

A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



Lindley Johnson 1854-1937

Resort architecture, liberated from the strictures of urban life and the greater rigidity of formal winter society, inspired some architects to produce their best work. One such figure was Lindley Johnson, a member of that talented and eclectic generation of Philadelphia architects whose careers began during the 1880s. Although not as productive as his better known contemporaries Wilson Eyre, Frank Miles Day, Walter Cope, and John Stewardson — all of whom received Maine commissions — Johnson maintained a modestly steady, largely residential practice from 1883 until about 1920. Of the more than 150 designs he produced throughout his career, mostly for patrons from Philadelphia and its suburbs, twenty were Maine commissions; and all were executed during the early 1890s for a new summer colony on Grindstone Neck in Winter Harbor (Figure 1).

Described in an obituary as being “a member of a socially prominent family”, biographical details concerning Lindley Johnson are surprisingly sketchy.¹

Born in Philadelphia, he grew up in the Germantown neighborhood and attended local private schools. Like many Philadelphians, he continued his education at the University of Pennsylvania, graduating with a B.S. degree in 1875. For the next year he travelled, making a tour of Europe and continuing around the world to China, India, and Australia. By this time he had decided to pursue a career in architecture and went to Paris for further study. Entering the Ecole des Beaux Arts in 1877, he spent about four years in the Atelier Moyaux. Returning to Philadelphia, he worked for a year in the office of Frank Furness before leaving in 1883 to establish his own practice. His subsequent marriage to Susan LaRoche Keating, the daughter of a prominent Philadelphia physician, produced three children. A founder of the T-Square Club in 1883, Philadelphia’s leading architectural organization, Johnson was also active in the Art Club and the Society of Beaux Arts Architects. In 1902 he became a member of the American Institute of Architects, nominated by his fellow Philadelphians Amos J. Boyden, Walter Cope, and Wilson Eyre.

From its inception, Johnson was closely involved with the development of a summer colony on Grindstone Neck, the genesis of which dates to May, 1889,



Figure 1. Grindstone Neck, circa 1950 view (MHPC).

with the incorporation of the Gouldsboro Land Improvement Company which purchased a nearly 5,000 acre tract of land in Winter Harbor. The town, so named for its deep waters which did not freeze during the coldest months, remained a district of Gouldsboro until 1895. One reason for the selection of this particular site was that a leading investor in the enterprise, New York banker John G. Moore, was a native of Steuben, a small town located about fifteen miles from Gouldsboro.

Economic factors played a key role, and one of the Company's chief motivations was the example of the real estate boom which had taken place in Bar Harbor over the past ten years. Encouraged in their belief that "Maine summer resorts continue to grow in favor", they were also reassured by active development taking place in nearby Sullivan, Sorrento, and Lamoine.² Grindstone Neck seemed to them an ideal place to establish a new summer resort, especially as "Winter Harbor now resembles Bar Harbor as it was before it became ultra fashionable."³ It was assumed that vacationers would welcome "the opportunity for the 'undress' life of old Bar Harbor."⁴

To promote their venture, the developers, described as "a party of capitalists",⁵ who were "men of wealth and culture and mean business",⁶ issued a prospectus in the summer of 1889 for their proposed development on Grindstone Neck. Not only did they intend to commence construction of cottages for themselves as soon as possible, but they also planned to erect a hotel and a clubhouse by the following year. The Company established agents in Philadelphia, New York, Boston, and Winter Harbor as well as a branch office in Bar Harbor. To encourage immediate settlement, about twenty lots were made available to early investors for the nominal sum of fifty dollars an acre. By 1891 all capital stock had been subscribed. The Company was confident its plans would be profitable:

Without, therefore, predicting unparalleled results, the Gouldsboro Company entertains the assurance of entire success, and believes that its property at Winter Harbor has been by nature destined to, *at least*, rank equal in value with that at other summer resorts adjacent to Bar Harbor.⁷

As the area being promoted constituted "a natural park", and potential building sites were well situated, the cost of effecting necessary improvements would be relatively low.⁸ Thus, it was predicted that "when the property is cleaned up, the building sites should command fancy prices" as soon as Grindstone became fashionable.⁹ The Company optimistically regarded its holdings "as a territory susceptible for development into a cottage colony of the character, for instance, of Tuxedo, of Llewellyn Park, or of Northeast Harbor".¹⁰

Convenient transportation was vital to the success of any summer settlement. Grindstone residents could take the Maine Central Railroad from Boston to Mount Desert Ferry, where they transferred to a boat for the thirty minute ride east over the five miles of Frenchman's Bay. Steamer lines provided additional connections from Portland, Rockland, New York, and Boston.

Stage routes accommodated travellers who preferred to remain on land. By May, 1890, the Company had purchased the steamer *Silver Star*, which would thrice-weekly bring passengers and mail to Winter Harbor and docked at the newly constructed wharf on the western side of the Neck. It also owned a smaller launch, appropriately named the *Gouldsboro*.

Development began in earnest the following summer, when roads were cleared and lots laid out. Where possible, local materials were to be used. A plentiful supply of fine building stone was available nearby, and most houses featured chimneys and mantels of beach stones. Area builders were contracted to execute the several architects' designs.¹¹ Anticipated costs were estimated to be about twenty percent less than the sum required for comparable construction in Bar Harbor.

The Company first planned to develop a tract of 300 acres on Grindstone Neck. Once that market was well established, it would proceed to expand on the Schoodic Peninsula. Grindstone Neck, formerly farmland, comprised a picturesque rocky promontory, one and a half miles long and a half a mile wide. Extending into Frenchman's Bay, its unspoiled ruggedness was one of its attractions: "The rough ledges, which in turn lend a picturesque primitiveness much to be admired by lovers of the truly rural."¹² By tradition, the Neck owed its distinctive name to the wreck of a vessel carrying a cargo of grindstones, quarried nearby and taken by boat to coastal mills.

Grindstone's proximity to the village of Winter Harbor, already a modest resort, was another advantage. The town, it was reported, "retains much of its primitive simplicity."¹³ In addition to rustic aesthetics, its businesses would be able to provide all necessary provisions, supplies, and horses for the seasonal residents, insuring that the new development would be kept strictly residential: "The situation of this property is such as to protect you to the fullest extent from nuisances which are so often found at summer resorts."¹⁴

Reporters for the *Ellsworth American* and the *Bar Harbor Record* followed the progress of the new development with interest, for observers regarded Grindstone as signalling the beginning of renewed real estate prosperity which had been predicted for some time: "There is no doubt that the resort will in a very short time be a popular one, as it possesses advantages equal to those of any of the resorts on the Maine Coast."¹⁵

Aiming to attract only "the most desirable of purchasers",¹⁶ the healthful qualities were also emphasized:

At no summer resort will be found a better class of residents, a more healthful climate, more substantial comfort, more freedom from the conventionalities of older resorts, and a more natural and enjoyable life at moderate cost, than at Winter Harbor.¹⁷

Development of the new summer community was carefully and conservatively planned so as to insure that it would become a "cozy little watering place".¹⁸



Figure 2. George Dallas Dixon Cottage, Grindstone Neck, 1975 view (MHPC).



Figure 3. J. Bonsall Taylor Cottage, Grindstone Neck, rendering from 1891 promotional pamphlet, *Grindstone Inn and Lands*, (MHPC).

Cottage lots were to be no less than one acre in size. Other restrictions included limitations on subdivision as well as requirements that structures be used solely as residences and that the Company set additional "conditions against undesirable structures".¹⁹ Stables were constructed on the northern portion of the Neck, well away from the cottages. The Company would maintain strict control over the sale of land, and no public sale of stock would be made. Purchasers agreed to build a dwelling within a year which was to cost no less than \$2,000. It was assumed, however, that structures would probably cost more:

The Company estimates that cottages of a substantial and comfortable character can be constructed at from two thousand dollars upward, and that handsome and commodious summer residences can be erected and furnished at a cost of between thirty-five hundred and five thousand dollars.²⁰

Further, "no unsightly structures for commercial or kindred uses" were permitted.²¹

In April, 1890, Nathan Franklin Barrett (1845-1919) began surveying the Company's property. He carefully mapped out the site, dividing it into 198 numbered lots. Barrett, a noted landscape architect from New York, described his proposed arrangement:

By my plan the two well known styles in the art of landscape, the severe or artificial, and the rough weird and picturesque would be combined, and the unusual natural topography availed of to the best advantage.²²

Barrett liked Grindstone enough to construct his own cottage there. He collaborated with Johnson on several other planned developments, including ones in Pullman, Illinois; Tuxedo Park and New Rochelle, New York; Ponce de Leon, Florida; and Chevy Chase, Maryland.

As soon as surveying was completed, construction would begin. By May, 1891, the *Bar Harbor Record* reported that "cottages are going up rapidly at Winter Harbor",²³ and the Neck was being "fast converted into a new attractive and delightful summer resort",²⁴ as the site underwent "a rapid and complete transfiguration".²⁵ Within the first year, nearly thirty cottages were either completed or under construction,

and still more were in the planning stages. Local residents found welcome employment on the Neck. Its growing collection of "fine cottages and villas"²⁶ gave promise of its becoming "quite a summer resort".²⁷ To further encourage development, Gouldsboro "exempted from taxation all lots and improvements for ten years".²⁸ Not all planned cottages were constructed. Charles W. Sibley of Boston, an officer of the Company for whom Johnson designed a cottage, decided not to build.

Philadelphians constituted the majority of Grindstone's summer residents and Johnson's patrons there, though some were from New York, Boston, and Providence. Several were officers and major stockholders of the Company, and Dixon, Levis, and Tiers occupied Pennsylvania houses by Johnson. The property owners at Grindstone, while comfortably well off, were not of the same class as the most affluent of those who chose to spend the season at Bar Harbor, and consequently the vacation social life near Winter Harbor was on a more informal scale. The professions of the Philadelphians were varied. Spencer Ervin was a broker, and George Dallas Dixon was a vice president of the Pennsylvania Railroad (Figure 2). Samuel Lewis was involved in real estate ventures, while John B. Lennig and James B. Thompson made their living in manufacturing. William T. Tiers, Frank T. Patterson, and Nathan Trotter were merchants, and three, J. Bonsall Taylor (Figure 3), John Jacob Ridgeway, and Angelo Tillinghast Freedley, were lawyers. Of Johnson's non-Pennsylvania patrons, John Whipple Slater was a well-known manufacturer from Providence, and George William Ballou worked as a banker in New York.

Lindley Johnson employed a lively variety of styles for his Grindstone cottages, though many were in the flexible and commodious Shingle Style widely popular for New England summer houses. Professor Charles A. Doremus, a physician from New York, occupied an enlarged log cabin, while the architect himself designed a chalet for his own use (Figure 4). As a member of the Executive Staff and the official Company architect,



Figure 7. Episcopal Church, Grindstone Neck, circa 1920 view (MHPC).

NOTES

Several architects worked on Grindstone Neck, though most structures were designed by Johnson, and his work here comprises the largest number of commissions he received outside the Mid-Atlantic region. For a discussion of the Grindstone houses for Charles S. Whelen and Laura D. McCrea by Wilson Eyre (1858-1944), see my entry on that architect in this series (III, no. 12, 1986).

¹ "Lindley Johnson", *Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 23, 1937. He was well known enough for his obituary to appear the same day in the *New York Times*.

² *Ellsworth American*, September 24, 1896.

³ *Gouldsboro Land Improvement Company's Grindstone Inn and Lands, Winter Harbor, Maine* (thereafter abbreviated *GLIC*), 1890, p. 15. Differing editions of this brochure were published in 1890, 1891, and 1892. Only the 1890 version is paginated.

⁴ *GLIC*, 1890, p. 15.

⁵ *Ellsworth American*, June 5, 1890.

⁶ *Ellsworth American*, May 15, 1890.

⁷ *GLIC*, 1890, p. 20.

⁸ *GLIC*, 1890, p. 22.

⁹ *GLIC*, 1890, p. 21.

¹⁰ *GLIC*, 1890, p. 8.

¹¹ Contractors included P.H. Stratton of Ellsworth and George A. Bannon and John E. Clark of Bar Harbor. George E. Norris of Hancock and George Wescott of Bar Harbor undertook stone and mason work. Landscape architect Nathaniel F. Barrett supervised local engineers J.F. and Charles P. Simpson of Sorrento.

- ¹² "The New Resort", *Bar Harbor Record*, May 22, 1890.
- ¹³ *GLIC*, 1891.
- ¹⁴ *GLIC*, 1890, p. 21.
- ¹⁵ *Ellsworth American*, June 5, 1890.
- ¹⁶ *GLIC*, 1890, p. 9.
- ¹⁷ *GLIC*, 1891.
- ¹⁸ *Ellsworth American*, September 24, 1896.
- ¹⁹ *GLIC*, 1891.
- ²⁰ *GLIC*, 1890, p. 14.
- ²¹ *GLIC*, 1890, p. 10.
- ²² Report of Nathan F. Barrett, *GLIC*, 1890, p. 25.
- ²³ *Bar Harbor Record*, May 7, 1891.
- ²⁴ "The New Resort", *Bar Harbor Record*, May 22, 1890.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*
- ²⁶ *Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide*, July 30, 1890, p. 450.
- ²⁷ *Ellsworth American*, April 2, 1891.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*
- ²⁹ *GLIC*, 1890, p. 5.
- ³⁰ *GLIC*, 1891.
- ³¹ *Bar Harbor Record*, September 21, 1899.
- ³² *The Beacon, Winter Harbor, Maine*, brochure, 1890.
- ³³ *Bar Harbor Record*, September 28, 1895.

LIST OF KNOWN COMMISSIONS IN MAINE BY LINDLEY JOHNSON

All structures designed for Grindstone Neck, Winter Harbor, between 1890 and 1892.

[] = Barrett Plan lot number

PUBLIC STRUCTURES:

Club House, Extant.
Grindstone Inn, Destroyed.
Episcopal Church, Extant.

COTTAGES:

George William Ballou Cottage. [15]
Mrs. Sarah N. Cannell Cottage, Destroyed. [17]
George Dallas Dixon Cottage, Extant. [19]
Charles A. Doremus Cottage, Extant. [1]
Angelo Tillinghast Freedley Cottage, Destroyed.
Spencer Irvin Cottage, Built, Not Located.
Lindley Johnson Cottage, Extant. [50]
John B. Lennig Cottage, Extant. [51]
Samuel W. Levis Cottage, Extant. [5]
Frank T. Patterson Cottage, Destroyed. [47]
John Jacob Ridgeway Cottage, Extant. [18]
Charles W. Sibley Cottage, Not Executed.
John Whipple Slater Cottage, Destroyed. [12]
J. Bonsall Taylor Cottage, Extant. [3]
James B. Thompson Cottage, Destroyed. [14]
William T. Tiers Cottage, Extant. [20]
Nathan Trotter Cottage, Extant. [6]