to the amusement of the big boys who hung around the store and who mocked me, repeating my polite request in falsetto voices and guffawing as I fled the yahoos on my bicycle. McGrath's, the beating heart of the village, is still where it was and still run by the same family. The post office, too, stands in the same place, only now we have keys for our boxes instead of combination locks.

Where the Northeast Harbor branch of the Bar Harbor Bank stands now was the tantalizing Pastime Theater, whose movies changed every two or three days. Big, full-colored posters of coming attractions were out front, promising exciting movies about passionate love and war, which I was never allowed to see. I yearned over those posters. It was not until I was fourteen that I was liberated into the heady delights of the Pastime. Admission was fifty cents; children under twelve paid twenty-five. I don't remember any movies I saw; by the time I was allowed in, I was more interested in who was there with whom than in the movie itself. The Pastime burned in the 1960s, and I still feel wistful when I look at the Bar Harbor Bank. It's a superior bank, which sends us birthday cards signed by all who work in the Northeast Harbor branch—what other bank does that?—but it is not the Pastime.

Next to the Pastime was Brown's Taxi, long vanished, but essential during the years of gas rationing. Then came Mr. Stanley's Fish Market, now a gift shop. In 1945, you could catch flounder (delicious) and pollock (barely edible) from the Sea Street Dock. Old Mr. Stanley, the father of David Stanley, who succeeded him, would give a nickel apiece for the flounder I caught if they were big enough. I suspect Muzzie had a hand in Mr. Stanley's willingness to take me on as a supplier. The smaller flounder and the pollock came home to be prepared by the grumpy cook. No cook in the kitchen now, and no fish in the harbor, not even the spiny sculpin, so ugly that I hated catching them and taking them off my hook. The harbor was dredged years ago to accommodate more and larger yachts, the Sea Street Dock grew into a marina with long finger piers for sleek sailing and motor yachts.

Stanley's Fish Market lasted a long time, nearly a hundred years. I miss its pungent smells and its utter basic-ness: in the front room, a rolltop desk with a spindle for sales slips and a large black register for cash sales, which gave the most satisfying ca-ching; In the back room were deep sinks and marble slabs for cleaning fish, an ice chest or two, and a lobster tank. Mr. David Stanley kept the records of what was ordered and what was charged in his head, accurately, according to my mother.

What else? There was Elrie Holmes' store, which sold utilitarian clothing: yellow slickers called "sou'westers," sneakers, rubber boots,

and flannel shirts. There were several grocery stores where my mother and grandmother used their red and blue points for rationed items, like meat and butter. The Pine Tree, the Hillcrest, Ober's were right on Main Street. The IGA was up on Summit Road. It later turned into Small's Market, but it eventually folded and transmogrified first into an art gallery, and finally into a private house. The Pine Tree Market is the sole survivor, but it operates at a disadvantage now that better roads make the big supermarkets in Bar Harbor and Ellsworth more accessible. Now, hard spirits and fine wines are a big part of the Pine Tree's business. In the 1940s, no alcohol was sold anywhere in Northeast Harbor; it was available only at the state store in Bar Harbor. Near the Pine Tree was Mrs. Flye's lunch counter. When I was older, my friends and I would giggle over the notion of a lunch counter called "Flye's."

Like the other kids, I was enamored of the drugstore's old-fashioned soda fountain and its vanilla milkshakes. That summer of 1945, I had my first and last banana split there, paid for with two weeks' allowance. It was a wonder: two halves of banana in an oblong dish, three scoops of ice cream in different flavors, and a tower of whipped cream with a cherry on top. I can still remember how ill I felt afterwards from gorging.

I miss Walls' colorful little shop, selling bunches of flowers from his nursery in glass jars. It's now a photo gallery. In kind Mrs. Tracy's Store, you could buy "dry goods" like needle and thread, yarn, and underwear; it's now an art gallery. I remember at least one antique store, P.P. Hill, which Muzzie patronized, and British Tweeds, selling cashmere sweaters, wool suits and capes, and wool plaid Bermuda shorts. (There's little need for British woolens now, but the weather was cooler in summer then.) The Kimball Shop was a rich jumble of knickknacks, dishes, toys and lamps, a far cry from the beautiful and well-organized household goods store it has become. Miss Kimball was, to a nine-year-old, a terrifying mountain of a woman with frizzy red hair who did not want children fingering her merchandise and, when we ventured curiously in, scolded us out in short order.

Over the ensuing decades, the balance between "summer" and "winter" enterprises has shifted dramatically, and sometimes I think of the art galleries, real estate agencies, antique stores and clothing

boutiques as like purple loosestrife, forcing out the indigenous plants. One recent evening, I complained grumpily to a fellow guest at a party that there were very few “authentic” places left in Northeast Harbor. “What do you mean by ‘authentic’?” he asked, reasonably enough. I laughed and said sheepishly, “‘Authentic’ means it was there when I was a child.” Unreasonable, but true for me.

Back to when I was nine. My bicycle freedom extended to more than Main Street. Weekday mornings, I biked to rowing class at the Northeast Harbor Fleet headquarters at Gilpatrick Cove, which I don’t think has changed much since the 1940s, although the simple “Clubhouse” has been enlarged. We rowers sometimes were taken



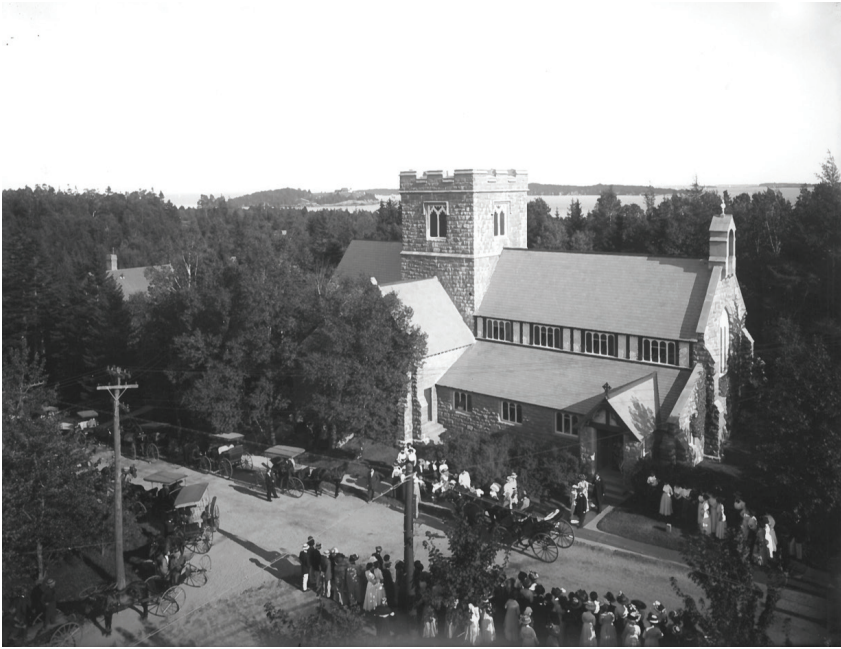
Northeast Fleet sailing class by Gilpatrick Cove, circa 1949. *Courtesy of the Northeast Harbor Library*

sailing in Bullseyes by the instructors, glamorous older boys of sixteen and seventeen. One of them used to tease me and say, “You’re my girlfriend, Louisa, aren’t you?” I would blush and shake my head. I doubt if he knew it, but he made my heart beat faster, and I wanted him to mean what he said. (This man is now well over eighty. He and his wife have joined the growing ranks

of “year-round summer people” in Northeast Harbor. I have never told him my secret and never will.)

After rowing class, my friends and I went to the swimming pool, which was only a fenced-off semicircle of murky green and frigid ocean, slightly sun-warmed. In the little entrance hall, supervised by the dignified, bespectacled Miss Wood, wearing ankle-length

dresses, was a chalkboard telling you the day's water temperature, which was usually in the high sixties or low seventies. If the tide was high enough, you could make the pool feel warmer by going into the ocean first. There are today many women my age, loyal to the spirit of those hardy days, who still swim only in the original pool and the ocean, eschewing entirely the standard turquoise blue, heated rectangle added some forty years back, maybe fifty, and known to our generation as "the new pool." On rainy days, there was the library with its open wood-burning fireplace and a wealth of books to choose from.



St. Mary's-by-the-Sea, undated photograph. *Courtesy of the Northeast Harbor Library*

What else did we do? Most of life was family-centered. In the evening, the grown-ups sometimes gathered at each other's houses for a drink, or at small dinners for six or eight prepared by the cook brought from Philadelphia for the summer, but there were no catered parties. (No decorators, either; the prevailing style could be termed "eclectic summer cottage shabby." Summer cottages were sold furnished.) We didn't go many places in the car because of gas rationing. We did take the mail boats to the Cranberry Islands for

picnics and to the church fairs. I remember the potato races and the three-legged races, and the fish chowder prepared by the ladies of the Cranberry Isles Ladies Aid society. There were beautiful patchwork quilts for sale, made over the long winter.

Like most people we knew, we went to St. Mary's-by-the-Sea Episcopal Church on Sunday, and to the brief sunset service on Sunday evening on the lawn of what was then the Cromwell estate, overlooking Somes Sound. We children and the younger grown-ups sat on the grass; older folks sat on folding chairs. Miss Pendleton, the church choir mistress, played the portable organ, furiously pumping the foot pedals, to accompany the ragged hymn-singing. A member of the congregation gave a brief homily. No one had to wear church clothes to the sunset service, and the whole thing was over in half an hour, so we children did not object to this second Sunday observance. Sunset service exists now pretty much as it did, an island of continuity.

One hymn we always sang in the summer of 1945 was "Eternal Father, Strong to Save," the verses for the Army and Air Force, as well as for the Navy. The verse about "those in peril on the sea" still makes me well up. Half consciously, I did absorb the reality that 1945 was an extremely anxious time for the adults, waiting for the war to end, hoping fervently for the safe return of the men and boys not already dead. It never occurred to me that my father could die, but I missed him.



Louisa Foulke, now Newlin, at the Sea Street dock. "Miss Mac," a nanny who was a friend of Yan, is in the background. *Courtesy of the author*

On VJ Day, joyful celebration broke out. The fire engine gave rides to Bar Harbor and back for all who could scramble on board.



The author with her husband, Bill, 2015. *Courtesy of Eliza Carney*

My mother considered me too young for this excitement, and I did not go, except in my imagination. I was consoled by the knowledge that my father would be able to come home, which he did, within a few months.

I acknowledge that there is a classic tendency to look back at earlier eras through a “dome of many-colored glass,” and yet I do believe that even for grown-ups, life really was simpler then on Mount Desert Island, and it stayed simple for at least another ten years, simpler than in the glory days of Bar Harbor and the lavish parties of the 1920s, and simpler than now when the locus of fashion in the second gilded age has shifted to Northeast Harbor. In retrospect, I lived in a golden age between two gilded ones.

The golden age is long over. Bill and I are now members of the oldest generation, facing changes in ourselves as well as in the village. There’s no buffer between us and mortality any more. I will never again meet old ladies on Main Street who hail me by my mother’s

maiden name, Louisa Wood, as I did when my grandparents were still alive. However, much remains.

We have considered establishing ourselves elsewhere in Maine in summer. We could find in other corners of the coast all the dear clichés: the cry of gulls, the chugging of lobster boats starting up at dawn, the mournful clang of bell buoys, and the sound of unseen oars rhythmically splashing in the fog. But we are tied here by love for a brother and his family next door, for another brother and his, four miles away, for a sister fifteen minutes from our house, and for all their children and grandchildren visiting throughout the summer; and by love of this specific spot, of the hills we call mountains, the parade of sailboats scudding in and out of Somes Sound, the little bridge over Gilpatrick Cove, McGrath's! We are condemned to stay.

There are worse fates.

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Louisa Newlin started teaching English sixty years ago. She has taught in a variety of independent secondary schools in Washington and overseas; in D.C. public schools as part of Folger Shakespeare Library's outreach programs; and at American University. Locally, she has taught at the Acadia Senior College, and she has given several Shakespeare courses at the College of the Atlantic. She served on the board of the Folger Library for fifteen years and for shorter periods on the boards of other nonprofits.

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