



*Charles Walbridge photograph
courtesy of the Minneapolis
Institute of Art*

A Coffeepot: From the American Revolution to a Lasting Mount Desert Island Legacy

By Ben Pierce

On July 3, 1917, Ruth Eliot Pierce and her mother, Mary Yale Eliot, signed the guest book as the first occupants of a new summer cottage along Peabody Drive in Northeast Harbor. The cottage is called the "Coffeepot." It stands at the end of a simple dirt driveway. A rustic sign tacked to a tree quietly announces its presence. Aside from a few architectural adjustments, the Coffeepot is the same cottage it was in 1917—it even houses

the original wicker furniture. Seven generations have enjoyed the house and an eighth will soon come to experience its charm. In the summer of 2017, many descendants of the Pierce and the Eliot families celebrated one hundred years of the cottage by the sea. On the living room mantle stands a framed photograph of a sparkling antique silver coffeepot. Family lore has it that the sale of this coffeepot funded the building of the cottage and is the source of the house's seemingly odd name.

The living room of the Coffeepot is shown with its wicker chairs, as it appeared in 1931. *Photograph by Roger Pierce, courtesy of the author*



How much truth is there to the silver coffeepot story? What has happened to the cottage over the years? What relevance do these histories have to Mount Desert Islanders today?

The silver coffeepot has a story that spans almost two hundred and fifty years. It once belonged to one of the founders of Acadia National Park, and has since changed hands at least half a dozen times. Its namesake cottage is the beloved retreat of generations of friends and family, who come every year from all over the world to enjoy the people, the beauty, and the peace of Mount Desert Island. This Northeast Harbor retreat might never have existed without that silver coffeepot.

Origins of the Silver Coffeepot: Benjamin Burt 1775–1780

The career of Benjamin Burt (1729–1805)—a contemporary of Paul Revere’s and a well-respected Boston silversmith—is the first chapter of the Coffeepot’s story. Burt apprenticed under his father, John Burt, and, in 1754, assumed a formal position in the family business. Records show that a Benjamin Burt served three days with the militia at the Battle of Lexington in April 1775. It seems probable, but it has not been proven, that Benjamin Burt the silversmith is the same Benjamin Burt who served as militiaman.¹ Nevertheless, Burt the silversmith produced high quality silver pieces for over half a century. The coffeepot’s value has been widely recognized, and it is now part of the permanent collection at the Minneapolis Institute of Art.²

Little is known of the coffeepot’s journey between its creation, ca. 1770–1775, and 1906, when an elegant coffeepot ascribed to Burt was pictured in an exhibition catalog for the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.³ The sellers were Charles William Eliot and his second wife, Grace Mellen Hopkinson Eliot.⁴

*Convergence with Mount Desert Island:
Charles William Eliot 1834–1881*

We know a great deal about Charles William Eliot. He was born in 1834 with a severe birthmark along the right side of his face, and was the only son among the five children of a Samuel A. Eliot of Boston. Charles graduated from Harvard at age nineteen, and at age twenty-one, was elected a member of the faculty as a tutor of mathematics. In 1857, his father’s business failed and the family became dependent on young Charles. A year later, Charles married Ellen Derby Peabody of Boston. Charles and Ellen had four children, two of whom died in infancy (Francis in 1861, and Robert in 1866). The remaining sons—Charles and Samuel—outlived their mother. Ellen Derby Peabody died of tuberculosis on March 13, 1869, the day after her husband’s surprising and contentious election to the presidency of Harvard University. At thirty-five years old, Charles William Eliot was widowed with two young sons, and the new president of what was then still a small university.⁵

Over the next forty years, Eliot reformed American higher education. He introduced a core curriculum for undergraduates, founded new graduate schools and expanded others, modernized entrance exams to encourage a diversity of college applicants, promoted opportunities for women to pursue higher education, and expanded religious training programs to include many more denominations.

Slight of build (he weighed 135 pounds when he rowed in the 1850s), but erect in posture, he was resolutely logical in his thinking, highly organized, and articulate and direct in all matters.

Dr. Eliot found his way to Mount Desert Island in the 1870s while taking summer cruises with his young sons, Charles and Samuel. In 1880, his sons formed the "Champlain Society"—a band of college students who spent summers exploring the flora and fauna of Mount Desert Island. They were so enamored with the beauty and the uniqueness of the island that they encouraged their father to purchase a large swath of land on the northern side of Northeast Harbor, running east of Harbor Brook. By the fall of 1881, Eliot had built his summer home across from Bear Island, overlooking the Great Harbor.⁶

Charles William Eliot: How Did He Acquire the Coffeepot?

How the coffeepot came into Dr. and Mrs. Eliot's possession prior to 1906 is a mystery. Eliot might have purchased the coffeepot himself, though his spending habits, and the simplicity of the items in his final estate, suggest that the purchase of such a luxurious item would have been out of character for the ascetic Unitarian.⁷

Perhaps it came through an inheritance. Eliot's forbearers had been very wealthy in the early 1800s—his father was mayor of Boston in 1838—but the family wealth was lost in 1857 when his father's business failed, and

the family became destitute. While both of Eliot's wives came from families with means, no record has been found to support the alternative theory that the coffeepot came from one of them.

It seems possible that the coffeepot was a gift to commemorate one of Eliot's achievements. Many milestones in the life of Charles W. Eliot merited recognition: his presidency at Harvard, his achievements and generous mentorship during his years as a professor, and even the celebration of his seventieth birthday in 1904. But none of the records of these events document the receipt of a coffeepot.

A wealthy friend, of whom Charles W. Eliot had many, may have bestowed the coffeepot on the family as a gift. The Crane family, for example, formed numerous ties with the Eliot family over three generations. Richard T. Crane (1832–1912) was the founder in the mid-1850s of R. T. Crane & Bro., a Chicago-based manufacturer and seller of pipes and plumbing supplies.⁸ By the early 1900s, the company was the world's leading manufacturer of valves and fittings, particularly for bathrooms as they became a staple of American homes. The Crane's fortune was said to rival the wealth of the head of Sears, Roebuck and Company in Chicago.⁹

The Pierce family long credited Charles R. Crane with gifting the silver coffeepot to Eliot. This might be due to the fact that, in 1922, when Eliot was eighty-eight years old, Charles R. Crane gave him an automobile.¹⁰ Two of Richard Crane's sons, Charles R. Crane and Richard T. Crane Jr., had documented connections to Eliot, but few before 1906. A separate connection is that Richard Crane Sr.'s grandson graduated from Harvard the same year that Charles W. Eliot turned seventy. Any of these Crane family members possessed the necessary wealth to afford a gift as expensive as the silver coffeepot, and there were many occasions—many graduations,

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birthdays, speeches, and then Eliot's retirement—at which the bestowal of such a gift would have been appropriate.

Yet there is still no positive answer as to how the Eliots came by the Burt coffeepot. The only certainty is that they owned it in 1906.¹¹

*Burt Coffeepot and Charles William Eliot:
Parting Ways 1916–1917*

Exactly when, how, and for how much, the Eliots parted with the coffeepot is better understood. Mr. Francis Hill Bigelow was a neighbor of the Eliot's in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and a known "scout" for collectors of fine art. Records show that on January 1, 1917, Mr. Bigelow brokered the sale of the coffeepot to Mr. Francis P. Garvan, a major silver collector and benefactor of Yale University.¹²

Did the sale of the coffeepot fund the new cottage? In a letter of May 1917, Dr. Eliot wrote to his granddaughter, Ruth Eliot Pierce, about the imminent opening of the house: "The house has been built and furnished out of earnings and savings which would have otherwise gone into capital."¹³ Eliot named the new summer cottage the "Coffeepot," which lends credence to the theory that proceeds from the sale of the Burt coffeepot made at least a major contribution toward the estimated \$4,500 cost of construction.

*The Silver Coffeepot's Ongoing Journey:
1917–2018*

Francis Garvan purchased the coffeepot in January 1917. He in turn loaned it and eighty-four other silver pieces

to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 1919 to be shown in an exhibit of "American Silver of the XVII & XVIII Centuries" by C. Louise Avery.¹⁴

Eight years later, in 1927, Charles Knowles Bolton recorded the coffeepot and its arms of Delamare in his catalog as follows: "A lion ram[pant.]. Crest: a bird. On a coffeepot once owned by Mrs. C. W. Eliot. Made c. 1770–75 by B. Burt. Rubbing by F. H. Bigelow."¹⁵

In December 1928, the coffeepot and other Garvan silver was shipped to Yale. Garvan made permanent a large gift of silver and other decorative arts to Yale University in 1930. The coffeepot was ultimately deemed unnecessary to the Yale collection, and in late 1930, Garvan offered the coffeepot and many other works in a sale at the Anderson Galleries in New York. Its listed sale price was \$1,700.¹⁶

James Ford Bell, then Chairman of General Mills in Minneapolis, and his wife Louise, purchased the piece.¹⁷ In 1932, they donated it to what is now called the Minneapolis Institute of Art, and it resides there to this day. Over forty years after the donation, in a remarkable coincidence, Mr. Bell's grandson, Peter, and Peter's wife, Katie, moved next door to the Coffeepot in Northeast Harbor.¹⁸ The families only learned of the connection when the couple was visiting with Roger Pierce Jr. at the Coffeepot shortly after taking up residence in 1978.

Summer Cottage to Lasting Legacy: 1917–2018

In the winter-spring of 1916–17, in the midst of World War I, the cottage shortly to be named the "Coffeepot" was under construction. It would soon accommodate the granddaughters and great-grandchildren of the Eliots' growing family. At the same time, after years of toil, Eliot was celebrating the federally protected status that President Wilson had just conferred upon the five thousand acres that were initially called Sieur de Monts National



The Coffeepot in 2017 as seen from the back of the house, looking toward Great Harbor. *Photograph by Nikolai Fox*

Monument, the forerunner of Acadia National Park.

The task of designing the Coffeepot had fallen largely to Roger Pierce, a Boston banker, descendant of a well-known Boston grocer, and husband of Ruth Eliot, Dr. Eliot's oldest granddaughter. Lacking an architectural pedigree, Pierce still created an enduring and memorable home.

The two-story summer home he designed is all wood, clapboard shingles, with a porch running the length of the seaward side. Open studs are visible throughout, as it has never been winterized. Not a mansion, when it was completed in 1917, it had a front hall, a living room, dining room, kitchen, two downstairs bedrooms (for a summer cook and chambermaid—long since gone), and a back bathroom. Upstairs, off a long corridor, were seven bedrooms and two bathrooms. Over the years, the front entrance was expanded to include a powder room and closet, a playroom became necessary, an

upstairs bathroom was added, and the dining room was pushed out. The slightly expanded dining room features windows that slide *down* to open and have screens that hinge like doors. Handsome claw-foot bathtubs were (and still are) in all of the bathrooms, and, as a minor bow to modernity, a single shower was installed in the 1970s. The cottage's small basement once housed an old hand-wringing washing machine. A closet still holds a multitude of anchors, clam rakes, lines, oars, and other now little-used equipment. There is still no dishwasher in the house, just human hands. The house has changed remarkably little since July 1917.

In May 1947, Mary Yale Eliot died, and eventually her estate and that of Charles William Eliot (in Charles's case,

Ruth Eliot Pierce wields an axe by the oceanside porch, ca. 1917. Photograph by Roger Pierce, courtesy of the author



after a long delay) were settled. The eldest granddaughter, Ruth Eliot Pierce, chose the Coffeepot while her youngest sister, Carola Goriensky, selected the property and house that had belonged to Dr. Eliot's boatman, Orrin Donnell, a quarter of a mile away. Their sister, Ellen Paine, and her family summered on the western side of Mount Desert Island. The fourth sister, Grace, settled in France, the story long told that Maine's climate did not suit her.

The seven-generation legacy of the house remains. Cousins, with families, return expectantly. Eight grandchildren of Ruth and Roger Pierce own or partly own other houses on Mount Desert Island. Many of those homes are year-round. Stories are told, Eliot's *John Gilley*¹⁹ is read and reread, and every spring the house

is reopened to the sun, fog, pine trees, and sea.

Over the century, the Coffeepot, although altered little, has been witness to sweeping changes around the world and down the street, too. The house has hosted wedding parties, anniversaries, birthdays galore, and lobster "gobbles" of all description. A baby was born in the house, visitors come occasionally asking for a cup of coffee, a ghost is rumored to lurk in the dusty attic, and generations recall falling asleep to the sweeps of the Bear Island lighthouse and the calls of the Great Harbor bell buoy. Nearly all of the vicissitudes of shared family ownership have occurred: cold water swims, fishing expeditions, sailing adventures, card and board games, readings of Agatha Christie's tattered pages, hikes, popovers, and relaxed afternoons on the porch. Through it all, two things have remained steady and true: the elegant silver coffeepot in the photograph on the mantle, and the spirit of its namesake gathering place, to which



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so many family members return again and again, to be with the people, the beauty, and the peace of Mount Desert Island.

Ben Pierce is a lifetime seasonal resident of Mount Desert Island and a member of the sixth generation of his family to love the Coffeepot. A notable feature of his professional career was his contribution as the founding President of the Vanguard Charitable Endowment Program in Malvern, Pennsylvania, where he served for seventeen years. Today Vanguard Charitable is among the country's ten largest grant makers.

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