



Above: "Ruthy's Way"
Opposite, upper right: Harvard
President Charles Eliot and the
former "Blueberry Ledge"



Northeast Harbor's \$5.5M teardown leads to a \$30M transformation.

Whatever Happened to Blueberry Ledge

Too cool for the old school? One man's Peabody & Stearns home is another's Gwathmey Siegel.

BY BRAD EMERSON

Until recently, the tear-down fever that swept many of America's wealthy enclaves largely missed elegant Northeast Harbor, one of the last quiet, unpretentious redoubts of old, big money. The summer houses along the shore might be very large but are rarely showy, with simple landscaping, polished and groomed to a fine patina. Gray shingles and dark green trim blend into the surrounding landscape of ledges and spruce; pea gravel crunches underfoot on drives and paths. Many of these houses passed from generation to generation as chintzes faded and the wood smoke of a century of foggy-day fires scented the rooms. Driveways were marked by discreet varnished mahogany signs whispering the name of the cottage, and until recent years, the owners' names, a who-was-who of American finance and society. The few houses that came on the market were snapped up quickly, to be treasured by new owners in pursuit of the Ralph Lauren dream.

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PERSPECTIVE

Beginning in the mid-1990s, that paradigm began slowly changing. A few of Northeast Harbor’s large cottages were bought by new billionaires who tore down the old cottages to build something similar but bigger, with more of everything—more and better bathrooms, higher ceilings, and bigger lawns. Old landmarks gave way to new landmarks almost imperceptibly; real estate prices, historically far behind those of showier places like the Hamptons, began to rise. In 2005, when one of Northeast Harbor’s most revered properties came in the market, the process was complete, and the new order had arrived.

BIRTH OF THE SHINGLE STYLE

The story begins in 1879, when Charles William Eliot (see photo, previous page), the legendary president of Harvard University came to Maine on a camping trip with his sons. So taken were they with the Mt. Desert region that Eliot purchased some 150 acres of land along what is now Peabody Drive. In 1880 he commissioned Peabody & Stearns of Boston, one of America’s leading architectural firms, to design a cottage for a granite bluff overlooking Bear Island and the Eastern Way. Peabody & Stearns were innovators of what is now called the ‘Shingle Style’—that organic blending of early American and European forms, decoratively covered with wooden shingles, bristling with porches and gables—that defines summer resort architecture from the Hamptons to Winter Harbor.

Charles William Eliot was a product of the Boston Transcendentalist era, a believer in nature and fresh air. His new house, which he dubbed ‘Sunshine’ (though the family would later call it ‘The Ancestral’), was commodious but not opulent, a house perfectly suited to its site, and to the indoor/outdoor life of the summer. Soon after the house was completed, Eliot invited Frederick Law Olmsted, the most prominent landscape designer of his time, for a visit. After a few days, Eliot, curious, said to the great man, “Olmsted, you’ve been here nearly a week now, and you haven’t said a word about what I should do with my property,” to which Olmsted replied, “Do with it? My dear Eliot, leave it alone—it is perfect as it is.” Shortly after this, Eliot’s son, Charles Eliot, would become apprenticed to Olmsted, and until his death of spinal meningitis at 38, be one of Olmsted’s leading apostles of the naturalistic style. Dr. Eliot himself, keenly aware of the impor-

tance of preserving the Mt. Desert landscape, would become one of the founders of what is now Acadia National Park.

At Northeast Harbor, Dr. Eliot entertained many of the leading luminaries of his day, from politicians to plutocrats. By the 1940s, 'The Ancestral' had passed into the hands of Mrs. Peter Augustus Jay, who had given up 'Breakwater,' her 35-room Tudorbethan estate in no longer fashionable Bar Harbor. 'Sunshine' was rechristened 'Blueberry Ledge,' and here Mrs. Jay, whose diplomat late husband was descended from statesman John Jay, spent the usual Maine summer of cocktail parties and bridge. For at least part of each summer, she would be joined by her daughter, Susan Mary, herself the young widow of a diplomat long stationed in Paris. After Mrs. Jay's death, Susan Mary, by now married to political columnist Joseph Alsop, a cousin of the Roosevelt family, inherited 'Blueberry Ledge.' The interiors were done up in a proper mix of family heirlooms and cosmopolitan souvenirs by society decorator Nancy Pierrepont, a Northeast Harbor summer resident.

SALONISTE SUZY

Susan Mary Alsop became renowned as one of Washington's leading salonistes, and for many years invitations to her houses, both in D.C. and Maine, were highly prized. In his autobiography, her son Bill Patten recounts one guest list at Northeast Harbor: Douglas Dillon, who had been Treasury Secretary in the Kennedy administration, Lord Carrington, the former British foreign secretary, then-Ambassador Sir Nicholas and Lady Henderson, and Marietta Tree, a lifelong friend of Mrs. Alsop, and probably her closest counterpart in the circles in which they traveled. Between the Eliots and the Alsops, many of the world's leading figures had passed through the doors of the 115-year-old cottage.

This, then, was the house, a little worse for the wear, was picked up for \$5.5 million by Mitchell Rales, a Maryland investor who, according to *Forbes*, is worth \$3.7 billion, thanks to his ownership interest in conglomerates Colfax and Danaher (Colfax is responsible for marketing Craftsman tools). For Rales, it wasn't a classic Maine summer house with a distinguished pedigree but rather a choice house lot with spectacular views, and the ink was barely dry on the deed when bulldozers brought 'Blueberry Ledge' crashing down. In Maine, you don't waste a good house for nothing, and the local populace was scandalized.

(Continued on page 78)

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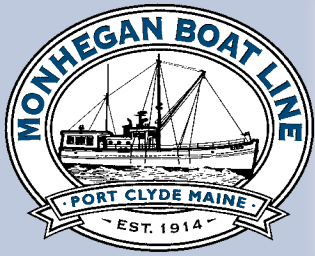


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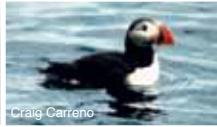
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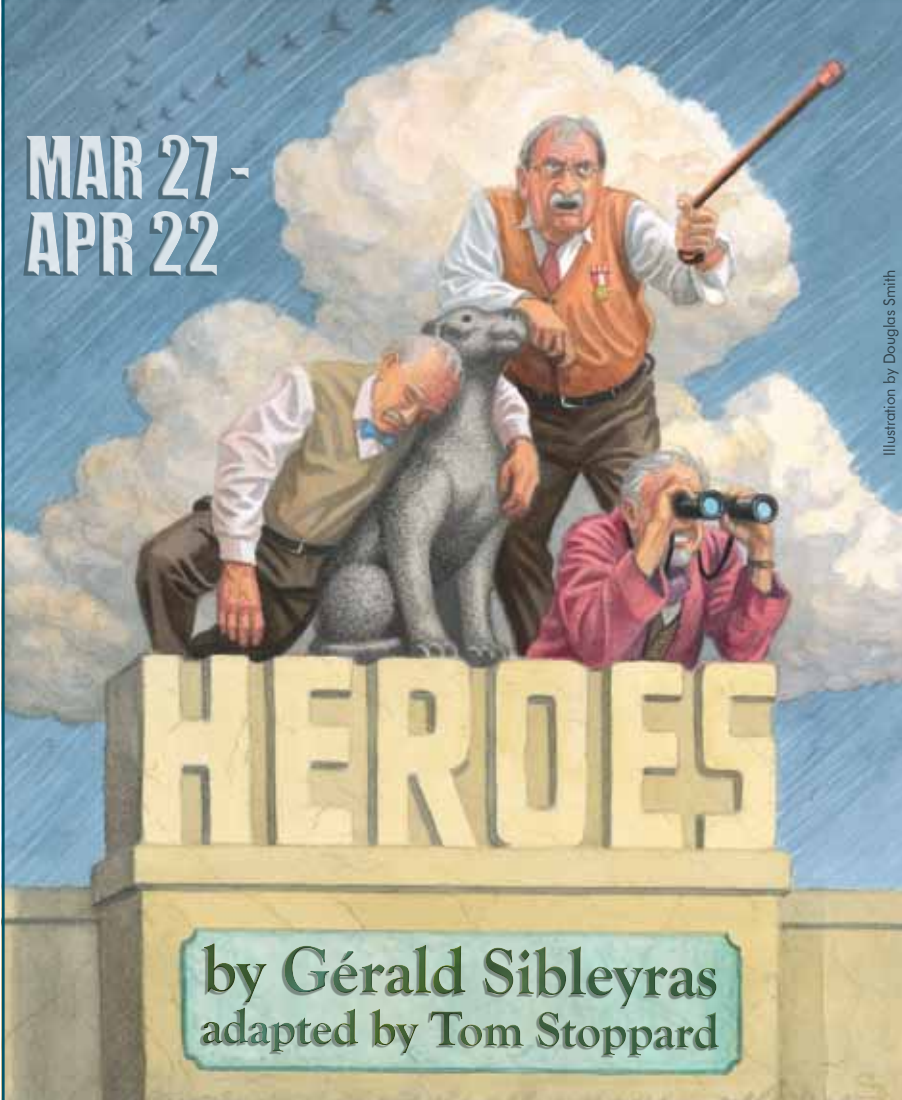


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PERSPECTIVE

Blueberry Ledge (Continued from page 31)

Within days the news was confirmed by local newspapers—building permits had been filed for \$18M for a compound to include a house designed by Gwathmey Siegel, designers of sleek machine-like houses more often associated with the sand dunes and glitz of East Hampton than the ledges of Maine.

EAST HAMPTON IN MAINE

Rales's new complex was to cover far more of the site than the old house, and Olmsted's wisdom about leaving the landscape alone was forgotten as ledges were blasted and trees were leveled to make way for guest houses, garages, boathouses, and swimming pools. For nearly four years machinery and work crews came and went. Costs rose to nearly \$30 million. Tongues wagged. Unkind comparisons to factories or concentrations



Mitchell Rales, who calls his new house *Ruthy's Way*, shares a laugh with Seal Harbor neighbor Sharon Rockefeller.

camp were made. Old time summer residents declared the view from the bay to be permanently devastated. Finally, nearly full-grown trees were brought in, pine needles paths were laid down, and the landscape began to heal. The estate still dominates from the water, but is invisible from the road (this writer had cocktails next door last summer, and found the house a bit looming through the trees). Last year, the Mt. Desert planning board found a small shed near the drive to be in violation and ordered their new largest taxpayer to remove it. After the briefest of legal wrangles, he did so, donating it to a Southwest Harbor charity who pronounced themselves grateful and delighted. The process of 'fitting in' was well underway. What history this new house acquires, and whether it will go the way of other Brobdingnagian 'cottages' like the 80-room Stotesbury pile at Bar Harbor, now site of a ferry terminal, or itself be torn down for something larger after 100 years, remains to be seen. ■

➤ See Mitchell Rales's *Forbes* World's Billionaires profile by visitingforbes.com/profile/mitchell-rales.

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