

# Local History

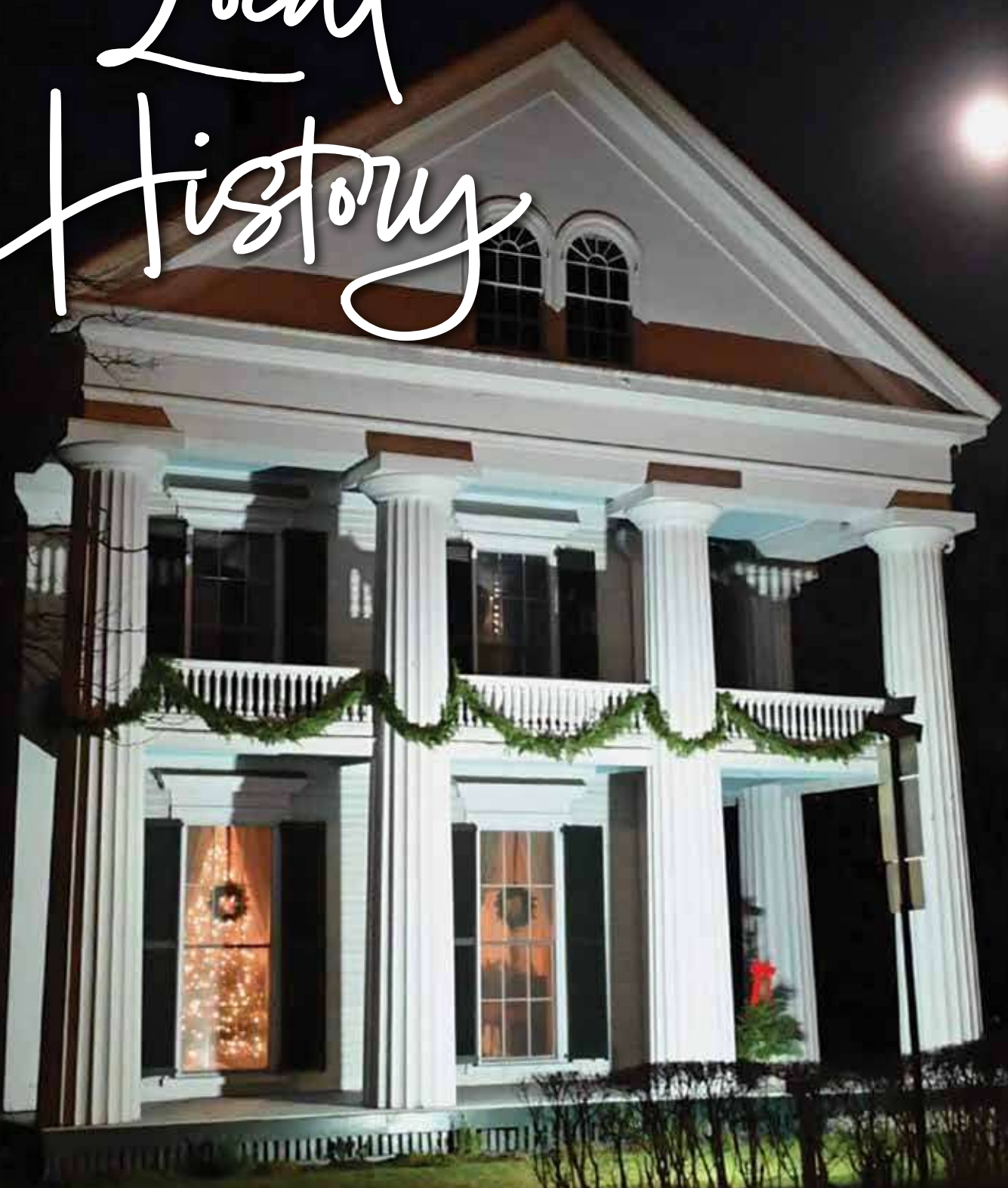


Photo by Bob Dennis

# Arsenic and Old Lace

## A peek behind the curtains at White Columns

by Laima Vince

At the top of Dock Square in Kennebunkport, located at 8 Maine Street, stands a grand house, known locally as White Columns for its imposing wide Greek columns. According to the National Registry of landmarks, the house is registered as the Richard A. Nott Memorial Home.

The White Columns mansion was built in 1853 in the Greek Revival style. In the early nineteenth century, as a young democracy designed and built the cities and towns that would become the major centers of American life, Americans looked back to the styles of classical Greek and Roman architecture for inspiration. At a time when monarchies were still prevalent in England and Europe, many in America believed they were the heirs of the ancient Greeks, who invented democracy.

The Greek Revival architectural style thrived during the 1830s to the 1860s and was popular in New England. Early 19th century builders designed and built utilitarian buildings such as banks, offices, and churches, as well as personal residences, to look like a modern rendition of the Greek temple. Majestic columns at the front of a house and emphasized pedimented roofs were signature stylistic aspects of Greek Revival architecture. However, many more humble dwellings included elements of the Greek Revival style.

"In the 1850s, in Kennebunkport we were still building ships," said Kristin Lewis Haight, Executive Director of the Kennebunkport Historical Society, as she opened the front door to the house, sumptuously decorated for Christmas. "Tourism had not yet become the next phase of our economy. White Columns represents a time when we were still building the biggest ships under the American flag right here."

Haight continued, "Shipbuilding in Kennebunkport declined at the time when more iron was required to build ships. That led to the failings of shipbuilding here, and more shipbuilding in Bath. Also, when railroads were built in Maine in the mid-nineteenth century it became much easier to send cargo to Boston via rail than to hire 15 sailors to sail a ship. However, import-export was still a huge business in Kennebunkport. We imported from all around the world, and we exported to England out of this port. We were very connected to the outside world and Kennebunkport's history was certainly part of the world trade."

The house, the opulence of decoration, the surrounding gardens, represent the wealth of a time when Kennebunkport was a player on the world stage due to its shipbuilding heritage and import-export triangle trade. The owners of the house were import-export merchants who imported rum, molasses, sugar and exported lumber and fish from the West Indies.

Haight, who has studied the history of the house and the family that lived in it for three generations, for 130 years, warned that we need to be sensitive to the nuances of merchant wealth. "Slavery was illegal in those days but we need to recognize with as much honesty as possible that wealthy merchants, like the ones who owned this home, made their fortunes on the backs of enslaved humans," she said.

"When I give my tour I tell the human side of the story. The Perkins Nott family represented a faction of who Kennebunkport was. Kennebunkport was also a hard-working community with farmers, blacksmiths, sailmakers, and carpenters. This is one of the last homes standing from that era that gives a sense of what the Victorian era in Kennebunkport might have looked like."

Kennebunkport Historical Society volunteers have decorated the house according to the theme of a Victorian Christmas. Each room contains a Christmas tree uniquely decorated in Victorian era style. The tables are set for a sumptuous afternoon Christmas tea and sunlight reflects off glass baubles. A particularly interesting detail for those who love old prints and cards are the Victorian era Christmas cards displayed on the hallway tables, just the like the family would have placed them when they were still alive and daily life was bustling at White Columns. The period-Christmas decorations gracing the exterior of the house have been created by Wallingford Farm.

White Columns was gifted to the Kennebunkport Historical Society in 1982 by Elizabeth Nott, who lived there alone and was president of the historical society during her lifetime. She requested that the house be designated to her brother, Richard Allen Nott (1895-1960), who served in both World Wars and later worked for AT&T. He had left Elizabeth the house when he died in 1960. Richard made a few modern-day improvements, remodeling the kitchen and bathroom to 1950s standards, while leaving the rest of the historical house exactly as it would have been from the 1850s onwards.

The house was built by Eliphalet Perkins III (1798-1874) in 1853 and sold for \$5000 to his only son, Charles Edwin Perkins (1830-1894), who was his father's business partner and the most eligible bachelor in town. That year, Charles fell in love and married the daughter of the Baptist minister who lived next door, Celia Parker Nott (1831-1888). Two children were born to them, Celia E. (Lela) Perkins (1855-1865) and Charles Eliphalet Perkins (1857-1886).

*-continued on next page*

**Opposite page: White Columns is especially stunning during the holiday season. Photo by Bob Dennis.**





Celia was known for her gardening and her sewing. She would sew on her couch and stow her sewing in a chest of drawers beside the couch if someone came to the house. Charles built an addition onto her sitting room so she could bring her gardens indoors in the wintertime.

Celia was also a diarist. Her diaries were found with the home in 1982. Those daily diaries helped shape the tour of the house. She wrote about the family who lived here, their trials and tribulations. She also wrote about what she was growing in her garden in detail in her diary. Her gardens were not just indigenous gardens of local plants as was common in her time, but contained what would have been considered "exotic" plants brought back from the family's travels abroad. In those days there were no trees surrounding the town. Trees were either cut down for building houses or used for shipbuilding. The gardens were therefore extensive. This year, Wallingford Farm is recreating the gardens according to Celia Parker Notts' diary descriptions of her original garden.

Hanging on a wall near the door is a studio photograph of Celia. She stands in front of a decorative window, her arm resting on the back of a chair, her dark dress billowing outwards, propped up with hoops, giving her a voluminous shape meant to indicate grandeur.

In a gilded oval frame positioned above Celia's couch, an oil painting of the sweet face of a little girl with pink cheeks, large blue eyes, chestnut hair combed back neatly and held in place with a blue bow stares out from the expanse of centuries. This was their daughter, known as Lela, who died at age ten of diphtheria.



A boy roughly four- or five-years-old gazes seriously at the viewer from an old black-and-white photograph. He is dressed in a suit decorated with whimsical trim, and wears black boots shined to perfection. This is Celia and Charles's son, Charlie, who fell through the ice and hit his head, suffering brain damage. He lived only ten years after his accident and died at age 29. Celia died soon afterwards. Despite their great wealth, they could not prevent their family from experiencing tragedies. Later, Charles married Celia's sister Lily (Lydia Paddock Nott 1837-1919) and in this manner the inheritance of the house passed to the Nott family.

The wallpaper in the grand front hall is one of the most remarkable features of the home. This is the only example of its kind still installed in the world. What makes the wallpaper unique is that it was hand-painted in Paris and brought across the Atlantic by ship. When it was fresh, it was incredibly toxic, but people didn't know that at the time. The green used to paint lush ivy contained arsenic, and the gorgeous blues were made of cobalt, which is radioactive.

Families of people who were able to afford this kind of luxury were often ill because of it and this family was no exception. Little Lela was considered a sickly child and was never well enough to go to school. Little Charlie suffered from asthma as a child. Celia herself died from chronic breathing issues. Today, because the wallpaper has faded over time, and because areas within reach are covered in protective plastic, it is safe to admire the sumptuous wallpaper on the house tour. Another highlight of the tour is rare original Civil War decommission papers signed by President Abraham Lincoln that were given to a cousin of the family.

*-continued on next page*

**Clockwise from top left: Celia's sitting room; the Christmas card table; the front hall's hand-painted wallpaper from Paris, France. Photos by Laima Vince**



During the holidays, docents lead tours through this unique Victorian era home, all decked out for Christmas. On the tour, they narrate Kennebunkport's history at the height of its glory during its shipbuilding and trading decades and tell stories of three generations of the Perkins-Nott family who lived in this house. Tickets are \$15 and are sold in the White Columns Gift Shop.

Group tours can be specially arranged at any time during the year and cost \$150 per group regardless of size (up to 15 people). Public tours during the summer season will resume Memorial Day weekend and continue through Labor Day. Donations to the Kennebunkport Historical Society are appreciated and all funds contribute to the upkeep of the town's unique historic properties.



**Photos top to bottom: Upstairs master bedroom decorated for Christmas; living room with Christmas tree. Photos by Laima Vince**