



## Curious George: Woodlawn's Enigmatic Benefactor

*by Jane Goodrich*

On the frosty morning of November 1, 1928, the citizens of Hancock County awoke to find they had been given a marvelous gift. A few days earlier, on October 29, George Nixon Black, Jr. had died in his Beacon Street home in Boston of the effects of arteriosclerosis.<sup>1</sup> He was 86 years old. In a will in which Mr. Black had painted a dozen institutions with a very charitable brush, his hometown had not been forgotten.<sup>2</sup> Woodlawn now belonged to everyone.

It was an astonishing final act, but one which had been foreshadowed. Thirty years earlier, in 1897, Mr. Black had gifted Ellsworth with a new library remodeled from the handsome Tisdale house, another jewel in the city's architectural crown.

Although George Nixon Black, Jr. had lived in Boston for nearly 70 years he always cherished his Maine roots. Woodlawn, along with its furnishings and history, was probably his most valued possession. He relished his summer visits to Ellsworth where he indulged in his horses, dogs, parties and antiquing trips.<sup>3</sup> When needed, he remodeled and decorated Woodlawn with great care, judiciously adding objects that reflected his colonial revival tastes but wisely leaving the furnishings chosen for the house by his grandparents, John and Mary Black, in place. He enjoyed telling the stories of his great-grandfather General David Cobb's role in the Revolutionary War, and especially prized General Cobb's close connection to George Washington. That he conceived of Woodlawn as a museum and public park is no surprise, as he desired to keep his family history alive.

Yet, due either to humility or design, his own history is strikingly absent. Woodlawn contains thousands of letters,



*Photo of George Nixon Black, Jr., circa 1864, from Woodlawn collections.*

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P.O. Box 1478, Route 172

Ellsworth, Maine 04605

207-667-8671

E-mail: [info@woodlawnmuseum.com](mailto:info@woodlawnmuseum.com)

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## The Director's Desk

Joshua Campbell Torrance, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

### Ellsworth Antiques Show at Woodlawn a Grand Success!

By all accounts the Ellsworth Antiques Show at Woodlawn was a great success. \$16,000 was raised for the museum's programs and activities. The show also had a positive economic impact on downtown businesses. More importantly, the show received wide media coverage, drawing 1500 people to the estate and exposing new audiences to Woodlawn's many offerings.

One of the most pleasing aspects of the show was the tremendous *esprit de corps* among the 200 plus people who worked to put it together. I want to extend my deepest appreciation to the Board of Trustees, our Patron Committee, our Preview Party Committee, our fantastic staff, and our dedicated volunteers. I also wish to thank the dealers, many of whom have been show exhibitors together for many years, and the amazing work crews who physically built the booths, set up the electrical, and raised the tent. The show would not have happened without all of you.

The Ellsworth Antiques Show at Woodlawn would be very pleasing to George Nixon Black, Jr, the museum's first benefactor. Nixon, as his friends called him, was a person who loved collecting art and antiques. He was a person who supported many artists and craftsmen, as Woodlawn volunteer Jane Goodrich details in the lead article of this newsletter.

Nixon was also a man who cared deeply about Maine and in particular his native city of Ellsworth. He would be most pleased that the Ellsworth Antiques Show at Woodlawn returned to its roots, just as he often did in the summer, and that the public had an opportunity to see wonderful objects amidst the beautiful setting of his family's estate.





## Curious George... (continued from page 1)

business records, deeds and travel journals, but fewer than a dozen were penned by George, Jr. A small collection of historic photographs exists, but there are more prints and paintings representing George Washington in the Woodlawn collection than there are pictures of the George who bequeathed it. In fact, George, Jr. has so successfully slipped behind the curtain of his own ancestry that today few people know he was never called George at all. To distinguish him from his father he was always called Nixon.

Nixon was born July 11, 1842 in Ellsworth. He was the second child and the only son of George Nixon Black, Sr. and his wife, Mary Peters Black. He was educated by private tutors, often along with his sisters, Marianne and Agnes Black. When he was eleven he took dancing lessons and he may have had some painting and drawing lessons as well. In 1860, when he was 18 years old, he moved with his family to Pemberton Square on Beacon Hill in Boston. It must have been an amazing change for a young man of artistic sensibilities after growing up in small-town Maine. At the time, Boston was the fifth largest city in the United States with a population just under 180,000.<sup>4</sup>

Boston was also undergoing great physical change. The area north and west of Beacon Hill where the family lived is today tree-lined and quaint, but was, in 1860, one huge construction site. The massive work project of filling the Back Bay began in 1858 just west of the present Boston Public Garden. In those years 35 train cars, loaded with gravel were making the 9-mile run from a quarry in West Needham, every hour, twenty-four hours a day, six days a week.<sup>5</sup> This filling continued (although at a slower pace) for the next 36 years, finally finishing in 1894 in the Fens near the present Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Houses and shops were built on this “new land” almost as quickly as it was leveled and graded, and a great migration of the population of Boston was underway. Derided at the time by Henry James “as a tract pompous and prosaic”, it was in the Back Bay that Nixon’s generation of men “established Boston as one of the centers of world culture in the arts and sciences.”<sup>6</sup>

It was also a frightening time. Nixon entered Harvard College in the fall of 1860 but he had trouble there and attended for less than a year. The Civil War had broken out and although Nixon did not enlist, many students dropped out at this time and classes were half-empty with their departure. The culture of the time by no means insisted



*Miniature portrait of George Nixon Black, Jr., painted by Laura Coombs Hills. Woodlawn Museum collections.*

that a man take a military part in the war but many students from both the North and the South left Harvard to join their respective forces. The nation was in a tumult. Financial markets were in a panic. Nothing would ever be the same.

It took a steady hand and an astute eye to negotiate a real estate business through these years of exaggerated growth and crisis, but fortunately George Nixon Black, Sr. possessed both. Determined and painfully hard working, the elder Black had grown the wealth left to him by his own father’s businesses to a size never dreamed of by the first generation. Following Nixon’s failure to matriculate at Harvard, and after allowing his son a year of travel in Europe, George, Sr. brought Nixon into the family business. The two men worked together for the next 14 years building a commercial real estate empire.

It is difficult to imagine how a young man interested in art, history and horses took to the drudgery of real estate work. We know very little of Nixon’s life during these years, but it seems that he accepted his duty and did his best to work well at it. Small glimpses of the man he was to become are evidenced in two contemporary letters. In one, Nixon’s interest in, and expertise on the opera are spoken



of. In later years he was a constant box holder at the Boston Opera. In the other, Nixon's father writes, "Nixon and Agnes are visiting the museum this afternoon."<sup>7</sup>

The Boston Museum of Fine Arts became one of Nixon's lifetime passions. At the time of his death, the MFA was his major beneficiary. Incorporated in 1870, the Museum was first housed on the top floor of the Boston Athenaeum, very close to the Black's home at 81 Mt. Vernon Street. The 1870's marked the infancy of the years in which America was emerging from its long dependence on European culture. A new nationalism was overtaking the country to culminate in the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. In Boston, the apex of this new expression was to be found at Art Square. Built on land created by the filling of Back Bay in the mid 1860's, Art Square (today's Copley Square) was anchored by the opening of the new Museum of Fine Arts in July 1876. The following February Trinity Church was dedicated. In 1896 the square was finished with the addition of the masterpiece Boston Public Library building, creating one of the most architecturally distinguished public squares in America, both then and now.

Whether Nixon and his family supported the MFA in these early years is not known. What can be suspected is that a man of Nixon's interests could not have helped but be excited and moved by these wonderful cultural changes happening in Boston in the mid 1870's. It would have to wait until he was the head of his own household to see what he would do on his own.

In October 1880, George Nixon Black, Sr. died, - probably at Woodlawn- while on a trip to Ellsworth. More disturbing perhaps for Nixon, was the death of his sister, Marianne Black, the following year. Tradition indicates that Marianne was in poor health due to a weak heart for much of her life, but the sudden death of the unmarried 42 year-old woman following so closely the death of her father left the remainder of the family shocked and shaken. Thrust suddenly into the role of being "the man of the family" seems to have been for Nixon a form of liberation. Finally free to make his own decisions, and to exert his own tastes, he wasted no time in doing so.

The deaths of his father and elder sister provided an opportunity for Nixon to commission an artwork and honor his family at the same time. What better memorial than a stained glass window to be placed in the new Trinity Church at Art Square? The resulting window is one of the great stained glass masterpieces of Trinity Church. Named "The

New Jerusalem" and depicting John's Biblical vision on Patmos, the window was installed in the west wall of the North Transept during the winter of 1883-1884. It was the first memorial window commissioned from master artist John LaFarge who was also responsible for the painted decoration inside the church. In creating the window, LaFarge employed every innovative technique in his repertoire using six different types of glass and extensive jewel work. The amazing window, still visible at Trinity today, was the first and finest artwork Nixon ever commissioned.<sup>8</sup>

The early 1880's also gave rise to thoughts about housing for Nixon and his family. After 22 years of living at Mt Vernon Street they moved to 57 Beacon Street early in 1883. It was at this address that Nixon, his mother and younger sister all lived for the remainder of their lives. The Beacon Street house was one of a pair of bowfront row houses designed by Ephraim Marsh in 1819. Both survive today, although #57 has now been separated into several living units.

Most Bostonians of the upper classes did not spend summers in the city. No record exists of where the Black family may have traveled before the death of George, Sr., but soon after Nixon began thinking of a summer home by the sea. In this regard, he turned to his old college classmate and friend, Robert Swain Peabody. Peabody, an accomplished architect in his own firm of Peabody and Stearns was, in 1883, working at the height of his youthful creative powers.

By January of 1884, local newspapers reported that the framed roof of George Nixon Black, Jr.'s Kraggsyde was



*George Nixon Black, Jr.'s Manchester-by-the-Sea estate, Kraggsyde. From the author's private collection.*



showing above Smith's Point in Manchester-by-the-Sea, Massachusetts.<sup>9</sup> The diaries of Robert Peabody indicate visits to the building site with Nixon in February and July of 1884.<sup>10</sup> Although neither man could have known it at the time, Kraggsyde not only became Peabody and Stearns' one great masterpiece, it also became the masterpiece and icon of the entire shingle style of architecture. Rambling, haunting and evocative, the beautiful house set high on a dramatic headland was famous in its day and was published several times both in Europe and America. Nixon and his family occupied the house every summer from May until October to the end of their lives. Sadly, the house did not share the same fate as Woodlawn and was torn down in 1929, the year after Nixon died.

The choice of the shingle style was a natural one for Nixon. The opposite of the showy marble and stone palaces of Newport, Rhode Island which aped European styles, the shingle style, appealed to the quieter Bostonian taste. Broad open porches, furnished with simple rocking chairs and rows of uneven shingles greying in the salt air, reminded even these millionaire cottagers of their colonial roots. Containing many elements of the later colonial revival style, this engaging type of building gave a quiet nod to Yankee Puritan virtues, and silent approval to the age and endurance of Boston money. Raw, unmanicured landscapes and tumbling masses of flowers provided the backdrop against the very coast where the ancestors of these cottagers arrived in America. At Kraggsyde, there also stood a picturesque carriage house and a large greenhouse where Nixon engaged in his hobby of growing and exhibiting specimen plants, flowers, and vegetables.

By 1895 when Nixon was 53 years old he was probably at the fullest and happiest point of his life. Deeply influenced by the colonial revival and his own family history he was at this time actively engaged in collecting furniture, china, silver and paintings. Much of this collection was gifted to the Museum of Fine Arts at his death. It was probably about this time when he began decorating the "colonial" middle kitchen at Woodlawn and he was certainly in the planning stages of the remodeling of the Ellsworth library.

On July 18, 1895, Manchester-by-the Sea celebrated the 250th anniversary of the landing of John Winthrop and his party aboard the *Arbella*. In what was a colonial revival extravaganza, citizens of the town dressed in costume as John Winthrop and his party, Chief Masconomo and his Indian greeters, continentals, local lady spinners with their wheels,



*Several prominent Manchester residents pose as pilgrims in 1895. Nixon is standing second from right behind young boy. Courtesy of the Manchester Historical Society.*

and soldiers from the Colonial wars. Parades, tea parties, picnics, bell and gun salutes ensued as well as a reenactment of the famous (and historically dubious) landing.<sup>11</sup> In a photograph of the day we find Nixon, grinning, in full Puritan regalia standing as a member of Winthrop's party on the float at the Manchester Yacht Club.

It was also in 1895 that Nixon again expressed his interest in both the visual arts and the colonial revival. Portrait miniatures painted on ivory were coming back into vogue after being out of fashion for half a century. In Boston, the artist Laura Coombs Hills led the revival of miniature painting. Already acclaimed for her watercolor and pastel paintings of flowers, Miss Hills visited England in the early 1890's and saw her first miniatures there. She brought home some of these ivories and began to teach herself the art of painting on them. By 1897 she was elected to the Society of American Artists as its first miniature painter.<sup>12</sup> Her style was fresh and painterly and avidly sought by collectors. She

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# The Ellsworth Antiques Show a





# at Woodlawn, August 2-5, 2006





# Turkish Towels to Tapestries

*by Rosamond Rea*

On June 27, the meeting room at Woodlawn Museum was filled with members and friends of the museum who assembled to hear textile conservator, Camille Myers Breeze, discuss the care, handling, and storage of textiles. The workshop was the culmination of a two-day visit to Woodlawn and the Orland Historical Society by Ms. Breeze, owner of Museum Textile Services in Andover, Massachusetts. This cooperative effort by Orland Historical Society and Woodlawn Museum to share the services of a textile specialist was a great success. During her visit Ms. Breeze spent a full day at Woodlawn conducting a general condition survey of the entire textile collection ranging from our many Turkish towels to the large 17th century tapestry that hangs in the main hallway. Her observations will help guide future preservation and conservation efforts at the museum.

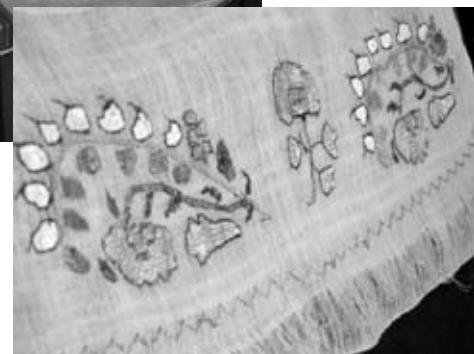
During her presentation, one of the objects from the Woodlawn collection that Ms. Breeze chose to discuss was a loosely woven linen rectangle with embroidered borders at either end that she and the museum staff referred to as a Turkish towel. Unfamiliar with the application of that term to such a textile, several workshop participants asked, “What IS a Turkish towel?”

If you go to a department store and ask for a Turkish towel you will probably be shown a luxurious cotton bath towel with looped pile known as terrycloth. Such modern bath towels are far from the thin, rather loosely woven, linen cloths with embroidered patterns at both ends to which the name Turkish towel originally applied. Often displayed as bureau cloths, or used as antimacassars on the backs of chairs and sofas at Woodlawn Museum, these objects have an exotic history.

Produced throughout the Ottoman Empire (1300 to 1923), these hand-woven natural handspun linens were commonly made in widths of 12 to 17 inches and finished to various lengths. The cloths were embroidered with a wide variety of designs usually in muted colors and highlighted with gold or silver wrapped threads. The larger cloths were used as towels at the baths, or to wipe hands after washing at the table, smaller ones were used as napkins or to wrap the bottom of a bowl or the handle of a pitcher before passing the vessel to a guest. One source quotes a traveler in

Constantinople in the 1840s on the subject of these textiles in the home, “No object great or small, is conveyed from one person to another, no present is made—even fees to a medical man—unless folded in a handkerchief, embroidered cloth or piece of gauze. The richer the envelope, the higher the compliment to the receiver.”

It is possible that there are so many Turkish towels in the Woodlawn collection because of John Black’s brother, Thomas Nixon Black, who was a merchant for many years in Constantinople. The towels would have been easily shipped as gifts to his brother (in the United States) and sisters in England. A reference in the Woodlawn archives written by John Black while on a trip to Boston dated Sunday April 8, 1849 states, “Gave Elizabeth [his daughter Elizabeth Black Dyer] the Turkish handkerchief and one of the Turkish slippers.” This is the earliest mention of the Turkish towels yet found at Woodlawn. These objects, although not used today in the manner originally intended, are a beautiful addition to the rooms at the museum. 🌹





## Reed Gochberg is 2006 Remick Fellow

This summer Woodlawn is pleased to have hosted Ms. Reed Gochberg as the Rev. Dr. Oscar E. Remick Fellow in Museum Studies. As a trustee, Dr. Remick dreamed of filling the museum with interns to take advantage of Woodlawn Museum's scholarly resources, while providing for the further preservation of one of Maine's most important historic estates.

Ms. Gochberg, a rising sophomore at Harvard University, is majoring in History and Literature with a specific focus on America. The Remick Fellowship allowed her to expand both her research experience and her knowledge of Maine history.

Her research focused on the *George & Mary*, a schooner built for George Nixon Black in 1847 and shipwrecked near Fenwick Island, DE in 1862. Ms. Gochberg examined accounts kept by George Nixon Black, Sr. of cargo shipped on and repairs made to the ship, the letter sent from the ship's captain, John A. Lord, telling of the wreck of the *George & Mary*, as well as Ellsworth town records. From these sources, she pieced together a history of the schooner: the type of trade for which it was used, its captains, and the resolution of what happened to its crew following the shipwreck.



Her work over the course of this summer shed light on the business affairs of the Black family and their place in the greater scope of Maine maritime history, as well as solving the mystery of what happened to this schooner, so prominent in the records of George Nixon Black, Sr. The culmination of the Remick Fellowship included a report of her findings and an article for the fall newsletter.

The Oscar E. Remick Fellowship is made possible through generous contributions from museum members and donors. The goal of this program is to mentor a young person and encourage excellence, just as Dr. Remick did for many people. Dr. Remick was a great trustee, visionary leader, volunteer, mentor, and friend to many at Woodlawn. He gave us

much, but above all, he gave us the confidence to make our dreams a reality.

Contributions are needed for next year's Remick Fellow. If you would like to contribute to the Rev. Dr. Oscar E. Remick Fellowship Fund, please mail your donation to Remick Fund c/o Woodlawn Museum, P.O. Box 1478, Ellsworth, ME 04605. ♡

## Woodlawn Museum 2006 Schedule of Events

**September 30 (10 AM-3PM): Autumn Festival**

*Celebrate autumn with fun activities for all ages. Some activities are ticketed, many are free!*

**November 4 (8 AM): Fall Clean Up Day**

*Help prepare Woodlawn for the long winter season and enjoy a free picnic lunch with other volunteers.*

**November 30 (5-8 PM): Holiday Open House** *Details TBA*

**December 10: Holiday Festival with Downtown Business Association** *Details TBA*

**December 2, 3, 9, 10, 16, 17 and 23 (1, 2, and 3 PM): Holiday Tours of Woodlawn**

*View Woodlawn fully decorated for the holiday season by area florists and decorators.*



## Curious George... (continued from page 5)

kept a detailed diary of her sitters and it is no surprise that Nixon was one of her first, as well as one of the few men she painted (see image on page 3). Nixon's mother also sat for her own miniature, but it is Nixon's that is the most striking. Hearty, happy and with vivid blue eyes and a stylish fur coat he smiles out at us from the small oval of ivory as one of the finest male miniature subjects Hills ever painted. This commission tells more than the story of Nixon's love for the colonial revival. It speaks also of his support for all artists, male or female. In fact, of the two portraits Nixon is known to have commissioned of himself, both were made by female artists.

On November 11, 1904 events occurred which led to Nixon's last great gift to the artistic and cultural community in his lifetime. On this day a disastrous fire swept through the Harcourt Building of artists' studios, located just west of Art Square. Several artists barely escaped with their lives and many others, including such notables as William M. Paxton and Joseph DeCamp, had their life's work destroyed. Almost immediately, a group of prominent artists approached a group of prominent businessmen and the Fenway Studios Trust was born. Working quickly, architects engineered a studio building that the artists had designed, and subscriptions were solicited to raise funds for the new structure. In just three months two trustees and fourteen subscribers had raised the money and donated the land. Of course, Nixon signed on as a subscriber at the onset. Amazingly, the new building was finished and occupied within a year of the Harcourt fire. The artist occupants who used the building were among America's most famous, and teachers from the Museum School used the studios for classes. Fenway Studios remain today as they were intended, fully occupied by a new generation of artists plying their trade.<sup>13</sup>

In the end, biography always falls short. The subject, aided by the silt of time still manages to elude our grasp. Nixon remains a delightful enigma. In 1842 when he was born, the northern border of the state of Maine had barely been settled with New Brunswick. It would take a remarkable youth to develop a love of art while growing up in a place where he barely saw it, and a strong swimmer to get from the icy, frontier waters of the Downeast coast to the important artistic and intellectual currents of his time.

So too, his powers of observation and self-interrogation must have been notable. He was after all, a man who declined

a Harvard education and then later endowed libraries. A curious blend of humility and fierceness, he had both the courage to insist upon his unconventional life and the humility to commemorate it in the simplest manner possible on his tiny marble headstone at Mt. Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Yet, it was as a patron that Nixon was his most singular. Possessed of the confidence and discrimination to recognize talent, and yet restrained enough not to meddle with it, he was responsible for breathing life into several enduring pieces of art. His greatest genius may well have been the ability to coax not only good work from his artist friends, but their best work. 🍷

- 1 Death certificate October 29, 1928 Massachusetts State Archives
- 2 Will- George Nixon Black, Jr. Suffolk County Courthouse, Boston, Massachusetts
- 3 Manchester Breeze , July 21, 1906
- 4 When in Boston, A Time Line & Almanac, Jim Vrabel, Bostonian Society 2004
- 5 When in Boston, A Time Line & Almanac, Jim Vrabel, Bostonian Society, 2004
- 6 Quoted from Lewis Mumford
- 7 Woodlawn Museum Archives.
- 8 Facts About Trinity Stained Glass, Trinity Church, 2004.
- 9 Cape Ann Advertiser, January 18, 1884
- 10 Diaries of Robert Swain Peabody, Boston Architectural Center, Boston, Massachusetts
- 11 Official Programme Peabody Essex Phillips Library, Salem, Massachusetts
- 12 Laura Coombs Hills, A Retrospective- Historical Society of Old Newbury, 1996
- 13 Fenway Studios, The Evolution of an Artist's Community in Boston, Nancy Allyn Jarzombek, 1998





# A Glimpse into the Archives: George Nixon Black, Jr.

George Nixon Black, Jr. was a patron to some of the best-known artists of his day. He was also a collector of fine quality antiques and an admirer of purebred horses and dogs. Unfortunately the Woodlawn Museum archives contains very little material that relate directly to Nixon. However, the items pictured here reveal much about what interested this important figure in Woodlawn's history.

*Throughout his life, Nixon owned several dogs of various breeds. Hub King, a prize winning St. Bernard, may have been his most precious. The dog's pedigree from the Hub Kennels in Roxbury, Mass. is in the Woodlawn collection along with a blue ribbon (not pictured) from the Rhode Island Kennel Club show of March 26, 1898 and a silver medal from the New England Kennel Club Annual Bench Show of 1898 where Hub King was awarded Third Novice. In 1898, St. Bernard dogs were an uncommon breed in America. Hub King's grandfather cost \$7,000 in 1891. The receipt for Hub King has not yet been discovered. 🐾*



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Yearly basic membership benefits include: Free admission per member per year, a subscription to the award-winning Woodlawn newsletter, a 10% discount in the Museum Store for purchases over \$10.00, notification of the annual members reception, a Woodlawn Museum window decal, and notification of special events as designated by the Museum. Additional benefits are specified below:

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*Camille Myers Breeze discusses textile care at June 27 workshop. See story on page 8.*



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