



Five Sargent House girls with other Mission scholarship recipients, ca. 1943. *Courtesy of the Maine Sea Coast Mission*

Sargent House: A Woman's Gift to the Outer Island Girls of Down East Maine

Rosamond S. Rea

Created in 1941 as housing for outer island girls, thereby enabling them to live in Bar Harbor and attend high school, Sargent House was a place long wished for by Maine Sea Coast Missionary Society staff. The generosity of a woman from the Mount Desert Island summer colony made it possible. Sargent House only operated for five years, from 1941 to 1945, but it had a long-lasting impact, providing the inspiration for legislation that would ensure educational opportunities for children living in remote parts of Maine.

The setting is World War II Bar Harbor, a place very different from the Bar Harbor of today. The town in 1941 was comprised of a myriad of businesses that vanished in the following decades. It supported several grocery stores ranging in size from corner markets to an I.G.A.; choices of shoe, clothing, furniture, and hardware stores; pharmacies with soda fountains; novelty stores; and eateries of all sizes. For those who could afford automobiles—and many could not—the latest models of Ford, Mercury, Lincoln, Oldsmobile, Chevrolet, Chrysler, and Plymouth were available from local dealerships. Ice for iceboxes, stoves, refrigerators, and other electrical appliances could be had locally; the choice of plumbers and electricians to install and service them was plentiful. There were banks, seasonal hotels, and two movie theaters—one with a bowling alley in the basement. There was a Bar Harbor Hospital for Animals and Mount Desert Island Hospital for everyone else. Interspersed with businesses were churches, police and fire stations, an elementary school, and a Class A-ranked high school. Flanking the Jesup Memorial Library were the YMCA, exclusively for men and boys on the one side, and the YWCA, providing a safe haven for girls and women on the other.¹ Scattered throughout were both year-round and summer residences. At 67 Cottage Street in the former Stratton residence stood Sargent House, the boarding home occupied by girls from the islands of Cranberry, Islesford, Long (also known as Frenchboro), and Swan's, newly renovated and operated by the Maine Sea Coast Missionary Society (now called the Maine Sea Coast Mission and referred to here as the Mission).²

By contrast, outer islands dotting the Maine seacoast, much loved for their rugged beauty, were isolated and their year-round populations eked out a meager existence. Regular ferry and mail boat service did not exist. Life was a struggle year round, but winters were the worst. Rough seas and frigid weather made contact with the mainland unpredictable and often dangerous. During the winter of 1943, Blue Hill Bay completely froze over and only the Mission's boat, the *Sunbeam*, could reach the outer islands, breaking through twenty-five miles of ice to bring supplies and medical assistance.³ When the fishing economy was bad, many families lived on the edge of disaster. Most islanders made do without indoor plumbing, reliable electricity, or telephone service. The Mission was the islanders' most dedicated, sympathetic, and persistent advocate.

For thirty-six years, the Reverend Neal Bousfield, Mission Superintendent from 1938 until his retirement in 1972, worked tirelessly to improve the lives of coastal Maine people. Employing his philosophy that outright charity demeans and even destroys the individual, Rev. Bousfield endeavored to help people help themselves. Educational opportunity was one pillar of his self-improvement philosophy. Since island education ended at eighth grade, it was up to families seeking a secondary education for their children to find creative ways to make it happen. Solutions included temporarily moving the entire family to the mainland, asking relatives to board the children, or boarding them in private homes. The student's hometown paid tuition to the host school district; room and board were worked out privately. The Mission's educational outreach capability relied on annual gifts to its Education Fund. Both the need and the available funds varied each year, leaving worthy students disappointed when the Mission budget fell short. Most aid went to students entering college, nursing, or normal schools.⁴ Helping as many girls as possible obtain a high school education was Rev. Bousfield's steadfast goal.

Fortunes changed late in December 1940 when the Mission received a gift of extraordinary magnitude specifically for the purchase of 67 Cottage Street and the establishment of a boarding house. The new venture was to be called Sargent House in memory of Mr. and Mrs. Winthrop Sargent. In addition to housing up to six high school girls, it would also serve as the Mission's central lending library for the entire Down East region.⁵ The establishment of Sargent House brought to fruition the long cherished dream to expand educational opportunities for high school girls.

Sargent House became a reality thanks to a trio of women from the Mount Desert Island summer community. At a time when most donations to the Mission's Education Fund ranged from \$1 to \$50, two significantly larger anonymous donations of \$750 and \$6,000, and an additional gift of \$925 from Mrs. Horatio A. Lamb, provided Rev. Bousfield what he needed to create the boarding home and maintain scholarship aid.⁶ Mrs. Lamb was a perennial donor to the Education Fund and could also be counted on for substantial gifts for specific projects; in 1939, for example, she had provided a "lighting plant" for the church on Matinicus Island.

For the Sargent House project, however, Mrs. Lamb's was not the lead gift. Although publicly listed as anonymous, the name of the generous donor who provided the \$6,000 that made purchase of the building possible can be found in the financial records of the Mission. She was Miss Aimee Lamb, daughter of Mrs. Horatio Lamb and the niece of Mrs. Winthrop Sargent. Other than to honor her aunt and uncle and carry on her family's philanthropic tradition, Miss Lamb's motivation for this particular gift appears lost to history. In Mission publications about Sargent House, Mr. and Mrs. Sargent are described as being "deeply interested in the education of girls from the homes of the poor." In fact, Mrs. Sargent (1852-1918) devoted decades of her life to the development of the Sargent Industrial School in New York, expending much of her own time, energy, and family resources for the education and betterment of underprivileged girls and women.⁷ A boarding house for coastal Maine girls was a fitting memorial.

Sargent House 1941-1973

Preparations for the opening of Sargent House proceeded briskly all spring and summer after the purchase of 67 Cottage Street on December 26, 1940. Reverend and Mrs. Anson Williams were hired, he as Missionary Pastor to the Down East communities and she as housemother. The couple was given an apartment on the first floor; girls' rooms would be upstairs. Rev. Williams built shelves for the nearly six thousand volumes that would fill the library, and furnishings were solicited. The Bousfields themselves donated a set of dishes to the effort.⁸ Meanwhile, Rev. Bousfield recruited girls and facilitated arrangements with the town for them to enter high school that fall.⁹ An air of excitement prevailed at Mission headquarters.

In September 1941, Sargent House opened with four girls.¹⁰ Tuition to Bar Harbor was paid by the home-island towns and each family paid about \$37 dollars towards expenses to the Mission.¹¹ Rev. Bousfield reported to the Board, "The homelike atmosphere and motherly way in which Mrs. Williams is working out the details of management is deserving of the highest praise. This new enterprise is truly a blessing and we expect another year to extend its advantages to a larger number of young people, who otherwise would not have the privilege of high school training."¹²

In the fall of 1942, four girls were again in residence. The following contented scene at Sargent House was publicized in the Mission's Christmas Bulletin of that year. Having just returned from a three-day holiday, the four girls were all seated in front of a warm fire enjoying sandwiches and hot chocolate when one girl turned to Mrs. Williams and said, "Gee, Ma, I'm glad to get home." But, in fact, trouble was brewing and that winter proved trying for the girls and their housemother. Perhaps it was the stress of the war economy, or the temptation to the girls of sailors and soldiers constantly about town, or any number of adolescent-related issues, but sometime during the winter months, Mrs. Anson Williams suffered a nervous breakdown. At their January 1943 Executive Committee meeting, Rev. Bousfield and Mission Treasurer Searls were authorized to make whatever changes they deemed necessary at Sargent House. Accordingly, to facilitate Mrs. Williams' recovery, the girls were relocated. One girl was sent home, two girls went to live at the Mission headquarters on Ledgelawn Avenue, and one was placed with a local family for the remainder of the school year.

For several months the future of Sargent House was in doubt. But it remained a priority for Rev. Bousfield, and with some careful adjustments, he felt he could save it. He assigned the Reverend and Mrs. Williams to Matinicus Island for the summer and, on their return to the mainland that fall, their duties were modified and a rental house in Bar Harbor provided for their use.

A new housemother, Mrs. Addie Mae Emery, the widow of a former Bar Harbor Baptist minister, was hired in time for Sargent House to reopen in the fall of 1943. Among her reported qualifications was that she had raised seven children. (By contrast, her predecessor had raised a single son, a fact that may explain her apparent difficulty in coping with a house full of independent-minded teenage girls.)

By all accounts, Mrs. Emery's tenure from 1943 to 1945 passed in splendid fashion. Her first year, five girls lived at Sargent House. Program adjustments aimed at minimizing the girls' idle time meant that in addition to their school work, tending the Sargent House library, maintaining a neat and clean living space, and assisting with food preparation and the washing up, the girls also babysat or provided light housekeeping to local families. The next year only three girls returned. Mrs. Emery continued to teach her diminished flock to "sew, cook, and manage the affairs of the home."¹³ When school closed in May 1945, Mrs. Emery, then seventy-two years old, retired.

Despite the dwindling numbers, Rev. Bousfield remained convinced that the need for Sargent House would rebound once the war was over. He began searching for another housemother—the third in four years. This time he looked beyond the field of local candidates and found Miss Ida M. Woodbury. Miss Woodbury held a Masters Degree in Religious Education and had worked overseas as superintendent of a mission girls' school and boarding home in Bhamo, Burma. She had also been employed as a social service worker in Massachusetts.¹⁴ Miss Woodbury seemed certain to bring success to Sargent House.

Unfortunately, in a matter of months Sargent House closed. The girls, some in their third year at the house, rebelled at the restrictive rules and house management and sought living arrangements elsewhere. At least one went to board at the YWCA; others lived in private homes for the remainder of the academic year. Rev. Bousfield's report to the Executive Committee in April 1946 referred to the failure as a "casualty of the war." And although he was ever hopeful it would reopen, Sargent House never again served its original purpose. Instead, rooms were used by interim Mission staff and, following the 1947 Bar Harbor fire, provided temporary housing to a burned out family. By 1948, Sargent House had been permanently converted to Mission staff housing as needed or was used for income-generating apartments. The building was sold in 1973 to Dr. Philip Norton, who remodeled it into dental offices and a second floor apartment. Today it is occupied by the successors to Dr. Norton's dental practice.



Sargent House, 67 Cottage Street, Bar Harbor, 1941. *Courtesy of the Maine Sea Coast Mission*

Memories of Sargent House

The girls who boarded at Sargent House are now women in their eighties. No record of who they were or where they were from has been found in Mission archives. Bar Harbor High School records that might identify out-of-town tuition-paying students were either destroyed soon after consolidation or are closed to the public. Identification could only come from the girls themselves.¹⁵ Many of their stories are lost—but not all.

In 2011, while delivering Meals on Wheels to several Northeast Harbor residents, Henry Raup, former Board member of the Mount Desert Island Historical Society, first learned of Sargent House. During that summer, he engaged in many lively conversations with Mrs. Marilyn Bryant Peterson, who recounted stories of growing up on Islesford and coming to board at Sargent House in 1943. Intrigued by her reminiscences and wishing to share the story of Sargent House with a wider audience, he proposed the subject as a possible article for *Chebacco*, whose editor asked me to pursue it. To my delight, a more complete picture of Sargent House has emerged thanks to the generosity

of Mrs. Peterson, who enthusiastically shared her memories and was able to put me in contact with one of her Sargent House classmates, Edna Lunt Pio, who resides in Ellsworth. Although the two women have little occasion to see each other—their last meeting was at a high school reunion many years ago—their shared Sargent House experience makes them part of a very small sisterhood. Both Marilyn and Edna arrived at Sargent House as sophomores in September of 1943 along with Rosetta Davis from Long Island and Ramona Davis from Swan's Island. The following account has been constructed from Marilyn and Edna's recollections.

Edna Lunt grew up on Long Island, eight miles off the coast of Mount Desert Island. She is descended from one of the original families who established roots there in the early 1800s. Edna describes life there as hard; families fished, farmed, and generally got by as best they could. In the early 1940s, neither electrical nor telephone service had yet been run out to the island. Her family used an outhouse. Edna attended the one-room school along with seven other island children and was taught by Mrs. Gladys Muir, the much-appreciated Mission-supplied teacher who, for twenty-four years, doubled as the church pastor on Sundays.

Marilyn Bryant grew up on Islesford where her roots also go back several generations. Both her parents were from Islesford and her grandfather, A.J. Bryant, was a noted carpenter and boat builder there. Her elementary education took place in a two-room school—one for the first through fourth grades and the other for grades five through eight. Marilyn's home had electricity, but no phone or indoor toilet. When not tending to household chores for her mother or caring for her younger siblings, Marilyn recalls having great fun exploring the island, climbing trees, and spying on the older kids. As she grew older she sometimes worked baiting trawl lines or washing dishes and housekeeping for summer people. Twice a month a Mission pastor, usually Rev. Bousfield, came to conduct church services and sometimes brought movies for entertainment or took children picnicking on Bear Island.

It happened that both girls' families moved off island the year the girls entered high school. Edna's family went to Portland, Maine so that her father could work in a shipyard, while Marilyn's father was convinced by his brother to move to Medford, Massachusetts to work at the Charlestown Naval Shipyard. Both girls found the shift from the intimacy of small-island living to an urban

setting rather terrifying, and they each remember fondly the sympathetic friends who helped them survive the year.

Marilyn returned to Islesford as soon as school was over in May 1943 to begin a summer job. The rest of the family followed as soon as circumstances allowed. Edna's family also returned to Long Island that summer. Aware of each island family's situation, Rev. Bousfield soon suggested that the girls enroll at Bar Harbor High School and live at Sargent House for the next three years. Neither Edna nor Marilyn recalls having any say in the matter. As outer island students, this was the best option for them in 1943. At least in the Bryant family, leaving home to attend high school was accepted practice; years before, Marilyn's mother had spent her high school years living with relatives in Portland.

Life at Sargent House was comfortable, almost luxurious in comparison with their island homes. The house was arranged with the Mission library, housemother's apartment, living room, dining room, and kitchen/pantry on the first floor. Two staircases led to the second floor, one from the main entrance hallway, the other from the kitchen/pantry area. On the second floor there was one bathroom over the kitchen and a corridor dividing the floor with girls' rooms on either side. Meals were eaten together as a family and housekeeping chores shared. Generally, the girls were expected to do homework at night and were not allowed out unsupervised. The library and living room were available for their use.

Mrs. Emery was their housemother and ran a disciplined household with kindness and understanding. Edna and Marilyn appreciated her grandmotherly ways, despite the strict rules governing their homework, behavior, and joint housekeeping responsibilities. Mrs. Emery has been described as very sociable and able to get along with anyone. At the same time she was highly principled and religious, but sanguine about the world.¹⁶ Marilyn tells of one girl who acted up so much that Mrs. Emery moved her from one room to another trying to find the right combination to tame her spirit, but after three months it was decided that the girl should return home where she was needed to care for her sick mother.

Before long the girls learned to capitalize on Mrs. Emery's weekly routine, which included Wednesday nights out and Sunday mornings at church. One hard and fast rule was that boys were not allowed at Sargent House in the

evenings. However, on at least one occasion the girls worked as a team keeping watch for Mrs. Emery's return while allowing a male visitor to slip in for a visit and then make a quick escape down the back stairway.

At the high school, tuition-paying students were fully integrated into the program without any differentiation based on where they were from. They were placed in one of three courses of study: college, commercial, or general. Marilyn and Edna pursued the "commercial" course of study that included bookkeeping, stenography, and typing in addition to standard coursework. Marilyn also worked on the yearbook board while Edna participated in basketball, intramural volleyball, and was on the food preparation committee.

Lessons learned in home economics classes were practiced at Sargent House. Due to war shortages, careful food preparation and preservation received



Mrs. Clarence Emery, Sargent House housemother from fall 1943 until summer 1945. *Courtesy of the Maine Sea Coast Mission*

greater emphasis. Marilyn recalls helping can food at the Casino building, located between the high school and Sargent House.¹⁷ Meals at Sargent House required careful planning. Mrs. Emery taught the girls to create delicious and satisfying meals using whatever food was available. A strategy Marilyn remembers learning from her was to use nuts in salads and other dishes to give them protein when meat was not available.

The Mission provided other services to the Sargent House girls. Every month Rev. Bousfield drove a group to Bangor for orthodontist appointments, and either he or someone from the Mission staff led weekend activities. Miss Edith Drury, Assistant to the Superintendent of the Mission and a young woman herself, was like a Girl Scout leader to them recalls Marilyn, while Edna has fond memories of Rev. Bousfield taking them on a hike up Champlain Mountain and looking out over the ocean as he pointed out each girl's island. Movie going was another common weekend treat.

To Marilyn's dismay, she did not return to Sargent House for her junior and senior years. Instead, she worked her board helping to care for her great Aunt Mame and Uncle George Stewart, elderly relatives she had never before met. Marilyn lived with them on Forest Street in an extra second floor bedroom. She missed the fun of Sargent House, but looking back is glad to have gone where she was needed. Marilyn often visited her friends at Sargent House as well as the other outer-island girls who boarded in private homes throughout Bar Harbor. Edna spent her sophomore and junior years living at Sargent House then moved to the YWCA in Bar Harbor the fall that Sargent House closed.

After graduation, in May 1946, Marilyn returned to Islesford to work for summer people as usual, but within a few months she was offered a job working for her cousin Curtis Stewart at his paint shop in Bar Harbor. Stewart's secretary was in the hospital with complications due to a pregnancy and he needed someone reliable to fill in, even if only temporarily. He knew Marilyn was well prepared for the task since she had completed the high school commercial courses and earned a typing certificate. Marilyn held the job for several years; her high school education had made it possible.

The Legacy of Sargent House

It may be argued that although Sargent House operated only for five years and served a limited number of students, its impact was felt throughout Maine. In 1944, at the height of the Sargent House experiment, Rev. Bousfield invited Commissioner of Education Dr. Harry V. Gilson to accompany him on the *Sunbeam* for a tour of outer island schools. For a full week Rev. Bousfield provided context and commentary to Dr. Gilson as they visited each island. At the end of the week, they toured Sargent House. Not long afterwards, Dr. Gilson wrote and submitted two bills to the 92nd Maine State Legislature aimed at extending opportunities for secondary education to all Maine children living in remote towns or unorganized territories. The legislation provided for the state to pay a substantial portion (at the time, up to \$180) of the costs for qualified children to board away from home in order to attend a secondary school of their choice.¹⁸ The law broadened the options available to island children; Marilyn's own younger sister and brother attended Lee Academy as a result of it. All outer island students wanting a high school education have taken advantage of this legislation since its passage in 1945.

The author wishes to thank Mr. Henry Raup for sharing his notes taken during conversations with Mrs. Peterson, and Mrs. Peterson for revisiting the topic several times in the preparation of this article. Thanks also to Mrs. Edna Lunt Pio for her recollections of Sargent House, and the Maine Sea Coast Mission, especially Marianne Barnicle, Archivist, for providing access to their archives.

Notes

¹ The information on World War II Bar Harbor is based on business advertisements in the Bar Harbor high school yearbook for the years 1939 to 1943 and on personal interviews with Marianne Barnicle and Anna Ryan, both of whom were teenagers living in Bar Harbor at the beginning of the war.

² The Maine Sea Coast Missionary Society was founded in 1905 by brothers Alexander and Angus MacDonald, both ordained ministers who realized that there was a needy and deserving parish to be found among the people living on the outer islands that dot the Maine coastline. The original by-laws state, "The purpose of this society is to undertake religious and benevolent work in the neglected communities and among the isolated families along the coast and on the islands of Maine, and to engage in all efforts that are calculated to contribute to the moral and spiritual welfare of the people in question." Throughout the early decades the Mission supplied and supported ministers, schoolteachers, and nurses to

the islands, and provided a year-round lifeline to the mainland. Since 1918, \$1,000,000 in scholarship aid has been given to deserving students. Today the Maine Sea Coast Mission “offers hope, encouragement and help to strengthen individuals, families and communities.”

³ 44th Annual Report of the Maine Sea Coast Missionary Society, 1949, 6.

⁴ In 1944 a permanent educational endowment was created thanks to a memorial gift from the family and friends of Lieutenant Alfred White Paine, USNR. The endowment has grown steadily, allowing the Mission to budget future scholarship aid with confidence. Minutes of the Executive Committee, 1930-57, Maine Sea Coast Mission Archives, 127; 75th Annual Report, 1980, 11-12.

⁵ Minutes of the Executive Committee, 1930-57, Maine Sea Coast Mission Archives, 106-07.

⁶ \$5750 covered the purchase cost and \$848.98 was spent on associated costs and remodeling, leaving \$1,025.88 in the Education Fund to cover student aid and scholarships. 36th Annual Report, 1941 and Expenses of the Maine Sea Coast Missionary Society, 1933-194, 275.

⁷ Mrs. Winthrop Sargent (1852-1918), née Aimee Rotch and sister to Mrs. Horatio A. Lamb (née Annie Rotch, born 1857), was married to Winthrop Henry Sargent (1840-1916), a businessman and grandson of artist Henry Sargent (1770-1845). They lived at the family estate, “Wodenethe,” in Fishkill Landing (now Beacon), New York and summered in Northeast Harbor. A 1916 history of The Sargent Industrial School tells the story of Mrs. Sargent’s forty years of work improving the lives of girls and women in her home community. Beginning in 1878 with sewing lessons personally taught at the local St. Luke’s Parish, Mrs. Sargent gradually expanded her efforts until in 1891 she established The Sargent Industrial School (S.I.S) at Mattawan, New York on the grounds of an old country estate. The S.I.S. offerings included basic sewing, dressmaking, cooking, housekeeping, kitchen gardening and, for a brief period, domestic service training. In later years the curriculum expanded to include gymnastics, dancing, singing, marching, and other physical activities. The S.I.S. was an early experiment in the teaching of Home Economics to young girls from an industrial community where most girls and women worked in mills. In 1916, S.I.S averaged an annual enrollment of seven hundred girls and women and offered both day and evening classes. It was in this tradition that the anonymous gift to establish Sargent House was given.

⁸ Interview with Martha Bousfield DeTurris, daughter of Rev. Neal Bousfield, January 6, 2012.

⁹ Such arrangements with Bar Harbor were common. Prior to the opening of Sargent House, annual town reports show tuition paid to the town for non-resident students to attend high school. During the 1940s, in addition to the outer islands the towns of Trenton, Orland, Gouldsboro, Detroit, Hancock, Enfield, Mariaville, Eastbrook, South Thomaston, Amherst, and Orneville all sent students to Bar Harbor at one time or another.

¹⁰ Unfortunately, no record of the girls’ names or the islands from which they came has been found.

¹¹ It is unclear whether the \$37 payment was for one semester or the entire year. Minutes of the Executive Committee, 1930-1957, Maine Sea Coast Mission Archives, 106-07.

¹² Christmas Bulletin, 1941, Maine Sea Coast Mission Archives.

¹³ 40th Annual Report, 1945, Maine Sea Coast Mission Archives.

¹⁴ Christmas Bulletin, 1945, Maine Sea Coast Mission Archives.

¹⁵ The following is a list of outer island girls known to Edna Lunt Pio or Marilyn Bryant Peterson as having attended Bar Harbor High School: Edna Lunt, Hilda Lunt, Ramona Davis, June Sheppard, Rosetta Davis, Ruby Davis, Marilyn Bryant, Hazel Bunker, and Betty Jean Sheppard. It is not clear which girls roomed at Sargent House and which girls boarded at the YWCA or in private homes. Clearly this list is not complete as the 1941-43 names are missing.

¹⁶ Memories of Rev. and Mrs. Clarence Emery by their grandson, Mr. Ted Emery, *Mission History* 1905-1955, Maine Sea Coast Mission Archives, 98.

¹⁷ The Casino was a town-owned building with a large kitchen, basketball court, stage, and balcony seating used by the high school for physical education classes and stage performances, and used by the community for dances, wrestling and boxing events, town meetings, and large exhibitions.

¹⁸ 39th Annual Report, 1944, Maine Sea Coast Mission Archives, 6-7 and Bills 645 and 646, 92nd Legislature (1945), State of Maine.