



The Desk That N(Ever) Was: Oldfarm, a Secretary, and Other Misplaced Furnishings

By Marie Yarborough

Locals still mourn the razing of Oldfarm, the family home of Acadia National Park founder George B. Dorr—but what happened to the objects that were left behind? The winding path of George Dorr's "Governor Winthrop Secretary" shows us how Dorr's successor fought to create and maintain a tangible connection to Dorr through objects from Oldfarm. Yet, by digging deeper, we may find that the connection between the desk and the park's founder is less than intimate, if not mistakenly imagined.

The mahogany, slant-top desk sits forty-four and a half inches high, forty-two inches wide, and twenty-two inches deep, with a serpentine front. It boasts four drawers with oval, Hepplewhite-style brass pulls adorned with an acorn-and-leaf motif, which is typical of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries.¹ It stands on ball-and-claw feet and the woodwork shows the hallmarks of hand-planing and dovetail joints. Although it has been described as "Governor-Winthrop style," that characterization is not likely helpful, as that tag-line has been erroneously assigned to many varieties of slant-lid desks from the Colonial Revival

Oldfarm, the family home of Acadia National Park founder, George B. Dorr, was demolished in 1954.
Courtesy of the National Park Service, Acadia National Park





Superintendent Benjamin Hadley, Dorr's successor, assured the survival of furnishings from the Dorr family home. *Courtesy of the National Park Service, Acadia National Park*

Period.² Based on these elements, historic furnishings expert Rosamond Rea suggests that the desk is Chippendale style, and is from between 1790 and 1800. According to the earliest inventory of Oldfarm furnishings, the desk was situated near one of the public entryways to the house, in the "Lower Front Hall, (On Landing)."³

How is it that a slant-top, mahogany "secretary" and a few other Oldfarm furnishings escaped daily use by park staff and eventually made their way to the park collections? To what extent is it correct to call this piece "George Dorr's desk," and to imply that it was a desk of great personal value to Dorr, at which he may have worked while creating Acadia National Park?

By the time the National Park Service razed Oldfarm in 1951, Dorr's most intimate and personal furniture, housewares, and small possessions had long been distributed according to his instructions, among his close confidants, as laid out in his "Last Will and Testament, 1943." In contrast, the other Oldfarm furnishings, supplied earlier to the National Park Service by a 1941 bill of sale, were eventually dispersed to neighbors and amongst the park service's units and buildings. The National Park Service's property record numbers marked items that remained within Acadia, and much of the furniture outfitted park buildings such as the superintendent's residence at Storm Beach Cottage, the Ranger Station at Schoodic, and the Jordan Pond and Brown Mountain Gate Lodges. Over the years, park staff inventoried these items yearly by physically locating

them in various storage buildings, offices, and residences, attempting to preserve both their provenance—Oldfarm—and their association with Acadia’s most eminent figure—Dorr—in the government property records.

Hadley v. O’Neill: The Struggle for Oldfarm Furnishings

Between 1947 and 1948, Superintendent Benjamin Hadley, Dorr’s successor and close confidant, sought the appropriate method of dispersing the government-owned furnishings collected from Oldfarm. Hadley attempted to decide what was useful to the service, what should be sold, what should be offered for sale to distant relatives and, finally, what should remain in his care as a reminder of Dorr’s connection to Acadia and Oldfarm.

On October 8, 1947, Hadley put forth his wishes to the director for certain furnishings to remain in Acadia, rather than being offered for sale to the public or to distant relatives. His memo recalls the several requests and repeat petitioning by Mr. Grover O’Neill on behalf of Mrs. O’Neill (a "distant relative of Dorr") to acquire some of the furnishings not needed by the park for sentimental value:

They both [Grover and Mrs. O’Neill] played the ‘Cousin George’ angle for all it would stand ... they hoped, if not expected, that on his death they would be the principal beneficiary under his will. Great was their surprise therefore when they read the first clause in

his will: ‘First: Such relatives as I have are either sufficiently provided for in their own estates or so remote ... that I intentionally omit them ... as beneficiaries ...’ Accordingly, the O’Neills got nothing by bequest.⁴

Later in the memo, Hadley suggests that the remaining property should either be distributed among park buildings or "sold by advertisement in the customary manner."⁵ His third suggestion remains the most personal, and it is probably the reason why these items exist in the collection today: he submitted that Acadia should keep certain items of value to be displayed in a future park museum. Referencing the memorial in Dorr’s name at Sieur de Mont, Hadley conceded: "I’ll admit, in some respects my ... suggestion has a very personal angle ... The park should keep these mementos of its first superintendent...he and his connection with the park is worthy of more intimate and personal memorabilia than a slate tablet on a piece of granite."⁶ Hadley went on to say:

There are now certain items of Oldfarm furniture [in the Storm Beach Cottage] ... there for both use and safe keeping ... As long as I remain superintendent of Acadia and occupy that residence I’d like to retain those few visible reminders of my association with him. My sentimental attachment for them is, and the park’s should be, far greater than that of a remote cousin.⁷

On July 13, 1948, Hadley wrote a memo to the Director of the National Park Service, Newton B. Drury, outlining the status and updated locations of the items. The memo divided the property into four lists: items removed from Oldfarm and moved to the Homan’s House (all of which were subsequently

destroyed by fire on October 23, 1947), items removed from Oldfarm and remaining in his care at the Superintendent's residence at the Storm Beach Cottage, items that remain in the Oldfarm house, and items that Grover O'Neill has expressed interest in, including but not limited to the "Secretary, Governor Winthrop" listed by Hadley as having a potential value of \$500, which was well over the value of all of the other items enumerated. Hadley summarizes that "every item on the list could be sold... . There are really no items of historic or antique value, barring the Governor Winthrop desk and two or three bureau stands. They have fair money value as pieces of good furniture, not as antiques."⁸

Hadley concluded by advocating for safeguarding some of Dorr's furnishings by keeping them, including the desk, in the Storm Beach Cottage where Dorr spent his final years and where Hadley had moved the items following Dorr's death in 1944. This list included forty-four pieces, such as ceramic flower pots, a Seth Thomas clock, some rugs, Chinese vases, the desk, and other mahogany furniture. Hadley wrote:

Before reaching a final decision on the disposition of the furniture, I venture to suggest that consideration be given to retaining some of the items now in my care in the Storm Beach Cottage. They do not comprise even a minor part of the furnishings of the house and should not be looked upon as such. They do, however, constitute a visible link between the park and Mr. Dorr. They reflect his occupancy of the house they are now in and to a degree reflect his personality. For the sake of perpetuating that association for a time, at least, I think those pieces should be kept. For your information, the O'Neills are not aware of the fact that the items on the Storm Beach list are where they are now.⁹

A final attempt by the O'Neills to purchase items from Oldfarm came on March 2, 1949 in the form of a letter from Grover O'Neill to Hadley. O'Neill writes that he has been informed "that you have been authorized to dispose of the items of furniture not needed by the Service ... I would like, for sentimental reasons, to acquire as many of these items as I can, provided the price is reasonable and fair." As if to try to sway Superintendent Hadley's decision to release items to them by suggesting Hadley might profit from the arrangement, O'Neill states "... I told Mr. Drury [Director of the National Park Service] and Mr. Tolson¹⁰ that you had undoubtedly been promised some memento by Mr. Dorr, and I hope that in the process of acquiring these things I would obtain the desk which could then be presented to you as coming from him."¹¹

From Storm Beach Cottage to McFarland Hill

Clearly, Hadley's convictions were not altered by the O'Neills' conspicuous suggestion that Hadley might receive the desk if the O'Neills purchased it. That letter was the last documented request from the O'Neills about the furnishings, and, in 1951, Oldfarm was razed. According to government property records in a 1977 card catalog inventory, the desk remained assigned to the superintendent at the Storm Beach Cottage in 1958, 1959 and 1960.

It is inventoried as: "Desk (Secretary Governor Winthrop Style, serpentine front, mahogany, oval brass pulls; on charge to Storm Beach Cottage;

According to a 1977 card catalog inventory, the desk remained assigned to the superintendent at the Storm Beach Cottage through 1960. *Courtesy of the National Park Service, Acadia National Park*

DI-100 (APPROVED APRIL 1942)	
ITEM	Desk (Secretary)
DESCRIPTION	Governor Winthrop Style, serpentine front, mahogany, oval brass pulls
	446 (PROPERTY NUMBER)
ON CHARGE TO:	R. R. No. AND DATE
Attic	P. O. No. AND DATE
Storm Beach Cottage - Hadley	VOU. No. AND DATE
Supt. 5-27-58	ACTIVITY Old Acadia N. P.
	COST \$100.00 (nominal value)
	Acquired from Geo. B. Dorr on
	Bill of Sale dated 9/16/41
	16-28227-1 GPO

Property Number 446; Cost \$100.00 (nominal value) Acquired from Geo. B. Dorr on Bill of Sale dated 9/16/41."¹²

We can likely assume that the desk stayed in the Storm Beach Cottage through the next few Superintendents' residencies, but the path of the desk between 1960 and 1988 is unclear. In 1988, it is listed on an inventory as "removed to Hulls Cove" following a repair to one of the rear ball and claw feet.¹³ Over the next two years, most of the items were slowly removed from Storm Beach Cottage to a storage room in the Hulls Cove Visitor Center.¹⁴

In 1990, thirty-seven items originally from Oldfarm, including the desk, were accessioned into Acadia's Museum collection and stored in a climate-controlled, secure facility.¹⁵ Forty-three years after Superintendent Benjamin

Hadley first suggested the park keep certain items associated with Dorr, the remaining furnishings from Oldfarm had made it to their final destination. Over the years, the lore surrounding some of the Oldfarm furnishings intrigued local people and even inspired local researchers and professors to arrive at Park Headquarters in person, asking to see "George Dorr's desk." And, although it is true that this piece of furniture was owned by Dorr, the idea that it was an intimate or cherished piece, one that Mr. Dorr may have worked at daily in his creation of Acadia National Park, does not ring true.

Dorr's Sea Room and his Most Valuable Secretary

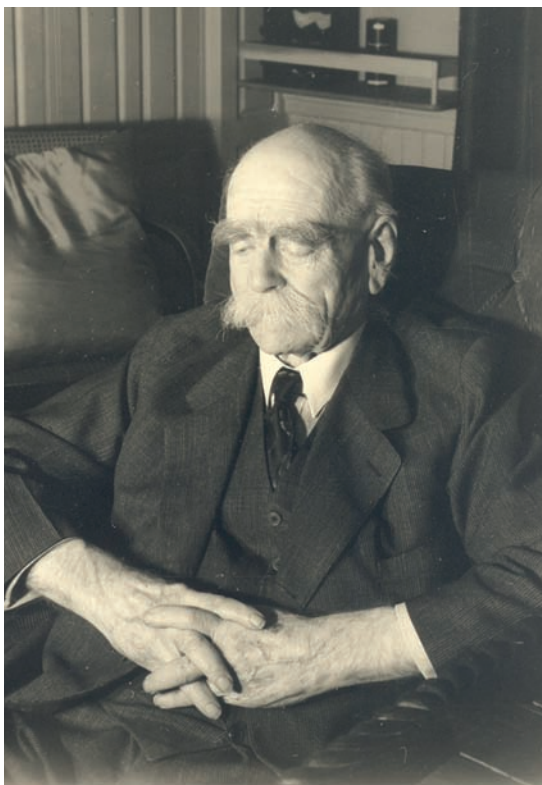
What can we assume about the importance of this desk as it functioned at Oldfarm? Was this a valuable or "personal" piece of Dorr's and, if so, why was it not bequeathed in his will to any of his close confidants, as similar items of his had been? According to Dorr biographer Dr. Ronald Epp in his book *Creating*



Entrance foyer at
Oldfarm, 1922. *Courtesy
of the National Park Service,
Acadia National Park*

Acadia National Park, Dorr's third-floor Sea Room, with wall-to-wall bookshelves and small swinging windows that opened to the landscape and seascape, was where "[Dorr's] reflective activity took place ... in this study, surrounded by books."¹⁶ Epp writes: "there, atop an oriental rug, Dorr placed a writing table, an eight-sided pedestal table, and several walnut rocking chairs."¹⁷ The Sea Room, with a large fireplace and a window seat, was adjacent to both his bedroom and a side porch overlooking the mountains. The Sea Room was an intimate space for Dorr, tucked away on the third floor, far away from the public spaces below, where he so often entertained. Therefore, it would make sense that the furnishings in that intimate space—the pedestal table, the writing table, and the rocking chairs—may have been more thoroughly incorporated into Dorr's daily life as he reflected and worked, than the desk was.¹⁸

On August 13, 1943, Dorr's will named his personal secretary of many years, Phyllis Sylvia, as one of his trustees, and bequeathed to her a number of furnishings, including but not limited to a Tip Top Table, a Louis XVI library table, all his articles of silver, a mahogany bedside table "listed as being in Storm Beach Cottage, but being used by me in my bedchamber at Oldfarm,"¹⁹ and a "Seth Thomas Clock, with Westminster Chimes, now at Oldfarm on the *desk on the Front Stairs* ..."²⁰ It is telling that Dorr bequeathed to one of his most trusted confidants such valuable and/or seemingly personal furnishings, such as, for example, his bedside table, and also the clock that sits on top of the



George B. Dorr, age 90, at the Storm Beach Cottage, c. 1942. *Courtesy of the National Park Service, Acadia National Park*

desk in question, but not the desk itself. So, the desk remained in Oldfarm, as a decorative piece, in the lower front hallway, suggesting it was not an intimate, sentimental, or valuable piece for Dorr, but rather a more public furnishing, one unsuitable for gifting to his close confidants and friends.

By 1948, Benjamin Hadley had moved the desk and the other selected furnishings to the Superintendent's Residence at the Storm Beach Cottage for safe-keeping under his watchful eye. It was clearly Hadley's desire to retain some small personal association between Oldfarm, Dorr, and Acadia that drove him to secure remaining items from Oldfarm that that he deemed potential heirlooms or that looked valuable, even though he knew these objects did not have intimate connections to Dorr. Likely, the O'Neills' continued interest in the desk strengthened Hadley's resolve to retain that piece in particular. Without Hadley's unwavering desire to safeguard certain items, they likely would have been sold at fair market value or worn-out from use in general park buildings. Although it is now clear that the desk does not have the personal association to Dorr that Hadley had hoped he was preserving, and that many others since Hadley had envisioned and even embellished upon, the desk remains a solid reminder of the grand manor that once stood at Compass Harbor—and of the man who worked tirelessly to create Acadia National Park.

Marie Yarborough trained as a Cultural Anthropologist at Wheaton College and went on to earn an MA in New England and American Studies at the University of Southern Maine. She has worked in libraries and museums since the age of fifteen. In 2010, she became the Writer-Editor at Acadia National Park, managing multiple indoor and outdoor exhibit projects over the following four years. Since 2015, she has been the Curator at the William Otis Sawtelle Collections and Research Center, where she manages Acadia's natural, cultural and archival collections.

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1. Rosamond Rea, email communication to Marie Yarborough, December 2, 2017.
 2. David Williams, email communication to Rosamond Rea, December 2, 2017.
 3. Inventory of Oldfarm furnishings, no date but associated with the 1941 Deed of Oldfarm and furnishings filed in Bar Harbor (presumed lost in fire of 1947). Acadia National Park Resource Management Records, Box 4, folder 10.
 4. Hadley letter to Newton B. Drury, October 8, 1947, Acadia National Park Resource Management Records, Box 4, folder 10.
 5. Ibid.
 6. Ibid.
 7. Ibid.
 8. Hadley letter to Newton B. Drury, July 13, 1948, Acadia National Park Resource Management Records, Box 4, folder 10.
 9. Ibid.
 10. Hillory A. Tolson, Assistant Director of the National Park Service from 1940-1963.
 11. O'Neill letter to Benjamin Hadley, March 2, 1949, Acadia National Park Resource Management Records, Box 4, folder 10.
 12. Government property record from a 1977 card catalog entry, Acadia National Park Museum Collections, Bar Harbor, Catalog # ACAD56014.
 13. Inventory notes with handwritten comments, in hanging files, 1988-1989, Curator's Office, Acadia National Park, Bar Harbor.
 14. A small private storage room in the lower level of the Visitor's Center building at Hulls Cove, Acadia National Park, where historic objects were stored before museum storage was built.
 15. Accession record ACAD_295, 1990, hanging files, Curator's office, Acadia National Park, Bar Harbor.
 16. Ronald H. Epp, *Creating Acadia National Park: The Biography of George Bucknam Dorr* (Bar Harbor, ME: Friends of Acadia, 2016), 53.
 17. Ibid.

18. The pedestal table was moved to the Homan's house and burned in the fire of 1947; the writing table was inventoried as "left" in Oldfarm and consequently never showed up in later inventories; and the rocking chairs were moved to Storm Beach Cottage, where they eventually disappear from the property records.

19. Codicil to George B. Dorr's Will, August 13, 1943, Chapman Archive, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Papers, B13, F05.

20. Author's emphasis. Codicil to George B. Dorr's Will, August 13, 1943, Chapman Archive, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Papers, B13, F05.

