

Eastport renovation uncovers clue to sardine industry roots

by Lora Whelan

Finding an old home in Maine is as easy as finding an apple tree along the road. Renovating an old home while maintaining a spirit of curiosity about the role the building played in the area's history, through the people who built it and lived in it, is not always as easy. Contending with old wiring, plumbing, punky wood, failing plaster and the layers added over the years can act as dampers to the natural curiosity of the homeowner or renovator. This is not the case with the Perry-based team of Joyce Jackson and Patrick Mealey, who own the company *fineartistmade*.

The company has made a name for itself for meticulous renovation and cabinetry work, in particular on period kitchens and bathrooms. Their work has been featured in several well-known magazines.

The couple's latest discovery, made during a renovation project on a 19th century home in Eastport, was "serendipitous," says Jackson. The company has a blog on their website where they discuss their projects. As they began blogging about the start of their project, Jackson gave some background on the sardine industry to the Eastport area and the "ebb and flow" of its importance to the local economy. Little did they know that very shortly after that blog post they would find that the house had a little known, but significant connection to the sardine industry.

On two exposed beams in one of the rooms are the large scrawled signatures of George Burnham Jr. and Josiah Burnham. For Mealey and Jackson, the signatures were tantalizing tidbits from the past that piqued their interest. Having worked for a number of years on the history of their house in Perry and having tracked down hundreds of photographs, documents and far-flung descendants of the original builders, the two were once again bit by the history and research bug. Jackson immediately began researching the Burnham names. What she found surprised them.

The sardine industry in Eastport and then the region is known to have been started in 1875 by Julius Wolff, who recognized that with sardine import restrictions created by the Franco-Prussian War there was an opportunity to be found in the small herring of the Passamaquoddy Bay area. However, George Burnham Jr. was documented in the 1919 book *Maine: A History*, vol. 3, by the Maine Historical Society, American Historical Society, as being the unsung father of the sardine industry in Maine and thus the country, as the sardine industry on the West Coast got its practices from the help and support of the East Coast industry.

The book explains: "In 1865, Mr. George Burnham, of the firm Burnham & Morrill, Portland, Maine, conceived the idea of using the small herring as a substitute for sardines." Burnham knew of the extraordinary amounts of small herring in Passamaquoddy Bay and was struck with the idea of using them as sardine substitutes. He traveled to France, where packing small fish in oil was first started in the early 1850s. Burnham went to Eastport in 1867, "secured a plant and commenced to work on the problem." But because of the damp climate, he failed to come up with a satisfactory method for drying



Geo Burnham Jr

the fish. Setting his sights on more lucrative ventures, he returned to Portland, where he became a senior partner of the firm Burnham & Morrill, later known around the world for its B&M baked beans, and a company that is still in existence today.

“This makes him pretty significant in terms of Eastport.” Says Mealey. But he also thinks its significant for the role that Burnham’s company played in later canned food development. “I mean B&M baked beans are as American as apple pie.”

Mealey relays how the final piece of the puzzle came to light. The question still in their minds was whether the Burnhams who signed their names on the beams were brothers and if George Burnham Jr. was the same man as the one they had read about. “How do we verify this?” Mealey says they asked themselves. Jackson went back to the computer and this time hit gold at the Maine Historical Society. A book on Maine family genealogy not only had photographic portraits of the brothers, but also their signatures. “They were spot on,” says Mealey of the matches to those on the beams.

Jackson and Mealey have finished their renovation work on the house in Eastport and are gearing up for new projects. But with each project and the connections they find to the area’s past through the clues left in the fabric of the homes they work on, they make new friends and excite an interest in local history through the homeowners they work with and through their website’s blog.

Jackson says that the clues they find are from the personal and intimate reactions and decisions made by people often influenced by large occurrences such as wars and economic changes across the country. She says, “Following the thread, trying to put it all together is what we like – the challenge” of working with old homes. “There is the connection of history across time,” Mealey explains.

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