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“Kavanagh,” a house of stories, makes an indelible impression on all who enter. **By Brad Emerson**

SCANT MILES INLAND from the summer hubbub of Route 1 and the tourist-laden towns of the midcoast from Wiscasset to Newcastle is another world, one of soft backroads passing ancient fields and quiet villages. One sees gentle rivers, white steeples, and beautifully kept 18th and 19th century houses. But, even in this rich landscape, one is brought up short at the first sight around a bend of a great square yellow house set back from the street behind ancient lilacs. Its flush board façade is adorned with pilasters. A perfect Palladian window looks out from above a semicircular portico, all surmounted by a large cupola behind a delicate balustrade. Nearby is a carriage house with a graceful row of arched doors. All seems unaltered in its setting of ample lawns against a background of ancient pines, below which a fragrant path winds to the shore of Damariscotta Lake.
“Kavanagh” is one of the great Federal houses of Maine, built in 1803 by James Kavanagh, the richest man in the district. An Irish Catholic émigré, Kavanagh and his friend Matthew Cottrill left their native County Wexford to escape British oppression and arrived in Boston in 1780. By 1788, they’d moved to Newcastle on the Damariscotta River in what was then the Province of Maine. There they opened a general store and prospered. Soon they made wise investments in lumber and shipbuilding, as well as the new toll bridge that connected Newcastle to Damariscotta. In 1795, for £1,018, they purchased two lumber mills and a grist mill on 576 acres known as Lithgow Farm, later adding a fulling mill—giving rise to the name of Damariscotta Mills for the surrounding village. Now a very rich man, Kavanagh began to give back to his community, building St. Patrick’s, the first Catholic Church in Maine.

In 1803, the time had come to build a house commensurate with his wealth and position, and in housewright Nicholas Codd, also an Irish émigré, Kavanagh found the perfect designer to give shape to his dreams. Little is known about Codd’s early years. His biographer, Andrew Gerrier, notes that he came to Newcastle by 1801 after his marriage to Margaret Coffin of Courte Sy of Drum & Drum real estate. Although the house had always been loved and well maintained by its affluent owners, [Robert] Lowell reimagined it as a gaunt survivor, the setting for his third book of poems, “The Mills of the Kavanagh’s.”
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Nantucket, perhaps brought there by Kavanaugh and Cottrill to build their own houses. By 1803, Codd’s first child was baptized by Bishop Carroll of Baltimore, who'd arrived to consecrate the new brick St. Mary’s donated by Kavanaugh. After those two houses, Codd went on to build a string of Maine's finest Federal-era houses, including the famous James Mc Cobb “Spite House” in Phippsburg and the Captain William Nickels house for McCobb’s brother-in-law in Wiscasset. It is not known where Codd received his architectural training; in Boston, where he first lived after arriving in America, or in his native Ireland. It is clear that, as with most of the talented housewright-architects of early 19th century New England, he made excellent use of the English and American architectural pattern books of the day. As Earle Shettleworth noted in a recent conversation, Codd’s designs certainly owe more to Federal New England—than late Georgian Ireland. Even so, the exterior of the house has European-inspired refinement. The flush board façade is meant to emulate smooth stone, the pilasters at the corner give grandeur, and a wooden belt course at second floor level emulates similar features in stone buildings. Passing through the large front door from the semi-circular portico, one is in a hall of unusually sophisticated detail for the time and place.

The far end is apsidal, with a long curving stair rising to the second floor. Each broad and shallow step is a wooden box set upon another in imitation of the self-supported stone stairs of England, and in the newel post is set an elaborately carved ivory inlay, bearing the designer’s initials, “N.C.”, high tribute by the owners. The hall doors are trimmed with elegant mold- ing, ending with a flourish in scrolled volutes at floor level, a feature unique in Maine. The attic was lit by a skylight whose source was an unusual glass floor in the cupola above, possibly added in Victorian times. The second floor hall is
large enough for a seating area in front of the beautiful palladian window looking out to the neighboring countryside. The eight major rooms of the main house are large and high with large windows with deep reveals containing folding shutters in each. Each room has a chimney breast and fireplace projecting from the end walls with elegant mantels. The drawing room is where Codd outdid himself, however, with a paneled wall with pilasters dividing doorways and arched cabinets, with an intricately carved cove and bracket cornice surmounting the whole. On this writer’s recent visit with a noted decorator friend, the friend nearly gasped at the proportions and light of main bedrooms, pronouncing them ‘superb.’ Behind the stair hall, a small first floor room, now a bath, with a large north-facing window, was designated as a “Prayer Room,” completed in time for use by the former missionary Father Jean de Cheverus, soon to become the first Catholic Bishop of New England.

The rear wing, believed to be the earlier house on the site, has its own simpler charms, its lower ceilinged rooms each with fireplace (there are 12 in the house), including the large cooking
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hearth in the original kitchen.

“Kavanagh” is that increasing rarity—a beautiful house that has always been appreciated and respected by its successive owners, retaining its architectural integrity inside and out. Kavanagh’s bachelor son, Edward, eschewed the family businesses, and, after a two-year Grand Tour of Europe, went into law and politics, becoming a U.S. Congressman. In 1843, he became the 17th Governor of Maine. He lived at “Kavanagh,” built when he was eight years old, until his death in 1844, four years before his father’s. After a Kavanagh daughter, Winifred, made it her home, the house was purchased by Charles Perkins Gardiner, member of a distinguished Boston family. Later his daughter Mary, the former wife of William Robinson Cabot, used it as a summer home. After her divorce, Mrs. Cabot lived for 30 years in London, returning to the house each fall with her two unmarried daughters, both nuns, while renting in the summers to her cousin’s husband, Mr. Winslow.
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