

# “RAVENSLEFT” ON SEA CLIFF DRIVE

ANNE STEBBINS FUNDERBURK

“Ravensleft” was designed by the Boston firm of Peabody & Stearns for my great-grandfather, James Ford Rhodes (JFR) and his wife, Anne Card Rhodes, as a summer residence, away from the heat and bustle of Boston.<sup>1</sup> The house was built in 1901 and named “Ravensleft” for the ravens which often nested on a small ledge halfway down the East wall of the cleft. Ravens still occasionally use that nest site.

My maternal grandmother, Bertha Harriet Rhodes (née Johnson), as the new bride of Mr. and Mrs. Rhodes’ only son, Daniel Pomeroy Rhodes, was given the honor of christening the site by smashing a bottle of *Veuve Cliquot* champagne over the point of rocks called “The Druids’ Temple” just South of the house. Crawford Howell Toy, a Professor of Hebrew and a close friend of JFR, read aloud a poem which he had written especially for the occasion. This poem was then framed and always stood on the mantelpiece in the dining room. Professor and Mrs. Toy were frequent guests at “Ravensleft” in its early years, as were many academics, politicians and others of note.

JFR had retired from the coal business in Cleveland and moved to Boston to engage in the gentlemanly pursuit of writing history. Boston society considered him a bit of a rough diamond from the Middle West, but, as he was a genial and generous host with an excellent cook and a superb wine cellar, he gained some degree of acceptance by Proper Bostonians. He eventually published a multi-volume history of the United States Civil War, a scholarly work which was for many years a standard reference for that period of our history. Much of his writing took place in the study at the foot of the front hall stairs in “Ravensleft”; if the weather were too hot to be indoors, he would retreat to the small screened porch off the dining room.<sup>2</sup> When I stayed in the house as a child, Grandmother would have lunch served out there on really hot days, something we always considered a treat.

JFR’s sister, Charlotte Augusta (“Gussie”) Rhodes, had married Senator Marcus A. Hanna, of Cleveland, Ohio, thus further cementing the close relationship between the families which had begun as a partnership in the coal business in Ohio. Aunt Gussie commissioned my great-uncle on my

father's side, Duncan Candler, to design a summer cottage for her family a few hundred yards to the West of her brother's cottage. This house, named "East Point", is still in the family of her descendants. Uncle Mark (Senator Hanna), an extremely powerful politician who had masterminded the election of President McKinley, was notoriously unsympathetic to the ideas of Theodore Roosevelt. Therefore he more or less railroaded T. R. into the vice-presidency as a way of neutralizing him. This strategy backfired when McKinley was assassinated and T. R. became President.

Because of the numerous political connections of the Hanna-Rhodes clan, many important people were entertained at dinner in "Ravenscleft". They didn't spend the night, as JFR liked his privacy. This, incidentally, is why there are almost no guest rooms – the house was designed to accommodate JFR and his wife at the head of the stairs, his secretary to the right of the stairhead, and her companion over the front door. This left one guest room, over the dining room. All the other rooms were for live-in servants, three on the second floor and seven on the third floor. The cook and kitchen maid slept in the one over the front door. <sup>3</sup>

Despite their differing political viewpoints, JFR did invite T. R. to dinner at "Ravenscleft", but at the last minute plans had to be changed because of something in T. R.'s schedule. Grammee (my great-grandmother) was profoundly relieved, a fact memorialized by my grandmother in the following verse, which she wrote for my Aunt Nancy's third birthday party:

*The man who named the Teddy-bears, was nearly coming here.*

*But now he's not; there's hugs a lot for Grammee; three big cheers!*

T. R. did actually visit "Ravenscleft" later on, after he was no longer President; my mother, Rebecca, as a very small child, sat on his lap, but I don't know in which chair.

Because JFR didn't want to be disturbed while he was writing, my mother and her siblings almost never stayed with their grandparents in "Ravenscleft"; instead their father usually rented someone's cottage for the summer. In 1912, my mother was born at "Craig Knowe", then the Penman cottage, at "Confusion Corners" on the Rowland Road. It later belonged to Theo Talcott-Slater, and is now owned by Jamie Somes. Other houses the family rented included "Wabenaki" (later "Dilly Cottage", now "Christmas Trees") and "Windybrow" (on the "Curly S", now torn down).

The original interior decoration of “Ravenscleft” was rather gloomy, at least on the first floor. All the woodwork was stained flat black, including the doors, while the walls were a sort of dirty mustard color. This was still in evidence inside the games closet at the foot of the front hall stairway when Gretchen LeGré bought “Ravenscleft” in 2004. <sup>4</sup>

If we children became too much for the grown-ups after being cooped up inside during a heavy rainy spell, we would be sent out to the verandah to race up and down and burn off our excess energy before coming inside again. There was also a tongue-in-groove tabletop on saw horses which served (poorly) as a ping-pong table. During dry spells the grooves would open up, allowing balls which hit a groove to carom off at unpredictable but fascinating angles. If one leaned on the table reaching to hit one of these wild balls, the saw horses usually collapsed.

My grandmother, as an Englishwoman, was a firm believer in exercise, rain or shine; rainy days would see her tramping up and down the verandah as fast as her short little legs could carry her until she had done her mile. She played tennis into her 70s.

Heating such a large house on cold, wet foggy days was a real problem. There was a big round wood-burning furnace in the cellar, rather like an octopus, with stovepipes like long arms coming out at odd angles. These led to fancy cast-iron register grills on the first floor. Lighting the fire in the furnace and getting it to draw properly was a major job, often accompanied by colorful language. There were also three fireplaces downstairs and three upstairs. The wood for these lived in a low closet in the front hall, under the front-stairs landing. Whoever designed the fireplaces made them look quite beautiful, but unfortunately he didn't know how to build a fireplace which wouldn't smoke. If one lit a fire in one of them, one was likely to end up kippered instead of warmed. As children, when we were cold and wet, we used to sneak into the kitchen where there was a huge double-oven Glenwood coal stove which was kept burning all summer long, but we had to be careful to stay out of Cook's way.

This coal range was also the original source of hot water for the house. The brass pipe in the firebox was connected to the hot water storage tank in the maids' dining room, behind the kitchen. When we were little, we used to dry our wet sneakers in the small lower ovens, which the cats also liked to curl up in. The plate-warming shelf over the range was great for

keeping cereals and crackers dry and crisp. When the family were in residence, the Irish cook always kept a big kettle of tea stewing at the back of the stove top. This was for the help and was kept topped up by the judicious addition of boiling water from time to time. At the end of the week, the cloth tea bag was removed and emptied, refilled with fresh tea leaves, tied up tightly, then dropped back in the kettle and covered with boiling water to provide the next week's supply of stewed tea. You could probably have used it to tan leather by the weekend.

A small, high door in the back porch wall was used by the ice man to deliver blocks of ice directly into the huge ice box in the larder, right behind the kitchen. A second, smaller ice box lived in the butler's pantry off the dining room. This was still in use as late as 1961; I remember our dogs drinking out of the drip pan beneath it and upsetting Maggie, my grandmother's parlor maid. The larder was a fascinating room to me as a child. There were all manner of strange devices, such as duck presses, fancy tin molds for Bavarian Cream and other gelatin desserts, a coffee grinder (bolted to the countertop) which was worked by turning a great crank handle on the side, an enormous flour bin attesting to the fact that the bread was made at home (but empty in my day and a nifty place in which to hide), grooved wooden butter paddles, conical ice cream scoops and an ancient ice cream freezer, huge crockery bowls for making bread, and an army of big black and gold canisters along the countertop.

The bench along the north wall of the kitchen is where the servants sat while waiting for a bell to ring. The bell box, still on the North wall of the butler's pantry, contains numbered windows behind which, when a bell was rung, a white metal tab would drop down, showing which room had rung. As children we were never allowed to ring a bell unless directed to do so by a grown-up, so the first thing we did upon returning to "Ravenscleft" after my grandmother's death was to race around the house, wildly ringing each and every bell we could find. I often found it difficult to understand why only four grown-ups (my great-grandparents, his secretary and her companion) needed ten live-in servants to take care of them: butler, valet, footman, coachman (later chauffeur), lady's maid, parlor maid, chambermaid, cook, kitchen maid, and laundress.

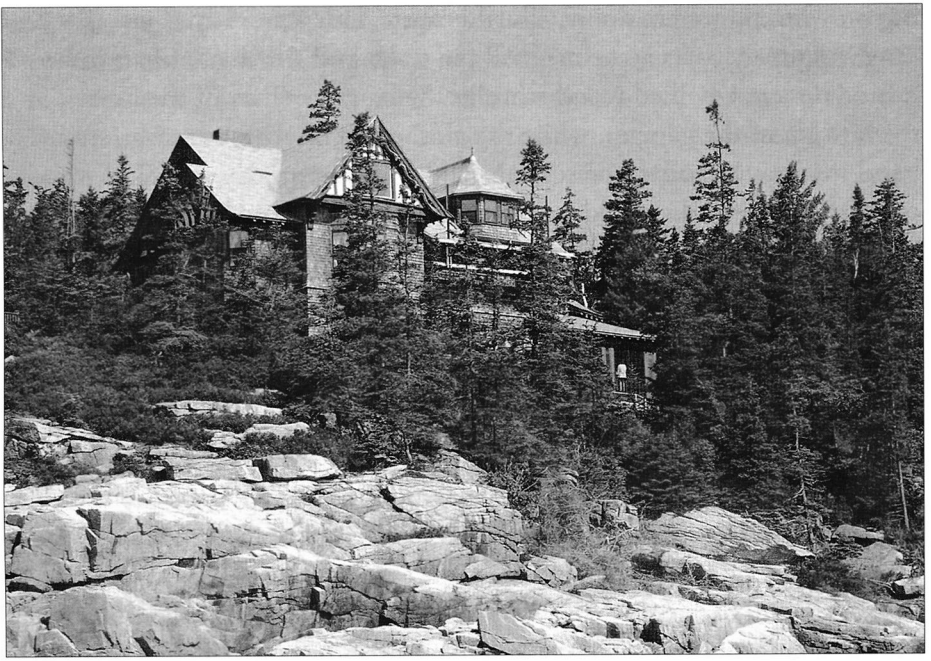
The idea of a resident laundress was mind-boggling, until I realized that people changed their clothes as often as three times a day, depend-

ing on what they were doing. Furthermore, ladies wore as many as three long, frilly petticoats at a time. All the wash and rinse water had to be heated on a pot-bellied wood stove in the laundry (East of the house, on the far side of the garage), while the clothes themselves were washed by hand in a row of soapstone set-tubs with brown laundry soap and wooden wash boards. The wood stove also heated the many heavy flatirons used to press the clothes and table linens. And there were always masses of these, as Grampa thoroughly enjoyed entertaining guests to dinner (seven courses, with a different wine for each). His wine cellar opened off the North wall of the back hall, next to the bottom of the back stairs.<sup>5</sup>

My grandmother used to tell of President Taft's visit to Seal Harbor. He arrived by private yacht at the Seal Harbor Town Dock (the old Acadia Pier) and stepped onto the float, all dressed in his party clothes, to meet Aunt Gussie's reception committee. Since he weighed over 300 lbs., the float began to sink, and as the welcomers moved to greet him, the whole end of the float submerged, inundating the Presidential party shoes. Grandmother, who retained her British passport till her death in 1962 at the age of 90 and hadn't much use for Presidents anyway, got a good laugh out of it, but Aunt Gussie was most upset.

"Ravenscleft" has had another use (other than as a private residence). Until quite recently it appeared on every nautical chart of the waters off the South coast of Mt. Desert Island, marked as "Gable". The gable in question is the third floor window in the dormitory which looks out to sea. Taken in conjunction with the bell buoy off "East Point", it was an important landmark for navigators. There is an interesting story about that bell buoy: when it was originally placed, Aunt Gussie complained that it disturbed her sleep. Since she was Senator Hanna's widow, her complaint was attended to and the bell was replaced with a flashing light. As a child, sleeping in the secretary's room at the head of the stairs, I could see that light flashing in the night against the wall of my room. I used to count the interval till I fell asleep. Some years ago it reverted to a bell.

Except for the frontal landscaping, "Ravenscleft" looks very much as it did before the Second World War. The exterior has been very faithfully restored by Mrs. LeGré. She had her workers copy exactly the fancy carved woodwork under the eaves (usually called "gingerbread" on Victorian houses). The bargeboards, which were also rotting out, have



been perfectly copied. All the chimneys have been restored and fitted with chimney pots. (I don't remember the latter as a child.) The stucco between the half-timbering is slightly more orange than pale yellow, but the brown trim is identical.

There was a small wooden bridge below the Southeast screened porch which spanned a little gully. As children we used to play "Billy Goats Gruff" by the hour at this bridge, taking turns at being the Old Troll. It has been completely restored and is now part of a network of charming little footpaths between the house and the cliffs above the ocean. I wish they had been there when we were little; then Grandmother might not have worried so much when we played outside. As it was, we scrambled about on the rocks of "The Druid's Temple", working our way down to the water and trying to get around the outer corner of the "Temple" and into a small sea cave which my mother and her brothers called "The Robbers' Cave". The sea level had risen enough between 1918 and 1948 that we never did manage this feat.

I've often been asked if there are any ghosts at "Ravenscleft". I've never heard tell of any, although there might have been if a hysterical housemaid had carried out her threat to leap from a third-floor window onto the rocks. Grandmother had everyone rushing about, laying pillows



and mattresses below while someone talked the distraught woman out of taking the fatal plunge.

However, there is an interesting story about a murderer in the house next door. By this, I mean the house which was “next door” during World War I. It stood on the South side of the County Road just on the Otter Creek-Seal Harbor line. It has long since vanished, but a clump of white lilacs still grows by the site, just West of the Blackwoods Campground. Anyway, Junior, a young man in his late teens or early 20s who was none too bright, was pestering his grandmother, who was doing the ironing, for some money to go to Bar Harbor to the movies (silent, of course). She said, “No,” but he kept after her. She still said, “No,” so in a fit of temper he snatched one of the flatirons from the woodstove and threw it at her. Unfortunately it killed her. In a panic he dragged her body out into the woods and arranged her tidily under a tree. Then he went for the police, saying, “I’m worried; I can’t find Granny.” Well, he ended up being tried, and witnesses were brought in to testify to his character. Grammee was one of them, as he had worked for her at “Ravenscleft” on odd outside jobs. Because he had stolen some small items, she gave him a bad character reference. When he was sentenced to Thomaston (manslaughter) he stood in the dock and shook his fist at her, shouting, “I’ll git ya fer this, Mrs. Rhodes, when I git out!” This frightened her so much that she asked JFR to buy her a pistol, which she then placed in her bedside table drawer.

Years went by; JFR died; my mother and her siblings and parents began to spend their summers with Grammee at “Ravenscleft”, and the “murderer” was released from Thomaston. The week following his release, the family were seated at luncheon when they heard heavy footsteps overhead. When they looked about, they realized that everyone in the family and staff was accounted for. Who was walking around upstairs? Grammee remembered reading about the release in the newspaper and gasped, “It’s the murderer!!” My Uncle Adam, the oldest male in the absence of my grandfather, grabbed the dining room poker, while his brother, Tim, took the tongs. Together they sneaked upstairs to the bedroom above the dining room. After cautiously opening the door, they found my mother’s fox terrier puppy, trying to carry my grandfather’s shoes across the floor, but the shoe trees made them so heavy that the dog kept dropping them. So much for the murderer! Incidentally, his great-nephew was my baby-sitter in the summer of 1945, and I lived to tell the story, so all’s well that ends well.





*Anne Stebbins Funderburk was born in Boston in 1938 and raised in Marblehead, Mass. and Seal Harbor, Maine. Her great-grandparents on both sides were early summer residents. She spent her summers in “Ravenscleft” and “Cedar Cliff”, the summer house of her father’s father, George Ledyard Stebbins. Now a retired high school language teacher, she has always been happiest in Seal Harbor and considers it her “belonging place”.*

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The original address of “Ravenscleft” was “Sea Cliff Drive”; the street was later renamed “Cooksey Drive”.

<sup>2</sup> The heavy oak table and rush-bottomed chairs which JFR used were still there when Edith and Bud Grassi purchased the house from my grandmother’s estate in 1964 and when “Ravenscleft” was sold to Gretchen LeGré in 2004. (At that point, all the original furnishings were sold at auction.)

<sup>3</sup> When the Grassis acquired “Ravenscleft” in 1964, most of the beds were original to the house, as was most of the furniture. Some of it was painted by Mrs. Grassi.

<sup>4</sup> The Peabody & Stearns blueprints were still in a compartment under the bottom shelf of the study bookcase in 1964, when the Grassis moved in. Originally, the deck off the West end of the living room was a semi-enclosed and covered verandah; the North wall was wainscoted to about three feet, with diamond-shaped panes of glass above, like the upper sashes of the main house. There was a central door in the West end which opened onto the existing steps down to the rocks. Only the South side remained completely open. Mrs. LeGré has restored the verandah roof, enclosed the North and West sides with window walls, and installed sliding glass doors on the South wall.

<sup>5</sup> Mrs. LeGré installed an elevator where the back stairs used to be, and the machinery is in the old wine cellar. Many of the items described here no longer exist: the coal stove, the larder ice delivery door, the bell box in the pantry, the bell buttons in various rooms, etc. The companion’s room and the cook’s room above it are now both bathrooms.