

# Kennebec Current

“The clash and the clatter of mowing-machines float up where the old man stands, and leans his trembling hands on the worn old snath, as he looks afar in the broadening path, where the shivering grasses melt beneath a seven-foot bar and its chattering teeth.” — Holman F. Day (see page 8-9)

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July–August 2023

## West Gardiner Historical Society to Get New Home



West Gardiner Historical Society President Debbie Couture stands on July 6 next to a slab on Spears Corner Road in West Gardiner where the society's new two-story home is expected to be built over the next five months.

Photo by Nikko Noble

West Gardiner's selectmen voted in July to award a contract to a local contractor, Bob Bower, for the construction of a 40-by-60-foot, two-story building that will become the new home of the West Gardiner Historical Society.

The builder is required to frame the town-owned building and make it water-tight by December 1, according to Debbie Couture, the society's president. Bower submitted the lowest of three bids for the project, but it was still more than the \$206,000 the town has available to spend, so the selectmen and Bower modified the contract to omit the building's siding for now in order to match the town's budget.

A slab for the building already has been prepared at a site near the Town Office. The new building's address will be 310 Spears Corner Road. Insulation, siding, and other tasks will be completed later.

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## Hussey's General Store, Ex-proprietor Both Close In on 100 Years



Above, the business sign at Hussey's General Store beckons customers. At right, Elwin Hussey reminisces about his days of running the store.

Photos by Bob Bennett



A century ago, most American towns of any size featured what was usually called a general store. These enterprises carried food and drink, clothing and footwear, tools, building supplies, and many other necessities that local residents required. They were often near the center of the town.

Some of them still exist. Locally, one of the best-known of these businesses is Hussey's General Store in Windsor, founded 100 years ago.

Elwin Hussey, the person probably most associated with the business, also is approaching his centennial. Born in the fall of 1923, he is known for his vivid memories and stories about the

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## Silence is Golden



Mary Astor appears in a movie scene on the cover of the program for the Colonial Theater's recent two-day silent-film festival in Augusta. See story on pages 8-9.

From the KHS collection

## Soggy Weather No Obstacle to KHS Activities



President's Message  
**Jamie Logan**

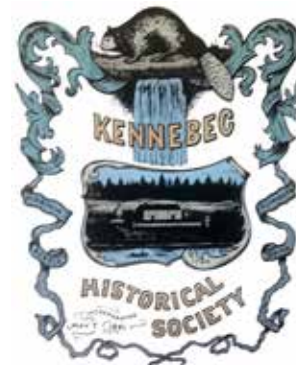
Hopefully, by the time you are reading this the rain has subsided somewhat and we're able to enjoy the Maine summer outdoors. The rain hasn't dampened enthusiasm at the Kennebec Historical Society for two upcoming events – the society's fifth annual tennis tournament and its first annual golf tournament. More information about both events is available on page 13.

The rain also thankfully failed to deter book buyers from stopping by KHS in early June. Thanks to all who volunteered and helped make yet another book sale a success for KHS. Thank you also to all who donated books, came to shop, or helped spread the word about the sale to other book lovers. It's always good to see the

books from the sale headed to a new home where they'll be appreciated.

Another bright spot in recent months has been the KHS programs. Thanks to all who attend; it's wonderful to see people's enthusiasm for history in action at the presentations. The topics vary from month to month, and it's always an educational evening. The presentations for July and August should be no different, with lumber barons and war pigeons as the respective topics.

I hope to see you at one of the KHS events in the coming months. Enjoy the rest of your summer and thank you, as always, for your support of KHS.



*Discovering, preserving,  
and disseminating the history of  
Kennebec County, Maine, since 1891*

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- Total membership:**  
606 on July 14  
Life members: 249

## KHS to Resume Open House at Its Headquarters



The Kennebec Historical Society will be reviving an old tradition by hosting an open house from 2 to 4 p.m. Sunday, August 20, at its headquarters, the Henry Weld Fuller Jr. House, at 107 Winthrop Street in Augusta.

Some of the society's latest acquisitions will be on display, and refreshments will be available. If you have questions about the event, call the society at 622-7718 or email [kennhis1891@gmail.com](mailto:kennhis1891@gmail.com).

We hope to see you there!

## KHS Welcomes the Following New Members

Janine Bonk — West Gardiner  
John O'Hearn — Augusta

Nancy Smith — Ellsworth  
Winthrop Maine Historical Society —  
Winthrop

*and continues to recognize ...*

**Sustaining Business Members**  
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### **Kennebec Current**

Our 162nd Issue

#### **Staff**

Joseph Owen, editor  
Rich Eastman, designer  
Bob Bennett, writer  
Emily Schroeder, writer  
Teddy Faugno, photographer  
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The Kennebec Current encourages letters to the editor. Email letters to [kennhis1891@gmail.com](mailto:kennhis1891@gmail.com). All letters are subject to editing for taste, style, and length.

## Hussey's General Store

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family business.

Hussey's father, Harland B. Hussey (1898-1965), established the business in 1923. At the time, he owned an auto dealership with gas pumps in the center of Windsor. On the southwest corner of the intersection of routes 105 and 32 was a retail business called Dutton's Store, which burned in the summer of that year. Hussey set up his operation on a lot near that location, using an old stable as the structure. This first building was expanded several times and was replaced in 1954 by the existing structure, which stands where Dutton's Store had been located. The first building that housed the business still exists. Route 105 separates the two locations today.

Elwin Hussey essentially grew up in the store. Besides helping to fetch and deliver the myriad goods and products that the store carried even back then, young Elwin also had a paper route to make "side money," he said in a recent interview. After graduating from Erskine Academy in South China, he went to Colby College in Waterville, graduating at the age of 19 in 1943. After service in the U.S. Navy as a radio and radar technician during World War II, he returned to Windsor and re-entered the store's activities.

An old saying goes, timing is everything, and for Hussey this proved to be true. His training and experience in the military were especially helpful in the blooming television market and continuing radio boom of the postwar era. The store began to sell these devices in great numbers and had a substantial repair business as well. Hussey's also had an antenna-equipped trailer that could be brought to a potential customer so that person could try out the new technology before a purchase.

About the same time, the store began to stock and sell another type of product for which it is widely known today: wedding gowns and formal wear. In an era before big-box stores and shopping malls, customers from around the local area and the state began to flock to Windsor to buy clothing for weddings, proms, and other events.

It was also during this time that Elwin Hussey shot a man, according to a 2021 recounting of the incident in the weekly *Town Line* newspaper.

In the late 1960s, the store suffered several overnight break-ins. To try to stop these episodes, Elwin began spending nights sleeping in the store after closing hours. Not knowing whether the crooks were dangerous, he kept a shotgun nearby. During one such nighttime vigil, he was awakened by two burglars breaking through the front door. They headed for the cash register while Hussey went to a neighbor's house, arranged to have the police called, and went back to the store to deal with the intruders. Believing that one of them was armed (it turned out he wasn't, but in the dark, it was impossible to tell), Hussey winged him with a round from the shotgun as he tried to escape. Police found the second visitor hiding on an upper floor, and weapons were discovered in their nearby escape vehicle. Ultimately, though the crimes were stopped, the victim sued Hussey successfully for \$5,000, alleging excessive force.

Today, with this drama long in the past, Hussey's general store, still under the leadership of family members, continues to be a Maine icon known literally around the world. A glance at the internet produces countless descriptions of visits to the store from travelers, writers, and podcasters from multiple global settings.

Hussey is still in the store most days, and though his hearing is not what it used to be, he is still "sharp as a tack," according to his son Jay. His father regales visitors with stories of being on the aircraft carrier USS Shangri-La near the end of World War II and hitchhiking to see Boulder Dam near the end of his service. Once a licensed pilot, Elwin Hussey no longer lands on China Lake in the winter, but Jay advises that nobody ever should "try and put something over" on his father.

After recent construction, the tall sign that had advertised Hussey's General Store for years was preserved and moved across Route 32 to the entrance of a parking area. It still touts the products for which Hussey's is renowned – guns, wedding gowns, and cold beer.

The store continues to sell its more traditional goods along with antiques, old books, phonograph records, and other collectables as well as locally focused T-shirts, gifts and other clothing.

Asked to comment on his legacy in connection with the store, he said he didn't know how it would still be here without him.



**This building, the old location of Hussey's General Store in Windsor, stands across Route 105 from the current store.**

Photo by Bob Bennett

## KHS Acquires Artist's Trove, Blaine Letter, Bailey Stereoviews

Happy summer! We thought you might like to know about some of the recent additions to our collections. One is a notebook detailing Vietnam Remembrance in the Park, which took place in Augusta on September 21, 2014. The same donation also included a Daughters of the American Revolution record book with biographical information on the Revolutionary War soldiers named on a memorial tablet in Lithgow Public Library.

Another collection honors the life of Emilia Veilleux Poulin Tardiff, also known as Toni (1909-2005), born and raised in Augusta. She was an accomplished artist, the only charter member of the Kennebec Valley Art Association who had a Franco-American background. Included are many small examples of her art and articles about her.

An interesting find on eBay was a crate stencil, circa 1930s, 16 inches long by 5 feet wide. The wording is as follows:

**NEEDEL CRAFT PUB. CO.  
CHAPPLE ST.  
AUGUSTA, MAINE**

We don't know who created this, but the person obviously was not familiar with the correct spelling of the street name. Many years ago, Augusta was a major publishing hub, and we're always on the lookout for issues of publications that we're missing.

Stereoviews are highly prized by KHS. We recently acquired several done by Henry Bailey.

Bailey was born in West Gardiner in 1822. He practiced photography in Augusta from 1867 to 1894. The images, all dated 1879, are of the Augusta House, the Kennebec County Jail, the Kennebec Arsenal, and State Street looking north from the State House. Come on in and use a viewer to make them appear in 3-D!



This stereoview of the Augusta House was photographed by Henry Bailey of Augusta.

From the KHS collection

Unitarian minister. He and his family lived at 64 State Street.

Another eBay find is a wonderful carte de visite of the State House, circa 1850s. A carte de visite is a small photograph, in this case 2½ inches by 4 inches, which served as a calling card of sorts. The photographer was Charles H. Starbird, of Augusta. That same purchase yielded a letter written by Augusta resident James G. Blaine, a prominent national political leader, and addressed to Henry Wilson, a U.S. senator from Massachusetts, requesting an Army commission for Frank Stanwood. Stanwood appears to have been a nephew of Blaine's wife, the former Harriet Stanwood. Wilson later served as vice president under President Ulysses Grant.

A major acquisition now lives in the Fuller Parlor. It is a dining room table and chairs donated by a descendant of



The Collections Box  
Emily Schroeder



This illustration of roses was painted by Toni Tardiff.

KHS Collection

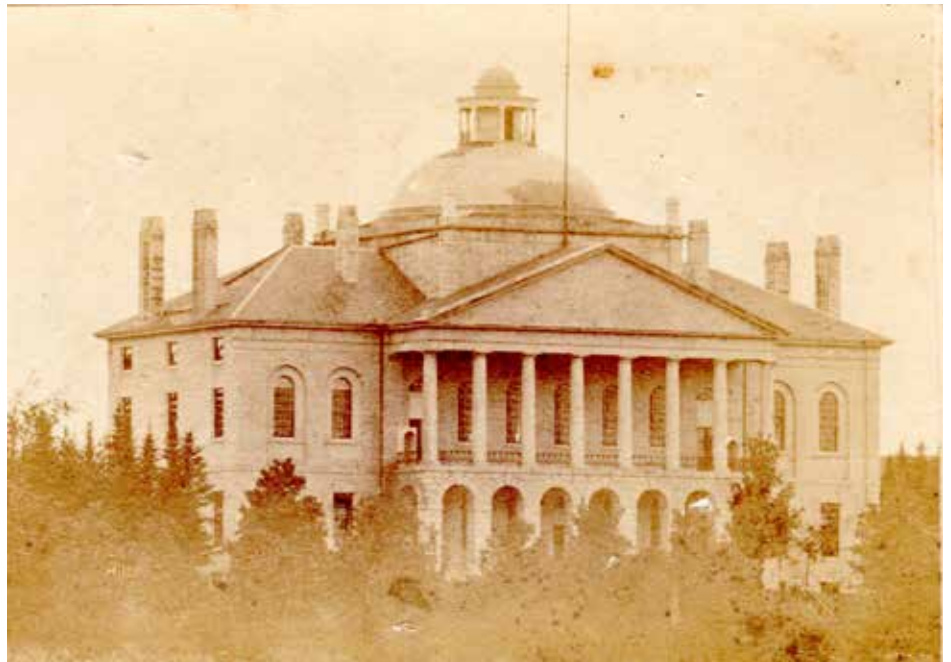
Benjamin Apthorp Gould Fuller (1818-1885), also known as “BAG” Fuller. His parents were Henry Weld and Esther Gould Fuller, the first owners of our house. “BAG” Fuller attended Bowdoin, and by 1849 he was county attorney. He represented Augusta in the Legislature in 1856, and edited *The Age* newspaper concurrently, from 1855 to 1857. He moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1864 and worked primarily on trusts.

The reader will realize that these items are a very small portion of the society’s holdings. We hope to whet your appetite and encourage you to visit and examine these materials in person.

Until next time!



— *Emily A. Schroeder,*  
KHS archivist and  
Collections Committee co-chair



This carte de visite image from the 1850s, depicting the Maine State House, was taken by photographer Charles Starbird, of Augusta.

From the KHS collection

## West Gardiner

*Continued from page 1*

Couture said her society consists of about 20 members, 12 to 14 of whom are active. She said the group has photographed the climate-controlled archive at the Kennebec Historical Society in Augusta and hopes eventually to set up a similar space in its new building to house fragile documents and other historical artifacts. Couture, a former Navy captain who also worked for many years with the Maine Emergency Management Agency before retiring, said she has several documents at her own home that she plans to give to the society when the climate-controlled room is set up, and she knows of others in town who expect to do the same.



West Gardiner’s history includes being the hometown of John Frank Stevens (1853-1943), the engineer who supervised the most crucial phase of the construction of the Panama Canal. Stevens is depicted here on a postage stamp that was issued for use in the Canal Zone when it was under U.S. administration.

From the KHS collection

Also, the society expects to take possession of a 12-foot-tall carriage that a local woman owned and that was stored for many years at the home of late former longtime Selectman Mert Hickey, whom Couture described as having been the de facto town historian.

In the meantime, the group plans to attend to another matter that is both mundane and urgent.

“Our goal right now is to put together the document that people will sign when they donate things,” Couture said, referring to what is known as a deed of gift.

The town’s voters recently approved an allotment of \$115,000 for the building project. The rest of the construction funding comes from the society’s fundraising efforts and money left over from previous allocations. The society also received a \$25,000 grant from the Thompson family, members of whom lived in West Gardiner, for the express purpose of preserving records of the town’s history.

The new building will occupy a site where a past president of the society, Kathy Chapman, once lived in a mobile home. The building will use the same well and septic system.

“We hope she comes back to see it. She doesn’t live close by anymore,” Couture said.



— *by Joseph Owen*

## A Grave Mystery - Woman Returns Headstone to Rightful Place

*Reprinted with permission from the September 13, 2022, edition of the Morning Sentinel.*

**C**indy Gagnon began some detective work in the summer of 2022 to find out where a damaged headstone kept in storage in a Fairfield museum really belonged, and ultimately made her way a few towns over to China. She wasn't expecting to stumble across a local mystery that summer.

She had been planning to continue her work with Daughters of the American Revolution, a group that restores the graves of American Revolutionary War veterans, and had begun work at the Alice Cemetery on the grounds of Good Will-Hinckley in Fairfield. She was comparing the graves in the cemetery to records from the Maine Cemetery Association, and had one name for which she couldn't find a grave.

Gagnon, 63, thought the grave might be missing its headstone, and on a hunch figured she would ask the L.C. Bates Museum in Fairfield “just for the fun of it” to see if it had the stone. She was told by staff they didn't have the headstone she was looking for, but they did have a different one dating to the 1800s. And so the mystery began.

No one knows exactly how the headstone ended up in the museum, said Deborah Staber, museum director and curator. The stone is large and was broken into more than 10 pieces and at some point someone cemented it back together on a piece of metal board. The decades have worn away the stone and pieces of it remain missing, but it's somewhat legible, inscribed with the name of Margaret Ayer, who died August 1, 1865, at the age of 41, the wife of George Ayer. “Then husband dry thy tears, my children weep no more,” an inscription read.

Staber said the stone has never been part of a museum collection, but was probably brought there at some point for safekeeping. About 20 years ago the museum staff tried to determine where Ayer was buried, but were unsuccessful.

“So although we had tried, we never found where (Ayer) went,” Staber said. “We put her in a safe place and were waiting for someone like Cindy to come along and solve our problem and mystery.”

The Bates Museum is on the grounds of Good Will-Hinckley and the staff had looked to see how Ayer may have been connected to the campus, but could not find that either.

“We always wondered who Margaret was,” Staber said.

Although it wasn't the gravestone for Gagnon's unmarked grave, she simply couldn't let Ayer's headstone go back into storage. She was determined to track down Ayer's gravesite.

Gagnon, a Benton resident, had some practice from her work with Daughters of the American Revolution. She joined the group in the last few years, as membership to the group requires a family connection to someone who fought in the Revolutionary War. It took Gagnon a few years to find her connection.

The organization works to clean up gravesites and sometimes does restoration work, which is how Gagnon first got into headstone restoration.

“We fix cemeteries; we come in and clean — it's all about patriotism, education, and historical preservation,” Gagnon said.

She's done some other work repairing headstones, like in cases where they are only in a few pieces and can be put back together. In other cases, she said, if the stone is too damaged to repair, the best practice is to find the base of the



**Cindy Gagnon, a cemetery preservationist and member of the Daughters of the American Revolution, is shown May 25, 2022, at Emery Hill Cemetery in Fairfield.**

Photos by Rich Abrahamson



Cindy Gagnon places her hands on the damaged headstone of Margaret Ayer, who was buried in China Village Cemetery upon her death in 1865.

headstone and bury the rest of it there.

The group is focused on Revolutionary War veterans, but Gagnon said sometimes she can't help but stray off track. When a veteran is buried next to his wife or child, whose graves are in poor condition, how is she supposed to leave them like that? Such was the case with Ayer's headstone. Gagnon just couldn't let it sit in the museum. So she decided to track down Ayer.

More and more cemetery and genealogical information is available online. So Gagnon just had to go on findagrave.com, a website aimed at finding and sharing burial information. Gagnon said she searched under the Ayer name in Maine, and was able to find Margaret.

She was buried in China Village Cemetery with her parents and brother. Her husband George died in 1890, but he had married again and was buried with his second wife in Oakland.


"We're really pleased that Cindy solved the problem and returned the piece to its rightful place," Staber said. "That was the museum's goal, to have it go back to the rightful place."

Gagnon went to Ayer's gravesite and found that in the decades since her death, someone had replaced her headstone with a plaque, to leave some marker identifying the grave.

Ayer's burial site now has her headstone, too. Gagnon connected with China officials and Staber got in touch with the museum's board of directors, allowing for the stone to be placed atop the grave on September 13, 2022.

Julie Finley, a member of the China cemetery committee, said a shallow hole was dug for the headstone so that it lies flat with the ground and can still be read.

For Gagnon, her months of work and sleuthing has been rewarding. "It was pretty exciting, actually, to find her, find out where she belongs," she said.

— by Kaitlyn Budion 

## \* In Memoriam \*

**Ernest G. DeRaps**, 95, of Richmond, died July 4. A Palmyra native, he was a Navy and Coast Guard veteran and a former longtime Kennebec Historical Society member. He also was a photographer, news cameraman, Boy Scout volunteer, driving instructor, home builder, genealogy enthusiast, and painter who created images of 65 Maine lighthouses. He and his wife, Pauline, had six children.

**Moira Hastings Fuller**, 87, of Potomac, Maryland, and formerly of Winthrop, died May 24 in Maryland. A native of Ireland's County Galway, she immigrated to the United States at the age of 18, settling at first in New York, then in Winthrop in 1971. She worked for Kennebec Savings Bank for 20 years, then became a bank trustee in retirement. A longtime life member of the Kennebec Historical Society, she also was active in the Winthrop and Readfield historical societies. Together with her husband, Robert G. Fuller Jr., she was an active philanthropist who supported many local civic institutions, including MaineGeneral Medical Center, which named its rehabilitation unit in her honor. The late Elsie Viles, of Augusta, offered the Kennebec Historical Society a keystone donation for its first annual fundraising campaign in 2008, provided that the society name the campaign for her friend Moira Fuller. Fifteen years later, the Moira H. Fuller Annual Fund still bears her name. Her survivors include her husband, four children, several grandchildren, and seven siblings.

**David S. Silsby**, 93, of Manchester, died July 4 in Augusta. A Bangor native, he was a graduate of the University of Maine, Portland Junior College, and what is now the University of Maine School of Law. He worked 25 years in state government, including assignments such as reviser of statutes and director of the State House and Capitol Park Commission. He also served on the Supreme Judicial Court Planning and Design Commission and was a member of the State Capitol Master Plan Committee. A self-taught watercolor painter and longtime Kennebec Historical Society member, he depicted the building housing KHS when the society was located at 61 Winthrop Street in Augusta, then painted its current home at 107 Winthrop Street shortly after the society moved there in 2008. Both paintings are hanging on a wall in the society's headquarters. Silsby's survivors include wife Eleanor, five children, 12 grandchildren, and six great-grandchildren.

## Silent Movies Return to Augusta Theater Where They Premiered



The audience hears an introduction to one of the films presented during a two-day film festival at the Colonial Theater in Augusta.

Photo by Frank Albert

the people about the history of the entertainment industry in Augusta,” Wall said.

The local movie business got its start in 1919, when Edgar Jones brought his production company to Maine’s capital city to make two-reel, black-and-white silent movies. Jones, who also acted in the films, based them mostly on stories by Vassalboro native and Colby College alumnus Holman F. Day, a journalist, novelist, and poet.

The films featured actors who later became well-known in the business, such as Evelyn Brent, whose career is represented by a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. Other actors, such as William Wilson Peavey, were just local people who had a hankering for acting.



Edgar Jones starred in and directed four of the films shown in June at a two-day film festival at Augusta’s Colonial Theater. In this image, he plays the title role in *Cupid, Registered Guide*.

Photo courtesy of Ed Lorusso

In the early 20th century, when the movie business in Hollywood was still in its infancy, Augusta briefly flourished as an East Coast version of Tinseltown. Several silent movies were shot in and around the city, and their premieres took place at the nearly new Colonial Theater on Water Street in Augusta.

On June 16 and 17, some of those films – meticulously restored, and featuring new musical soundtracks – were shown again at the same theater, which also is undergoing restoration.

About 100 people attended the two-day film festival, according to the theater’s executive director, Kathi Wall.

Many years of film restoration by Ed Lorusso, of Belgrade, a retired former educator, made the festival possible. Lorusso said he found several degraded copies of the movies at Northeast Historic Film, a Bucksport nonprofit that specializes in film preservation. Computer scans of others were available through the Library of Congress. Lorusso financed the restoration work online through a series of Kickstarter campaigns.

He then approached Wall, who also lives in Belgrade, to propose the festival. She liked the idea.

“It just seemed to be a natural thing to do to educate

Peavey, in the Jones-directed movie *Cupid, Registered Guide*, plays a father who attaches conditions to the forthcoming marriage of his daughter, portrayed by Edna May Sperl. When the movie was shown in June, Peavey’s grandson Frank Albert, of Augusta, was in the audience.

“I was so impressed with the quality of the craftsmanship,” Albert said of the film, noting that one scene shot on the roaring west branch of the Penobscot River included stunts that demonstrated the actors’ remarkable abilities. Albert said he himself has taken a spill in the rapids there, so he has an inkling of how difficult the actors’ task was.



Augusta resident Frank Albert holds a photograph of his grandfather William Wilson Peavey, who also lived in Augusta. Peavey appears in an Army uniform in the photo, reflecting his service in World War I in France. He also played a major role in Edgar Jones’ movie *Cupid, Registered Guide* and bit parts in other movies made in the Augusta area.

Photo by Joseph Owen





Wall noted that when the films were made, computer-generated imagery was still several decades in the future, and even the use of stunt doubles had not been incorporated into moviemaking yet.

The festival included three other films directed by Jones: *Border River*, which was filmed in Augusta and was the earliest of Jones' surviving movies made in the area; *A Knight of the Pines*, which Jones shot in the Augusta area in the dead of winter; and *Caught in the Rapids*, starring Jones and Sperl and probably shot in the Penobscot River's Ripogenous Gorge.

Unfortunately, the Augusta area's time in the limelight was brief. Day, the author on whose stories the scripts were based, decided to take control of the business; so Jones departed for California and took many of the actors with him, including Sperl. According to a story that circulates in Albert's family, his grandparents also could have gone to California.

"They were invited to Hollywood," Albert said, but he added, "My grandmother put her foot down. She wasn't going to leave Augusta."


To replace the people who had left, Day hired a new director and new actors, including a teenage Mary Astor, who later became nationally famous and also has a Hollywood Walk of Fame star. Day's central Maine films include a big-budget, full-length feature, *Rider of the King Log*, which is based on one of his novels. He finished it, but it bankrupted the company and the film became lost.

"I know [Executive Director] David Weiss at Northeast Film has been looking for it for years, and it's never shown up," Lorusso said.

Two of the short movies made when Day ran the company were on the festival program, including *Brother of the Bear*, featuring Astor in a footage shot at the palatial Belgrade Hotel, which burned in the 1950s.

While the trajectory of the movie business in Augusta ended in failure, Wall considers the festival to have been a success. The Colonial would consider hosting such an event again, she said, but in shorter doses she said, noting that the festival schedule was noon to 5 p.m. each day with breaks.

"I think that is a little bit too long for the modern man's attention span," she said.

— by Joseph Owen 

Top to bottom: Edgar Jones, riding a horse in a scene from one of the movies he made in the Augusta area, crosses an iron bridge that was the predecessor of Augusta's downtown Calumet Bridge at Old Fort Western, with the intersection of Water and Bridge streets at lower right; Edna May Sperl and Ben Hendricks dance in a scene from the Edgar Jones movie *Knight of the Pines*, accompanied by Douglas' Orchestra, a local band hired for the production of the movie; a fretful Mary Astor appears at the Belgrade Hotel in a scene from the silent movie *Brother of the Bear*; Edna May Sperl shows signs of distress in a scene from the 1921 movie *Caught in the Rapids*, which was shot on the west branch of the Penobscot River; and Augusta resident William Wilson Peavey and Edna May Sperl portray a wealthy man and his daughter in *Cupid, Registered Guide*.

## Help Wanted in Amplifying Winthrop Soldier's Civil War Legacy

### Letter TO THE Editor

I am writing about a Kennebec Regiment soldier from Winthrop, Albert H. Frost.

Fifty years ago, as a young history teacher, I was walking through a cemetery in Winthrop and saw the graves of a number of veterans. The most numerous were from the Civil War and a number for Company K, 3rd Maine Volunteers. The headstone said “Albert H., Patriot Soldier who fell at the Battle of Gettysburg, July 2, 1863.”

Last year I learned of a collection of over 90 letters Albert wrote home between 1861 and a month before his death. I went to Philadelphia, where they were archived, and made copies of the collection. Like most soldier letters from any war to the home folks, health is a major concern and the news of family and friends was eagerly received. Albert says many times that those letters – never frequent enough – always lifted his fluctuating morale.

In June, one month before the First Battle of Bull Run, he is on fire to be a soldier and saving the Union, which he and most of the army believed would be a short war after one battle. The battle happened at Manassas and was a shameful defeat on the hills west of Washington, followed by a humiliating rout over the route that had taken them three days to reach the field, but going back took less than one.

His letters reveal the plunge in unit morale and cohesion. A hurtful rumor, scoffed at a few weeks before, had it the regiment could not be held for more than 90 days outside the state and they would be able to leave in September. Sore, and debilitated by “privations I never dreamed of,” Albert wrote, “I drank water not fir for cattle. ... [O]nly 8 from my company was on the field and I was disheartened by no officers. We joined another company” and went up Chinn Ridge, where they came under artillery fire from two directions and enemy infantry coming up – not a good spot for anyone, let alone green troops.

Albert, in a few days, went from being gung-ho and “bring it on” to signing a petition from most of Company K’s men, asking the governor to bring them home because of “bad food and hard usage.” Half of the 3rd Regiment’s men signed and submitted such requests to Maine Gov. Israel Washburn, as did men in other regiments.

Beneath it all, Albert’s patriotism fused with his religious ethos and helped him rebound and be on duty. Over his wartime service, he went through both disease and deaths of comrades by sickness and less by combat. Being a sketch book artist, of which no examples seem to exist, his letters reveal his sensitivity to beauty in both the scenery, fast being altered by the heavy feet of war. Even a march of his brigade on a starry night excited him.

“Our column was 10,000 strong marching under the canopy of stars. The column, stretched for miles undulated like a serpent moving along with the glitter of bayonets and burnished weapons,” he wrote, adding that it was beautiful but ruined by a downpour later that night.

Frost was remembered by a comrade “as the best-loved and most patriotic man in the company. Gus Thompson, his buddy, said, “The last time I saw Albert Frost alive he was behind a tree about as big as a stove pipe putting a cap on his rifle ... when I heard the old General’s order to fall back. ...” Thompson and Andrew Batchelder went back to that part of the field of this action looking for him. “He was shot in the groin and bled to death in a short time.” Using a hoe, they dug a grave “and placed our beloved brother on some knapsacks laying around and another over him and



The worn gravestone of Albert H. Frost can be seen in Winthrop's Maple Cemetery.

Photo by Dave Cook

covered him over.” They marked the grave with his name and regiment carved into a hardwood box cover, which they attached to a tree at the head of the grave. Unfortunately, it was removed by relic hunters, who swarmed like the bottle flies associated with such places. His family never had whatever peace they might have had, never knowing where their boy was buried. The stone in Maple Cemetery is over an empty grave.

His letters are all that remain of him, and I am using them in writing a regimental history for the 3rd Maine, which has never been compiled, although there have been several attempts. With Albert’s help, I want to bring the grim story of the Kennebec Regiment to light and a man who may have died because of a disability: He was deaf!

Gus Thompson said the 214-man regiment was called back amid the noise and confusion and blinding smoke from the shooting. Albert, who was doing what a soldier’s duty required, wouldn’t have heard the hollered orders to withdraw. During those tough 15 or 20 minutes when four men were killed and over three dozen wounded or “missing,” Albert’s death may have resulted from his deafness.

I believe there are letters long unread and photos in attics or china closets. I can be reached by phone (207) 513-8339 or david.sidney.cook@gmail.com. I hope to hear from anyone who can help.

  
 Dave Cook, Winthrop

## May the Fourth Be With You: Old Fort Western Marks Holiday



While Augusta Mayor Mark O’Brien, standing at left on the platform, waits to recite the Declaration on July 4 at Old Fort Western in Augusta, some of the fort’s staff members clad in period clothing fire a musket volley to mark Independence Day.

Photo by Joseph Owen



Robin Beck demonstrates an early spinning wheel in the parlor.

Photo by Rich Eastman



At left, a youthful guest gets introduced to sea shanties sung by Bobby and Jennifer LaRusso.

At right, Sage Viets-Author primes an iron forge for intense heat. Many early iron tools were forged in this fashion to outfit the fort.

Photos by Rich Eastman



## Hallowell Powder House Recalls Era of U.S.-British Conflict

The last war that pitted Americans against the British turned much of Bangor into a smoldering wreck, subjected Washington County to years of enemy occupation, and made Casco Bay the scene of a naval battle that killed the captains of the two opposing vessels.



History Through  
a Keyhole #7

Those War of 1812 shocks and the failure of the state government in Boston to provide protection reinvigorated Maine residents' decades-old aspiration to separate from Massachusetts and become a U.S. state on its own. They achieved that goal in 1820.

At the local level, the war also made Mainers more attentive to the prospect of future attacks from the sea. In Hallowell, that concern resulted in the construction of a powder house on a lofty hill overlooking the Kennebec River, the water route an invader would be likely to sow chaos in central Maine.

**Answer to Keyhole #7**

**Q: What is this?**

**A: Part of the Hallowell Powder House**

**Q: Where is it?**

**A: On the east side of High Street in Hallowell, which runs between Winthrop and Academy streets near the top of the long hill west of downtown**

**Q: What's historic about it?**

**A: Hallowell voted in 1819 to authorize the powder house's construction to help prepare to fend off attackers who might come up the Kennebec River from the ocean.**



The Hallowell Powder House is positioned high above the city and the Kennebec River on High Street.

Photo by Rich Eastman

Its National Register application states further: "In 1839 the cannon 'Thunder Jug of Maine' was brought to Hallowell and by the end of the century had been positioned next to the Powder House, overlooking the Kennebec. In 1947 the [city] of Hallowell sold the Powder House and lot to the Mary Kelton Dummer-Patience Stanley Chapter of the National Society Daughters of the American Revolution, who currently own the building."

A visit to the site on the appropriately named High Street once afforded a pleasant view of the Kennebec. Today nearly all of that view is obscured by trees and bushes, so even a vigilant observer would be unable to see the British – if they ever do come up the river.

In 1819 local voters authorized the construction of "a small utilitarian structure ... as a repository for the local militia's gun powder, armaments, and field supplies," according to an application for its inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places. The powder house joined that list in 2002.

"Solitary and aloft it stands / Like sentinel waiting his commands," H.K. Baker wrote in "The Powder House," a poem that appeared in the 1902 book *Historic Hallowell*. As it turned out, waiting was all the powder house ever did. Mainers stayed vigilant only until the Webster-Ashburton Treaty of 1842 settled a long-running dispute about the location of the border separating the United States from Britain's colonies in what now is Canada. After that, the structure became a relic of a bygone age.

According to information provided by Bob McIntire, a member of the Historic Hallowell Committee, the powder house is one of three early 19th-century arms magazines documented to have existed in Maine.

— by Joseph Owen 

## History Through a Keyhole - Puzzle 8

**T**oday we offer yet another door. It's the third in a row. Does the pattern have a hidden meaning? Our therapists are puzzling over it even as you read these words.

As for the last door, member Jon Phillips correctly identified the image in puzzle No. 7 as the Hallowell Powder House. Let's hope he doesn't pass this information on to our nation's potential enemies – although in the nuclear age, it's unlikely that an awareness of the powder house is going to benefit the shadowy forces who might wish to harm us.

So anyway, here's the next clue. The image at the right is of an object that is easily visible from a public road in Kennebec County. Readers who can identify it are asked to contact the *Current* and tell the editor three things: what the object is, where it is, and what its historic significance is.

Answers may be sent by email to [kennhis1891@gmail.com](mailto:kennhis1891@gmail.com) or by postal mail to Kennebec Historical Society, P.O. Box 5582, Augusta, ME 04332.

The winner, to be selected randomly from all correct answers submitted, will be awarded a year's membership in KHS for the respondent or a friend or relative. If nobody meets that threshold, the editor reserves the right to make the award to a respondent who provides a partial correct answer. The full answer and more information about the subject will be provided in the next issue of the *Kennebec Current*. Answers are due by August 26. Good luck.



## Business Sponsors Boost Society's Kennebec Classic Tournament

**T**he fifth edition of the Kennebec Classic, the Kennebec Historical Society's annual fundraising tennis tournament, has received a boost from five business sponsors this year, virtually guaranteeing the event's financial success.

The contributing businesses are Augusta Fuel Co., McKee Law, and O&P Glass, all of Augusta; Quality Copy, of Hallowell; and A1 Seamless Gutters, of Greene.

Also, 14 players signed up by mid-July for singles competition, and six doubles teams have registered. The event is scheduled for July 29 at the North Street Playground tennis courts in Waterville. The cost is \$15 for singles players and \$20 for doubles teams. For details, or to sign up and play, contact Billy Noble at (207) 313-6976 or [bnoble24@gmail.com](mailto:bnoble24@gmail.com).

The society also is hosting its first fundraising golf tournament September 27 at the Augusta Country Club. Registration starts at 9 a.m., and play begins with a shotgun start at 10 a.m. The cost to play is \$120 for single players and \$480 for a foursome. The price includes 18 holes of golf, a cart, and a post-golf luncheon. During the meal, raffle prizes will be offered. To sign up as a sponsor or player, contact Rich Eastman at (207) 215-2370 or email [reastman1952@gmail.com](mailto:reastman1952@gmail.com).

Donations to the society to cover the expenses incurred by either tournament are always appreciated.



## Yes, You're Reading That Right: KHS Book Sale Nets \$1,234

**I**n the 1987 comedy film "Spaceballs," actor Mel Brooks, playing President Skroob, wants to steal the air from the planet Druida to replace Earth's ruined atmosphere; but Druida's sky is cloaked by a locked air shield. When Skroob learns that the secret number code that will disable the shield is "1, 2, 3, 4, 5," he exclaims, "That's amazing! I've got the same combination on my luggage."

Maybe Skroob was tinkering with the cash drawer at the Kennebec Historical Society's June 1-3 book sale, because the amount of cash that buyers paid totaled exactly \$1,234 – one digit short of the movie villain's full ridiculous code, but a respectable tally nonetheless.

The sale featured more than 2,800 used books, thanks to the generosity of Tom Feagin, of Hallowell, who donated almost his entire personal library to the society last winter. The sale disposed of nearly half of its inventory, according to KHS Executive Director Scott Wood. The proceeds will be used to help fund the society's operations.

Wood said he hopes to hold another book sale in September, at which the remainder of the most recent supply will be available alongside newer donations.



Shoppers browse on June 1 among thousands of used books that the Kennebec Historical Society put up for sale at its Augusta headquarters.

Photo by Scott Wood



## Around Kennebec County

### AUGUSTA

Daughters of Liberty re-enactors from **Old Fort Western** are scheduled to do a textile-making demonstration from 5:30 to 8 p.m. August 3 at Augusta's Mill Park as part of Augusta Family Fun Day. The entire Fun Day event is free and open to the public.

"Martha Ballard's World," a presentation that strives to show aspects of the famed post-Colonial-era local midwife's life other than her work as a midwife, is scheduled for 1 to 4 p.m. August 26 at **Old Fort Western**. Fort personnel in period clothing will be assigned to four stations at the fort to describe Ballard's life, and a tea will close out the event. Pre-registration is required and admission will be charged. To pre-register or get details, call (207) 626-2385 or email [oldfort@oldfortwestern.org](mailto:oldfort@oldfortwestern.org).

**Old Fort Western** will be the point of departure on September 16 for a four-site archaeological tour that will include stops in at the sites of Fort Richmond, in Richmond; the Pownalborough Courthouse, in Dresden, where Fort Shirley once stood; Old Fort Western, in Augusta; and Fort Halifax, in Winslow. Archaeologists will be at each site to explain their work there. Pre-registration is required and admission will be charged. To pre-register or get details, call (207) 626-2385 or email [oldfort@oldfortwestern.org](mailto:oldfort@oldfortwestern.org).

### CHINA

The **China Historical Society** plans to host an open house from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. August 5 at the Old Town Hall as part of the annual China Days festivities, scheduled this year for August 4 to 6. The society will be displaying tools, costumes, paintings, certificates, and other collection items, all related to the history of China and its villages.

The family that recently bought the former home of their relative Rufus Jones (1863-1948), an influential Quaker writer and preacher, is holding a 4:30 p.m. open house for people who want to tour the first floor of the 19th-century home, located at 33 Jones Road in South China. Guests will be invited afterward to the McCormac-Conant camp at 26 Fire Road 57, which is near both the Jones house and Jones' summer cottage.

### LITCHFIELD

The **Litchfield Historical Society** plans to open the Old Town House museum from 2 to 4 p.m. July 22, and August 26. The Old Town House is on Hallowell Road next to the Litchfield Sportsmen's Club. For details, call Kris Stenberg at (207) 268-5037.

### MONMOUTH

The **Monmouth Museum** is hosting the town's 34th annual Applefest celebration from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. September 30 at the Main Street museum, which is charging no admission to visitors this summer. The festival includes children's activities, a band, sales of apple pies, and other elements.

### VASSALBORO

The **Vassalboro Historical Society** is hosting an open house from 1 to 4 p.m. July 23 and August 22 at the museum. The events are open to the public. The museum's phone number is (207) 923-3505.

Kate McMahon, a museum specialist with the Smithsonian Institution's Center for the Study of Global Slavery, will give a lecture on slavery in Maine from 3 to 5 p.m. August 13 at the **Vassalboro Historical Society** museum on Route 32 in East Vassalboro. The event is free and open to the public.

The **Vassalboro Historical Society's** museum, blacksmith shop, harness shop, and fire house all will be open to visitors during all of the town's annual

Vassalboro Days celebration. The event is scheduled for 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. September 9 and 10.

### WINDSOR

The **Windsor Museum**, located on the Windsor Fairgrounds, will be open to the public every day of the Windsor Fair, scheduled this year for August 27 to September 4. **Windsor Historical Society** volunteers in period clothing will give demonstrations of a blacksmith's work, oxbow making, cooking over a fireplace, working in a rebuilt sawmill, and other activities. Visitors must pay for admission to the fair, but after that all access to the museum is free.



Hallowell Food Pantry volunteers, many of them crowned by representations of various kinds of food, march July 15 in the annual Old Hallowell Day parade on Water Street in Hallowell. The earliest record of Old Hallowell Day dates to 1968, when the community staged the event to celebrate the Hallowell Improvement Association's cleanup of the west bank of the Kennebec River in the city, according to the **Old Hallowell Day website**.

Photo by Joseph Owen

## Upcoming Programs

### August: “War Pigeons: They Got Their Messages Through”

Based on her 2020 book *War Pigeons: Winged Couriers in the U.S. Military, 1878-1957*, KHS lecturer Elizabeth Macalaster’s presentation in August will trace the remarkable service of homing pigeons to the U.S. armed forces, from its beginning after the Civil War to the birds’ invaluable communications role in every branch of the military since then.

For 75 years, through four wars on four continents, these 1-pound birds were the military’s most reliable means of communication, carrying messages in and out of environments teeming with gas, smoke, exploding bombs, and gunfire. They flew through jungles and across deserts, mountains, and large expanses of ocean. Sometimes they arrived at their lofts nearly dead from wounds or exhaustion, but they got their messages through.



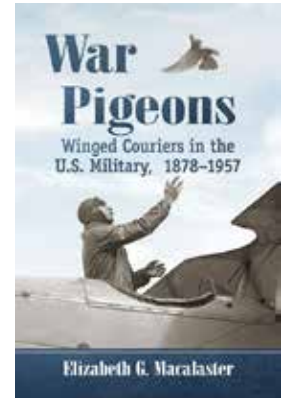
World War I aviator Erlon H. Parker, from Farmington, didn’t leave his home base without a couple of homing pigeons.

Photo courtesy of Elizabeth Macalaster

you have any questions about the program, please call Scott Wood, executive director, at 622-7718.

Macalaster began her career as a marine biologist. She turned to science journalism and worked for the U.S. Department of the Interior and the Environmental Protection Agency on water quality issues. She has collaborated on award-winning children’s and young adult books and now writes primarily science and history articles for newspapers and magazines. Macalaster is the author of *Reckoning at Harts Pass*, an adventure thriller in which homing pigeons play a covert role. A sequel is underway. She lives in Brunswick.

The Kennebec Historical Society’s August presentation is free to the public (donations are gladly accepted) and will take place at 6:30 p.m. Wednesday, August 16, at the Augusta City Center, located at 16 Cony Street in Augusta. If



Cover image courtesy of the author



Cher Ami, a famous World War I war pigeon.

Image courtesy U.S. Army Signal Corps

### September: Wildlife Biologist to be Annual Meeting Speaker

Wildlife biologist Ron Joseph, of Sidney, will be the guest speaker at the Kennebec Historical Society’s annual meeting, scheduled for September 21.

Joseph, born in Waterville, worked in his profession for 30 years. He plans to talk about his experiences as a boy living in the central Maine in the 1960s and 1970s and events in his later career.

While spending childhood summers on his maternal grandparents’ nearby dairy farm, he said, he became fascinated with songbirds, often spending hours perched on stacks of hay bales in a post-and-beam barn watching swallows dart in and out to feed their nestlings. Joseph’s mother encouraged his love of birds by giving him a 1947 copy of *Peterson’s Field Guide to Eastern Birds*. The book’s colored plates and range maps revealed a fascinating world of birds just outside his front door. His farm chores, from milking cows to collecting chicken eggs, were often interrupted by sprints through the barnyard to identify indigo buntings, chestnut-sided warblers, brown thrashers, and dozens of other songbirds.

Joseph has written a book on the topic, titled *Bald Eagles, Bear Cubs, and Hermit Bill: Memoirs of a Maine Wildlife Biologist*, which will be available for purchase at the lecture. The lecture begins at 6:30 p.m. at Hope Baptist Church in Manchester.

The society has scheduled a 4:30 p.m. potluck dinner to start the event, with the annual KHS business meeting, including elections of board officers and an additional board member, following at 5:45 p.m. The slate of candidates was incomplete at presstime but is expected to be finished by the end of August.

The society will post those details on its website when they become available, and members without access to the internet will receive notification either by letter or the next newsletter, if it becomes available in time.

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**KENNEBEC HISTORICAL SOCIETY, INC. - Application for Membership**

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Town/city: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP code: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone number: Home \_\_\_\_\_ Business \_\_\_\_\_

Email address: \_\_\_\_\_

Type: New \_\_\_ Renewal \_\_\_

Category: Individual (annual) - \$25 \_\_\_ Family (annual) - \$40 \_\_\_ Senior (60+) (annual) - \$20 \_\_\_

Senior Family (annual) - \$30 \_\_\_ Student (full-time) (annual) - \$20 \_\_\_

Life (1 person) - \$250 \_\_\_ Life Family (2 people) - \$375 \_\_\_

Business (annual, fewer than 25 employees) - \$100 \_\_\_ Corporate (annual, 25 employees or more) - \$150 \_\_\_

Nonprofit group (annual) - \$50 \_\_\_ Donation (optional): \$ \_\_\_\_\_

This is a gift membership, given by: \_\_\_\_\_

(Please send to Kennebec Historical Society, P.O. Box 5582, Augusta, ME 04332-5582.)

***This line and below for society use only:***

Date received: \_\_\_\_\_

Cash \_\_\_\_\_ Check #: \_\_\_\_\_

file 2.8.2

**Business hours:** 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday or by appointment. Appointments are highly encouraged. Call first.

**Mailing address:** P.O. Box 5582, Augusta, ME 04332-5582

**E-mail address:** [kennhis1891@gmail.com](mailto:kennhis1891@gmail.com)

**Telephone:** (207) 622-7718

**Web site:** [www.kennebechistorical.org](http://www.kennebechistorical.org)