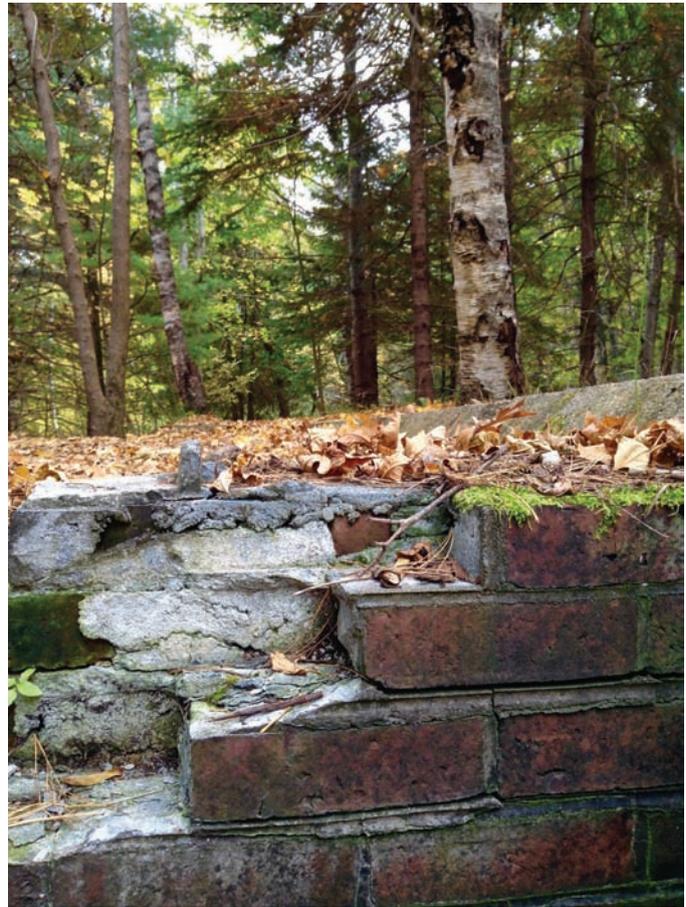




## *Foundation and Founder*

By Sean Cox

South of Bar Harbor, a small dirt parking lot marks the entrance to a stretch of land that is perhaps the most significant piece of Acadia National Park on Mount Desert Island. Locals and experienced visitors frequent this small parcel of land and explore the trails that wind through the ruins of an impressive summer estate overlooking Compass Harbor. These grounds present an opportunity to escape the seasonal influx of park and town visitors, and are therefore popular with families and hikers desiring some seclusion. Here, if one takes time to thoroughly observe the surroundings, markers of once-manicured grounds are visible. A brook lined with granite blocks winds through the trees, under the park pathway, and into the forest. Aging white pines dot the property. These trees do not grow straight and limbless as they would in a grove, but instead spread their large lower branches, crowding above formerly wide-sweeping lawns. Seasons of pine needles and brittle leaves coat rough-cut granite steps and the foundations of outlying service buildings, while exposed masonry of the grand summer cottage crumbles and vanishes beneath new growth. In what appears to be a neglected corner of Acadia, lie both the foundation of the Dorr estate named "Oldfarm," and the foundation of the park itself.



Crumbling brickwork and exposed mortar on the edge of the estate foundation. Although deterioration is clear, the skill applied in construction is also evident; brick flooring exposed to the elements for decades has not rippled from abusive winter frost-heaves. *Photograph by the author*



Sea-facing elevation of Oldfarm. *Courtesy of the National Park Service, Acadia National Park*

In 1850, Charles Dorr and Mary Ward were married and settled in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts. Their second son, George Dorr, later transcribed the story of his birth: "on the 29<sup>th</sup> of December, 1853 during a wild snowstorm," he wrote, "my father plowed his way on foot to carry the good news to my grandfather Ward."<sup>1</sup> Dorr was born into a wealthy Massachusetts family, and eventually developed a fashionable summer residence on Mount Desert Island. The land on which the Dorr family built their estate was purchased in 1868, and the home completed around 1880. The estate, christened "Oldfarm" in reference to the old farmland on which it was built, was one of the first large summer cottages on Mount Desert Island. It provided Dorr with an escape from increasingly suburban Massachusetts. Within these walls, Dorr would eventually craft his plans for a national park on the island his family had so loved.

As unique as the man who owned it, Oldfarm was an eclectic and imposing cottage, sitting comfortably south of Bar Harbor and overlooking the Atlantic. The creation of Oldfarm heralded a period during which a summering elite transformed formerly utilitarian lands into opulent statements of personal wealth and romanticized "natural" spaces. The mansion was a work of art, a creation without duplicate on Mount Desert Island. Its many unique features embodied the romantic era of Bar Harbor cottagers, a period of rapid construction of grand vacation estates across the island. The Dorr family had employed a Boston-trained architect from Maine—Henry Richards—to assist in planning the cottage. The building

reflected "practical" ideas generated by Charles and George Dorr and the artistic vision of Mary Dorr. Dorr's writings offer vivid descriptions of Oldfarm, ranging from the record of its conception to the admiration of its early magnificence.

The first story we built of granite split out from tumbled boulders in the gorge. At the last some brick was used that added their touch of color to the warm-toned granite. All was shingled [with] the warm brown, never rotting California Redwood. Great chimneys of brick rose above the shingles promising generous warmth, a promise they have well fulfilled. In the interior, the frame was built with extra strength—my father saw to that—while all the interior was skillfully and carefully worked out from the best of Michigan White Pine ... The result, when we at last moved in the summer of 1880, the carpenters were still working upon the house, was a delightful home and a home it has proved to be at any season of the year.<sup>2</sup>

Oldfarm stood on the rocky outcropping overlooking Frenchman Bay, with the surrounding islands and mainland in the distance. The view from the three-story construction would have been awe-inspiring. Fortunately, Mr. Dorr described the view from his Sea Room: "I used to see, day after day, this wonderful, slow breaking of dawn, with the bold rounded mass

of the Porcupine [islands] black against the growing light reflected in the Bay, then changing insensibly to green as the light grew stronger."<sup>3</sup>

A view like this, which today is obscured by the new growth of trees in what was once the foundation, inspired Dorr to spend over a decade advocating for the federal protection of lands on Mount Desert Island until, in 1916, he finally succeeded in creating the Sieur de Monts National Monument. The federal protection of this patchwork of formerly private land constituted a significant step forward for land preservation east of the Mississippi. The area first earned its title as national monument, and then, in 1919, earned the national park designation. The careful crafting of the case by the Hancock County Trustees of Public Reservations (HCTPR), and Dorr's articulate and persistent effort, ensured that federal infrastructure would protect natural spaces for future generations of islanders and seasonal visitors. Alongside other dedicated trustees—among them Charles W. Eliot—Dorr acted as an advocate, caretaker, and superintendent for Acadia, and donated decades of his time and vast financial assets to realize his vision. Rough and rocky coastline, glacial-cut lakes, forested natural habitats, and the bald wind-swept summits of Mount Desert Island's mountains were all preserved by the Hancock County Trustees. Oldfarm was Dorr's inspiration and his gateway to preservation efforts on the island, and it reminds us of similar donations of property and financial assets from his fellow "cottagers," which allowed the land to be federally protected.

After Dorr's death in 1944, Oldfarm stood empty, as Dorr had no children to inherit the property. Dorr never intended for his beloved home to descend into disrepair or to be reclaimed by the landscape. Before his death, Dorr had developed plans for the estate, but without his continued advocacy, the house was doomed. Dorr spent the final years of his life between Oldfarm and the Storm Beach

Cottage—a guesthouse that had been constructed as part of the estate plan and is an official park service building today. Although not nearly as grand as the mansion, Dorr found it much more convenient in his extreme old age. After Dorr moved permanently into the guest cottage, Oldfarm was rented out to friends and guests. Near the end of his life, Dorr wrote several letters expressing his wish that Oldfarm be preserved as a part of the forested island he so loved. In August 1940, Dorr addressed a proposal to President Franklin D. Roosevelt:

I write about a matter that is much in my heart at this time and I hope you look upon it favorably. This old family home, which has been in its day the scene of much generous hospitality, I would like greatly to have become, yet while I live, the possession of the United States, that it may serve the President and executive officers in maintaining health and vigor for their work.<sup>4</sup>

Though Dorr desired a presidential retreat to be made of his cottage, it was not to be so. President Roosevelt responded later that month, "your thoughtful and generous offer to donate this property to the United States is very much appreciated. I know of no provision of law, however, which would authorize me to accept it for the purpose you mention."<sup>5</sup> Roosevelt then suggested that the property simply be donated to Acadia National Park, to be made available for executive purposes if so needed. His original hopes disappointed, Dorr donated Oldfarm to the park. The house was spared from the great Bar Harbor fire of 1947, yet visitors walking the grounds of Oldfarm today see but a shadow of its former glory, and even that is slowly disappearing into the undergrowth.

In 1946, the National Park Service evaluated the aging house, determining the feasibility of various prospective uses for the estate that might justify

the expense of its conservation. The Park Service's report contains data concerning the costs for conversion into a concession building, an administrative outpost, a park museum, or a hybrid office and interpretive site. The extensive lawns, gardens, and tennis court that surrounded the mansion were prohibitively expensive to maintain, and therefore fell into disrepair. The park service reported that engineers found Oldfarm to be "structurally sound," but "mechanical work"—the heating systems, electrical wiring, and plumbing—was found to be outdated and insufficient. In a methodical fashion, the specialists composed six pages of typewritten cost analysis before finally recommending that the park service, "strip Oldfarm of such shelving, doors, or piping and other similar materials as may be of use in the Park in the near future, advertise for bids for razing [the] building, and as many of the other Dorr Estate buildings not required in the operation of the park."<sup>6</sup>

Oldfarm was ultimately destroyed by the very conservation group that Dorr had worked so tirelessly to bring to Mount Desert Island. Though Dorr had hoped that the National Park Service would protect historic treasures such as his mansion, the organization decided that the mansion would be too expensive to update and transform and agreed to obliterate Dorr's beloved home. However, the job was not entirely finished, and the remains of a few walls were still standing in 1955, when John D. Rockefeller Jr., a close associate of Dorr's in the development of Acadia, donated \$5,000 to finish the demolition and clean the

View of Oldfarm after initial razing of the home, before the Rockefeller-funded cleanup of the site. Courtesy of the National Park Service, Acadia National Park



area.<sup>7</sup> While today it seems shameful to have destroyed the home of Acadia's own founding father, the ideological priorities of the post-war years were not favorable to protecting such a structure. As Sarah Allaback points out in *Mission 66 Visitor Centers*, parks had been "neglected since the New Deal era improvements of the 1930s, and were in desperate need of funds for basic maintenance, not to mention protection from an increasing number of visitors."<sup>8</sup> The Mission 66 initiative of the National Park Service was a response to the dilemma of parks nationwide, and focused on building infrastructure and modern facilities. Additionally, in post-war America, it became increasingly popular to tour national parks by car, so new priority was given to attractions easily

reached by, or visible from, touring roads. By then, Oldfarm was a secluded liability and the financially-strained National Park Service decided it could not afford the house's maintenance. Only in hindsight can we recognize that the mansion's destruction was an incalculable loss. Acadia lost a potentially useful resource due to shortsighted prioritization and dire financial straits. We recognize that no institution of human design is perfect, and we can only hope that the destruction of Oldfarm will provide a useful example of inadvisable park management, and that its story will prevent similarly short-sighted decisions from being made in the future.

As father to one of the most well-known and frequently visited national parks in the country, Dorr's legacy impresses millions each year as they visit Acadia National Park from all parts of the globe. As a lifelong bachelor, Dorr had no immediate family to provide for and no need to conserve his



Rough-cut granite staircases through the estate are some of the most visible remnants from extensive, opulent landscaping. *Photograph by the author*

family fortune. His immense expenditures for the park amounted to a great public inheritance. Though they never met him, Acadia's visitors are direct beneficiaries of his work and passion.

The exposed brickwork and granite of Oldfarm offers a material reminder of "old Bar Harbor," when private ownership and opulence dominated the seasonal culture of the island. The summering population of wealthy families fundamentally changed the island, drawing those with power and fortune to the small coastal community. Ironically, the rapid development threatened the natural beauty of the island. At this critical moment, the late-Victorian environmental romanticism that had drawn many of these families to the island, and the fortunes and social capital of a few idealistic cottagers, together brought about the movement to protect beloved portions of Mount Desert Island.

While wandering through its ruins, one is still impressed by elements of George Dorr's once-grand estate; though left to the Maine elements for over sixty years, intricate herringbone brickwork patios have defied frost-heaves. Still, time has taken its toll. The lawns that held grandiose social tea parties for the summering elite have been obscured by new forest growth. The walls around the porch where Dorr entertained intimate friends and congressional representatives are slowly disintegrating. Trees sprout where Dorr's famous library once stood, and the servants' entrance and kitchen have slowly faded into the forest floor. Though the loss of this historic landmark is tragic, its ruins, and the surrounding

national park, are perhaps more valuable to the community than the mansion itself ever was. The members of local families and adventurous visitors who explore this corner of Acadia still benefit from the peace, the quiet, and the beauty that the Oldfarm grounds still protect and preserve.

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*Sean Cox grew up on Mount Desert Island with Acadia National Park as his next-door neighbor. In 2009, he began working for the National Park Service as an Interpretive Ranger for the busy summer seasons between school years. Sean graduated from the University of Maine in 2015 with a BA in history, and wrote his Honors undergraduate thesis on George Bucknam Dorr.*

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