

# The Dash

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SPRING 2020

**ANNUAL MEETING SATURDAY APRIL 4TH**

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# First Parish Church of Freeport and its Meetinghouses 1774-2020

BY ERIC C. SMITH

## FIRE!

**I**N THE EARLY MORNING hours of Friday, April 13, 1894, a fire broke out at Freeport Corner, starting at the Brewster Block where it consumed the Post Office and the YMCA. The flames, pushed by a raging nor'easterly gale, quickly spread to the First Parish Church. The church bell that rang out the initial alarm of the fire continued to ring from the heat of the blaze until the steeple crashed down, destroying the bell and Howard tower clock that had just been installed three years earlier. Soon the building was in ruins. Only the recent snow fall and modern water system gave firefighters the advantage to keep the village from further disaster.

The meetinghouse that had looked over the village for 75 years was gone, but within nine months the congregation was gathered in a new meetinghouse, built in uniquely Freeport Victorian style with great support from the



PHOTO BY DENNIS LANDIS

The current meetinghouse of First Parish Church was designed by architect W.S. Aldrich and completed in 1895 at 40 Main Street. It is the third building and third location of the church.

community. As this third meetinghouse of the church celebrates its 125th anniversary in 2020 and faces a new transition in service to the Freeport community, we look back at how this building came to stand at 40 Main Street.

## BEGINNINGS

First Parish Church traces its name and its origin to the very beginnings of Freeport. The first meetinghouse erected in the Harraseeket District of Ancient

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### SPRING 2020

The Dash is published four times annually by Freeport Historical Society for its members.

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Freeport, ME 04032  
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www.freeporthistoricalsociety.org

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Tuesday to Friday  
10 am – 5 pm

Appointments may also be made for a weekend visit.

We encourage a phone call prior to any visit, to verify that the office is open.

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### First Parish Congregational Church / Meetinghouse Arts:

In this issue, our FHS president Eric C. Smith has given us the story of how the town's first meeting house and home to the First Parish Church has served the community since 1774. The church has now found a continuing and expanded role as a gathering place for the townspeople.

After some modest renovations later this year, the space will be hosting artistic performances, cultural presentations, and continued religious services which will bring new life to the building through a partnership with ACAF, the Arts & Cultural Alliance of Freeport.

We are thrilled that this iconic building and venue is literally on our campus here on Main Street. I am honored to serve on the ACAF Board of Trustees and our two organizations are working together to celebrate Freeport's past and build our community through collaboration and engaged participation.

### Jack Montgomery, our Volunteer of the Year:

Local photographer Jack Montgomery has earned the title of our Mel Collins Volunteer of the Year for 2020. We truly value the quality of his artistry, as his sensitive photography of Pettengill Farm has enriched our organization for many years. Beyond allowing us to use his images of Pettengill, Jack generously donates his time and talent for family portraits for our annual auctions. We are announcing his award early so that we can showcase his photographs here, and we invite you to see more and hear Jack describe his work at our Annual Meeting on April 4th.

### Your response to our Annual Fund Drive:

Heartwarming! More donors, larger donors! Thank you all so much. Our loss of parking revenue is a big hit and our members responded generously; it was perhaps our best response ever. A special thank you to the very large donors in the \$5,000 - \$10,000 range. These donors were Linda Bean, Diana Bean, Edgar and Dot Leighton, John Brewer, Jan and Ed Gerry, and Anne and Jim Cram. Big and small, the total was over \$57,000. We appreciate every single gift and are honored by your trust in us to manage the Freeport Historical Society with integrity in pursuit of preservation, education, and community.

### Four-Hundred Years of Freeport History at our Annual Meeting on April 4th:

I hope that many of you have been enjoying local Freeport author Colin Woodard's series on Maine's statehood as published in the *Portland Press Herald* these past six weeks. Freeport's history is a tidy microcosm of Maine's history and our story is still being written. From the Native Americans' shell heaps on our shores to the earliest settlers, ship builders, sea farers, shoe makers, and shop keepers, it all happened right here. Capturing and caring for those stories and the documents, photographs, and artifacts that encompass them is what we strive to do. Your memberships, donations of materials, time and yes, cash are what makes it all possible. We thank you today on behalf of all the generations to come. **Please join us on Saturday, April 4th from 4 - 6:00 pm with honored speaker Colin Woodard.**

— JIM CRAM, Executive Director

## Docents Wanted: Pettengill Farm Historians

We would like to train a small group of volunteers who are interested in learning a detailed history of Pettengill Farm and the Pettengill family. FHS will host classes including a limited amount of reading assignments to familiarize docents with the farm. We use docents three times regularly during the year, with additional dates needed intermittently.

- Monthly tours during the summer (by reservation)
- Pettengill Farm Day tours
- Third grade class visits in October

**These tours are always a lot of fun!**

Please contact call Jim or Jesse at (207) 865-3170 or email info@freeporthistoricalsociety.org to learn more!

# Reflections on Photographing PETTENGILL FARM

BY JACK MONTGOMERY

I HAVE LONG BEEN drawn to the sights and smells of the tidal reaches of New England. Mud flats, salt hay, heron, the ebbing and flowing water—I love it all. I also take great pleasure from open fields and traditional architecture. I am an unabashed romantic born a century or more too late. My attraction to Pettengill Farm was immediate—a place as pure in its vision of nineteenth-century Maine as can be found in this part of the world. But for all of that, my attraction runs deeper still.

Dusk, dead of winter



I grew up with a strong sense that the ghosts of the past share space with our current lives. This notion occurred to me as young as age ten if not before. As a child, my mother often told me of her early life in New Hampshire during the Depression. The imagery of her stories

was vivid. Her family was dirt poor. They were tenant farmers, moving every year as my grandfather burned some bridge or other within a few months of his arrival on a new job. I was enthralled and carried those images with me into adulthood. And thus, from the first moment I walked into the Pettengill House 35 years ago I sensed I was in the presence of her past. This was a space where she could have lived during the hardscrabble years of her youth. I could envision her standing in the pantry sorting corn, tending the stove, sleeping in a rough bed under the eaves on a frigid winter night, sitting at the foot of the stairs in the kitchen to stay warm as she read a book or knit, or seeking some small private spot in the attic. I felt like I knew the place through her, right from the start.

And so I began to photograph, both in the house and in the evocative landscape that surrounds it. I have taken several thousand photographs there, both on film and with digital cameras. I have printed those images on gelatin silver paper and

Late afternoon early spring



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## Pettengill Farm

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by a variety of older, more traditional processes. I have built a catalog of images of architectural details—peeling wallpaper, rough floors, raw wood shelves, windows, doors, fireplaces—which I sometimes incorporate into constructed photographs.

It was a long time before I could articulate what draws me to Pettengill. But as I turn 70, I am increasingly aware



that photography is a means of personal exploration and reconciling myself to my past. I photograph to access my own internal life as well as to understand the world around me. It is not a commercial venture. There is a spiritual aspect in all this. Some of it I understand, but to a large degree I surrender myself to a non-verbal, non-linear side of my being. I realize this may sound odd to many folks but that is the reality of it, and that is why Pettengill Farm remains such an important part of my life.

It has been a great pleasure to give back to FHS through the donation of photographs and auction items. I am forever grateful for the opportunity to make these images. I walk there often in all seasons and weather, and like so many others I feel a sense of stewardship in overseeing the house and grounds.



My current passion is photogravure, a nineteenth-century process in which a photograph is embossed on a polymer coated metal plate that is inked by hand and then printed on a variety of papers by means of an etching press. I am in love with this slow process that relies upon craft and intuition. And so, as the new year is underway, I am now producing photogravure images from Pettengill, starting with the study of shadows of the trees on the exterior wall of the house, taken on a lovely late afternoon in February.



I hope that my best photographs lie ahead for me and I suspect they will be found at the end of Pettengill Road. I am very grateful to the Freeport Historical Society for this opportunity.

— Porter's Landing (March 2020)

We will be honoring Jack Montgomery with our Mel Collins Volunteer of the Year Award at our Annual Meeting on Saturday, April 4th!

## First Parish Church

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North Yarmouth was built in 1774 on lower Main Street at the top of Concord Road which led up from Porter's Landing. This building was used for intermittent services while church members still traveled to the Meeting House under the Ledge in the parish of North Yarmouth for most services. In order for the district to be set-off from North Yarmouth, a new town had to be established by the General Court of Massachusetts. This was done in February 1789, and on December 21, 1789 a meeting was gathered of members who had requested to be dismissed from the North Yarmouth church and now signed their names to a covenant to form the First Church of Freeport. The new church called Alfred Johnson, a recent graduate of Harvard College, to be the first pastor and he was ordained in the church 8 days later on December 29.

The congregation of 50 members during Rev. Johnson's ministry continued to worship in the first meetinghouse. Most of the earliest church records were destroyed in a house fire in 1809 that also led to the death of the second minister, Rev. Samuel Veazie. The meetinghouse was used for both church services and town meetings. In 1814 the church voted to pay Sam Blackstone \$4.00 annually for care of the meetinghouse. (However, if the town should clean the meetinghouse after town meetings, then Blackstone would receive just \$3.00 annually.) At the same meeting, the church voted to allow female members to be present at church meetings, if they so chose, but not to speak unless questioned.

The General Court of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts passed a bill in June 1816 to authorize the sale of ministerial lands that had been granted to several parishes in Cumberland County, including Freeport. The act appointed Barnabas Bartol, John A. Hyde, Moses Soule, Jr., Thomas Bishop, Nathan Nye, Cornelius Dillingham, and Jacob Johnson as trustees to sell the land in Freeport on which the meetinghouse stood. The trustees announced an auction within weeks



Each successive pew is a different length.

and in July sold 3 parcels of 15 acres each for between \$30.50 and \$23.00 per acre.

### SECOND MEETINGHOUSE

The following year the church voted to build a new meetinghouse in what had become the established center of town, on the hill overlooking Main and Bow Streets. The old meetinghouse was taken



The second meetinghouse was located at Freeport corner on Main Street on the site where the L.L. Bean flagship store now stands. The building began in 1818 but was destroyed by fire before completed, rebuilt and completed in 1819, and extensively remodeled in 1867. It was consumed by fire in 1884. No images exists of the first meetinghouse, built in 1774 on lower Main Street and taken down in 1818.

down in March 1818 and the frame of the new meetinghouse was raised that May on the new site. On July 28, 1818, when the building was half finished, it was consumed by fire. "Encouraged by public liberality," the parish began building again on the same foundation, and another frame was raised in September. The new meetinghouse was completed and dedicated on February 25, 1819.

In 1820, the year of Maine's statehood, the only record of church action is a vote to pay David Bartol \$7.12½ for 13 months care of the meetinghouse and one brush. The following year, the church voted to change the method of notice for church meetings. They would no longer be issued by the constables of the town, and they would read State of Maine instead of Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Following their puritan roots, a council of ministers in 1805 had unanimously voted to exclude all musical instruments from church services, especially the bass viol. But in 1856 the church voted to form a committee of William Merrill, Enos Griffin, George E. Soule, and George W. Gray to make such arrangements as they saw fit to have singing on the sabbath, a significant departure from puritan tradition.

The congregation gathered for a meeting on May 14, 1857 to receive a letter dated May 1 signed by 16 members

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Stained-glass windows on south wall.

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requesting to be dismissed from the congregation in order to form a new church in South Freeport. The letter described the pain of separation, but the feeling of duty to their families to establish a church closer to their homes. The church voted to approve the request and grant a letter of dismissal, making way for the new church to be formed, just as it had been formed by members dismissed from North Yarmouth church 68 years earlier.

In 1866 the congregation voted to renovate and redesign the meetinghouse, selling shares of \$3.00 each for the repairs. New pews were also auctioned to subscribers raising an additional \$1,100. After closing for 8 months the church was rededicated on January 1, 1868. A town clock purchased for \$450.00 and installed in the steeple in 1891. All lay in ruins on the morning after the fire in 1894. Only the pulpit bible, pulpit lamp, and a small marble-top table were saved. Fortunately, the building was insured for \$5,000.

A meeting was called to discuss a new church building the following Wednesday, and the church began holding services in the town hall the following Sunday. After two fires on the same site, the church voted to sell the land at Freeport corner to finance a new meetinghouse on a new site. A building committee was

formed of William A. Davis, J.E. Davis, E.C. Brown, J.P. Merrill, and E.B. Grant. E.B. Mallet sold the congregation a plot of land on Main Street between Mill and Grove Streets for \$1.00. What remained of the old bell was cut into pieces and sold to raise funds for the new building. The church tapped an aspiring young architect for the new design and work began on site in June 1894.

### BUILDING

Over two and a half centuries in New England, congregational traditions shifted significantly from early puritan practice, and the new meetinghouse was vastly changed from early puritan meetinghouses of plain white walls and clear glass. This Victorian era building, while a relatively plain shingle style on

### WILLIAM STEIN ALDRICH, ARCHITECT

**W**ILLIAM STEIN ALDRICH was born in Chicago in 1865, but after his father died at an early age, his mother moved with her two children to live with her father, John A. Briggs, in Freeport. He spent many days of his boyhood watching the master builders at his grandfather's shipyard on the Harraseeket.

After graduating from Freeport High School, he studied architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, graduating in 1888. He then apprenticed with John Calvin Stevens in

the outside was ornate inside.

Stained glass windows surround not only the sanctuary but the parlor as well, including in the large pocket doors that separate the two rooms. Windows were sponsored by patrons near and far. The largest window, facing Main Street, was given in memory of Rev. Preston B. Wing, pastor from 1879 to 1886. The three windows facing south were given by Mrs. C.A. Kohler of San Francisco in memory of her mother, Olive Coffin, and sisters, Roxanna Coffin and Olive Coffin Randall. The three windows facing east above the altar were each given separately, by E.S. Soule in memory of his mother, by W.A. Davis in memory of his mother, and by the Christian Endeavor Society, respectively.

Far from colonial box pews or straight-backed pews, the new pews were shaped to create curved auditorium seating within a square space, with two aisles converging toward a central pulpit. Each and every pew is a unique size and shape to form this arrangement.

Ninety years after the move to exclude all musical instruments from worship, the church installed a grand pipe organ in the front of the sanctuary. The steel bell placed in the steeple was newly cast, but included remaining fragments of the bell from the previous meetinghouse.

Just nine months after the fire and seven months since construction began, the congregation held its first service in the new meetinghouse on January 20, 1895. An inaugural organ recital and concert was held February 1 with organist Mr. Harvey Murray, soprano Miss. Ida K.

Portland before returning to Boston to continue his practice. He was married at First Parish Freeport just a few years before the 1894 fire, and he returned to design the new meetinghouse in the shingle style he surely studied with Stevens. He also drew upon the shipbuilding tradition of the town, using a timber and knee structure to form the large sanctuary with no other support columns, like an inverted ship hull.

First Parish Church in Freeport is the only known building in Maine designed solely by this accomplished architect.



Broad view of the sanctuary.  
PHOTO BY DENNIS LANDIS

Tarbox, and contralto Mrs. Nettie M. Hogan, all from Portland, and tenor Mr. William H. Stockbridge of Freeport. The church hosted two dedication services on February 7, the first at 2:30 in the afternoon with greetings from the Baptist, Universalist, and South Freeport churches, as well as Bowdoin College. A reception was held between services and the evening dedication commenced at 7:30.

### TRANSITIONS

In the 1950s the congregation grew and so did the choirs. To make space for the growing musical offerings in the church, the chancel was altered in 1954, 98 years since a committee was first formed to provide for singing on the sabbath. L.L. Bean donated funds in memory of his wife, Bertha Porter Bean, and his children, Carl, Warren, and Barbara, also donated funds in memory of their mother. These funds were used to build an expanded and divided chancel, with a new pulpit on one side and lectern on the other, and central stairs where senior, junior, and children's choirs could perform.

Also in the 1950s, a large kitchen and dining room were built in the lower level

of the building to host church functions and community bean suppers. Significant gifts toward this effort from Mr. and Mrs. Albert Conley led the congregation to



Hand-hewn trusses supported by knee braces.

dedicate this function room to Mary E. Conley. Sunday School also expanded to the lower level of the building under the direction of Luther M. Pennell.

In April 1964, neighbors Raymond and Glens Tozier gifted the church with the parking lot behind the building for the

sum of \$1.00. Initially a convenience for those gathering for church services and events, this gift has proved a lasting legacy providing significant income from parking rental to sustain the church and the building over the last two decades.

In 2020 the building will undergo another transition to make room for Meetinghouse Arts under the auspices of the Arts and Cultural Alliance of Freeport. Mirroring the 1954 changes, the chancel will once again be expanded to provide room for a variety of arts performances and the parlor will be redesigned to accommodate a visual arts gallery.

Freeport's first church has grown and changed along with Freeport's downtown for 230 years. It has changed locations as modes of transportation and commerce have reshaped the town, and its buildings have been built and rebuilt in changing styles. Both the church and the current meetinghouse still stand in devoted service to God and the community in the heart of Freeport. **FHS**

This article draws extensively from the work of Mildred Stowell Coffin and her published *History of First Parish Church Congregational Freeport, Maine 1774-1959*.

# THE NORDICA CINEMA:

*An Opera Star and a Balloon “Ascentionist” Figure in Freeport’s History*

BY ERIKA J. WATERS

**M**OST PEOPLE KNOW that today’s Nordica Theatre honors the very first theatre in Freeport—but there’s a lot more to this story.

The first Nordica theatre was owned and operated by Frederick C. Mortimer. Born in Biddeford around 1860 (his exact dates are unknown), he was performing in Maine as Master Frederick the Boy Wonder by age 12.

But he had greater ambitions and set off to explore America. He was a vaudeville comedian in New York and managed the notorious Gem Theatre in Deadwood, South Dakota—featured in the HBO series, *Deadwood*. He also barnstormed the country as an “ascentionist,” a daredevil who floated in a swing under a hot air balloon—although he nearly died when his balloon caught fire. Luckily, his parachute opened just 50 feet from the ground.

Maybe because of that harrowing experience, he gave up the rough and tumble life and came home to Maine in 1882. He soon was managing theaters on Peaks Island, in South Portland, and Yarmouth, and helped construct the waiting room for the trolley to Casco Castle. In 1911, he opened Freeport’s very first theatre, named the “Photoplay Garden.”

Located on Bow Street, halfway between Main and Depot Streets, the theatre showed silent films and staged vaudeville acts to an audience



Lillian Nordica as Brünnhilde, 1898

of 150. (We know this from a rare interior photo owned by collector Peter Moulton.) Admission was generally 10 cents, but for special nights, such as when a one-man band and an operetta were featured, the price went up to 25 cents.

Not too many years later, Mortimer changed the name of his theatre to The Nordica, after Maine’s first great operatic diva, Madame Lillian Nordica, a Farmington native. She died in 1914, so it’s possible the name was a tribute to her or that Mortimer, impresario that he was, calculated that an association with an opera star would enhance his theatre’s status.

Lillian Nordica, born Lillian Norton in 1857, became one of America’s first opera stars. She sang over 41 different roles in a number of languages—her Brunhild from Wagner’s *The Ring Cycle* was particularly famous—and she performed all over the world, before royalty, prime ministers, and presidents. Always the diva, she was famous for her extravagant costumes and jewels; at the time of her death, she had a million dollars in jewels (about 1.2 million dollars today).

Despite her immense wealth—she had 10 homes—she was a sympathetic, kind woman and often wrote checks to those in need.

She was also an advocate for women’s suffrage, an early Coca Cola model, and the marketing genius behind “Madame Nordica’s Bath Powder for the Reduction of Weight.”

You can visit Madame Nordica’s homestead and hear more about her extraordinary life at the Lillian Nordica Homestead and Museum in Farmington, Maine ([liliannordica.com](http://liliannordica.com)). Or listen to the Lillian Nordica episode of the podcast series, *Cool Dead Women*, available on Spotify, iTunes, and at [www.cooldeadwomen.com](http://www.cooldeadwomen.com).

(Thanks to an undated article on the Photoplay Garden written anonymously for the Freeport Historical Society; Sebastian Meade, Harraseeket Grange; Peter Moulton; Dana Peck, Biddeford Historical Society; Crystal Williams, the Lillian Nordica Homestead and Museum; and Hannah Marshall at the Gem Theatre, South Dakota.) FHS

Erika J. Waters, Ph.D., is professor emeritus from the University of the Virgin Islands. She taught part-time at the University of Southern Maine and was a Fulbright Scholar to Finland. She’s the author of *Kittery to Bar Harbor: Touring Coastal Maine*, among other books, and, with her daughter Blair, hosts the podcast, *Cool Dead Women*.



Renamed the Nordica in 1916, the theatre relocated to this location on Bow Street in 1920.



Ad from Freeport’s first theatre, the Photoplay Garden.

# Annual Meeting

Saturday, April 4th at 4:00 pm

Freeport Community Services, 53 Depot Street

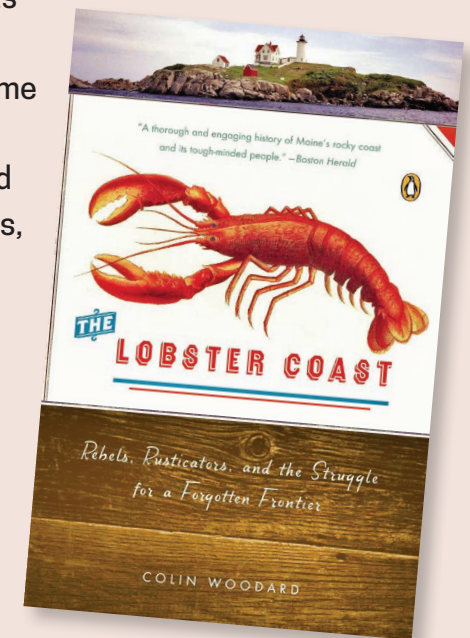
Honored Speaker: Colin Woodard



Colin Woodard is a *New York Times* bestselling author, historian, and journalist who has reported from more than fifty countries and seven continents. A longtime foreign correspondent for *The Christian Science Monitor* and *The San Francisco Chronicle*, he is State and National Affairs Writer at the *Portland Press Herald*, where he received a 2012 George Polk Award and was a finalist a 2016 Pulitzer Prize. Colin’s work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Economist*, *Smithsonian*, *Politico* and dozens of other publications. He is the author of *American Nations*, *American Character*, *The Lobster Coast*, *The Republic of Pirates*, *Ocean’s End* and the forthcoming *Union: The Struggle to Forge the Story of United States Nationhood*. Colin lives in Maine.

Please join us for a brief business meeting to celebrate FHS, elect trustees, and present annual awards. The meeting will be followed by “200 Years as a State, 170 as a Colony: The forces that shaped Maine’s Past, Present and Future,” a talk from Maine author and journalist Colin Woodard.

Woodard tells the backstory of Maine, a harrowing and little understood saga of war and betrayal, of clashing empires and ethnic cleansing, of an intra-English civil war and a 170 year colonial occupation by Massachusetts of what had been a separate province. These events shaped Mainers as a people and explain some of the culture’s most impressive virtues and most frustrating faults, as well as the still fraught relationship between this land’s real natives and the rest of us whose families came “from away” at some point in the past four hundred years.



# Our Generous Donors 2019

Your support is the sole reason the Freeport Historical Society exists today.

*The people, the programs, our ancient collections, and the protection and maintenance of The Harrington House and Pettengill Farm is provided by these generous people.*

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Helen Richmond Webb  
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## \$50 - \$99

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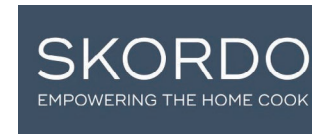
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*We sincerely apologize for any errors in this listing. Please contact us to report an error.*

# The Dash

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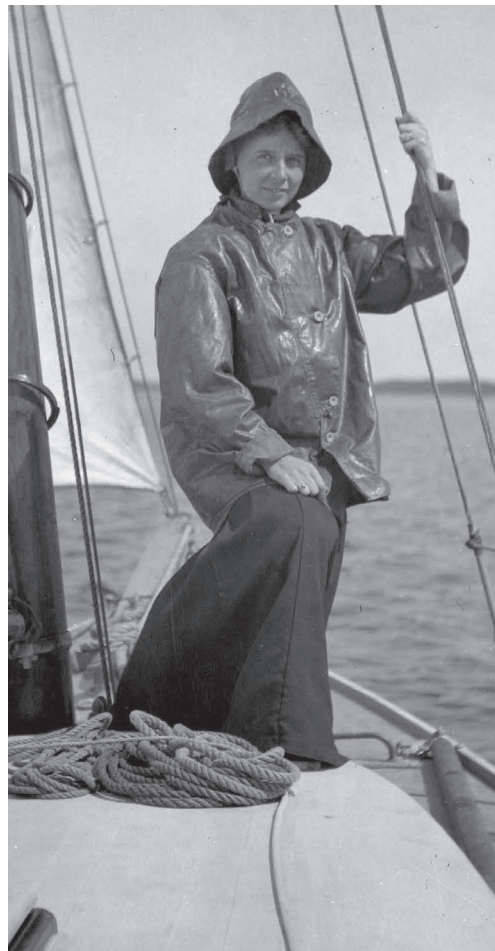
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## CONTINUAL BLOOM IN THE PERENNIAL GARDEN



**Tuesday, April 7th  
from 4:00 - 5:00 PM  
Harrington House,  
45 Main St., Freeport  
Suggested donation: \$5**

Join the FHS Garden Committee in welcoming Bill Kenzie, Nursery Manager at Allen, Sterling & Lothrop. Come and hear Bill explain how to have "Continual Bloom in the Perennial Garden." Bill has many years of experience as a landscaper and designer.



Please make checks payable to Freeport Historical Society and mail to 45 Main Street, Freeport, ME 04032, or pay by debit or credit card online at [www.freeporthistoricalsociety.org](http://www.freeporthistoricalsociety.org)

## Join Us!

**M**EMBERS RECEIVE a copy of the book *Tides of Change: A Guide to the Harraseeket Historic District, A Window Through Time* (Pettengill photo book), a trail map of Pettengill Farm, and our quarterly newsletter, *The Dash*.

Family Members and higher receive one hour of research time in our archives (a \$50 value) and invitations to events and exhibits at free or reduced rates.

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