VINTAGE

Christine Brooks Cote

THE LARGE BRICK DOUBLE house that sits at 159–161 Park Row in Brunswick was built by brothers Alfred and Samuel Skolfield between 1858 and 1862. Their father, George, had purchased the land in the center of town so that his sons would be among the community's social elite. George, along with other family members, ran a highly successful shipbuilding operation about four miles out of town on Harpswell Sound and was the wealthiest man in Brunswick.

Photos courtesy of Pejepscot History Center

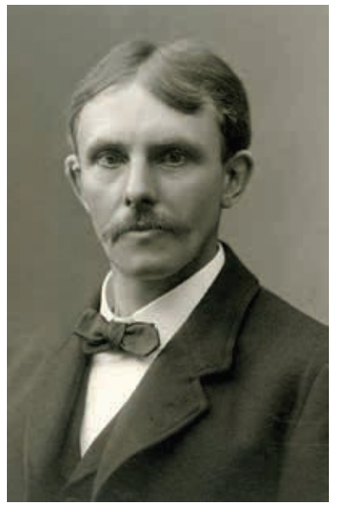
from left: Alice Whittier, Martha Harward Skolfield, Eugenie Skolfield Whittier, Charlotte Whittier (on lap), Isabel Whittier

Eugenie and Augusta Marie Skolfield

Once the house was completed, each brother lived in one side of the semidetached structure. Alfred's side remained in the family until 1994. Samuel lived in his portion until his death in 1916, then leaving it to his children, who eventually sold it in 1939.

In 1858 Alfred married Martha Harward, whose family lived in Bowdoinham, a small town about ten miles from Brunswick built on the shores of a freshwater tidal bay known as Merrymeeting Bay. In 1866, following the Civil War, Alfred moved his wife and daughters, Eugenie and Augusta Marie, to England. The end of slavery in the US brought a major change to the family's shipbuilding business, which prospered largely because their ships transported goods like cotton and tobacco, produced by enslaved labor, to factories in the North; Alfred was a Confederate sympathizer. With the end of slavery the business shifted its focus on the building of sailing vessels, which it continued to do until around 1885. While in England, Alfred worked in the shipping industry as a businessman.

For the next twenty years, Alfred grew his



Frank Whittier

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Alice Whittier

Isabel Whittier

wealth and acquired many valuable objects and artworks that he took with him when, in the late 1880s, the family moved back to the US and to their half of the large brick house on Park Row. Prior to her marriage, Martha had attended Ipswich Female Seminary, well known for its rigorous curriculum designed to prepare women for employment and an active role in their local communities and broader society. Martha was reported to be a strong-willed, principled woman who carefully managed household affairs for the Park Row house and guided the education and refinement of her daughters.

Alfred and Martha's oldest daughter was Eugenie, born in 1860. Though women of her era did not attend college, she was schooled in England and throughout her life maintained an active and curious mind by joining clubs and participating in organizations and community events. In 1895 she married Frank Whittier, a graduate of Bowdoin College and the Bowdoin College Medical School. After completing his education, Frank stayed at his alma mater to become the college's physician as well as a professor of pathology and bacteriology. He also served as Cumberland County health commissioner and Brunswick's milk examiner. Little is known about Alfred and Martha's middle daughter, Augusta Marie; she never married and died at the age of thirty-eight. Their

Photos courtesy of Pejepscot History Center

Dr. Alice Whittier

youngest daughter, Evaline Blanchard, died when she was only two.

Frank and Eugenie also had three daughters. The eldest, Isabel, was born in 1896. She attended local public schools and went to college at Bryn Mawr, followed by graduate work at the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Wisconsin, and Oxford University. She taught history at Hunter College and Brooklyn College, traveled throughout Europe, and authored several books and articles. She was active in politics and was a close friend of Margaret Chase Smith, Maine's first female senator.

Frank and Eugenie's middle daughter, Alice, was born in 1898. She, too, attended local public schools and went to Bryn Mawr for college. She graduated from Yale Medical School in 1925 and eventually settled in Portland,

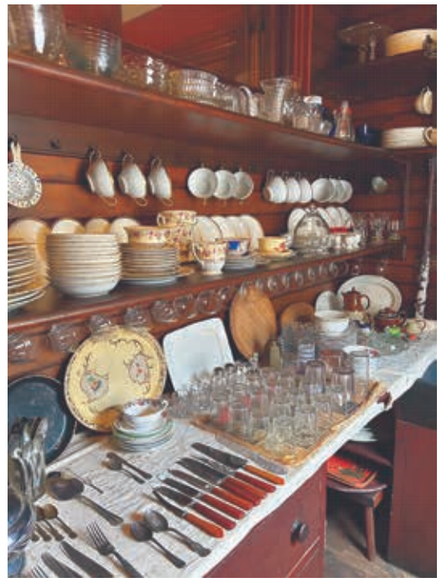
Maine, to practice medicine as Maine's first female pediatrician.

The youngest daughter, Charlotte, was born in 1903 and died tragically in 1912 when her clothes caught fire in the house's kitchen.

Neither Isabel nor Alice married. Their father, Frank, died in 1924, after which the house on Park Row was used only for summer vacations. Their mother, Eugenie, died in 1951. Isabel died in 1976 and Alice in 1994.

The Park Row property, now known as the Skolfield-Whittier House, was donated to the Pejepscot Historical Society by Alice. In the years between Frank's death in 1924 and Alice's death in 1994, very little changed in the house. The structure, systems, and fixtures of the house were untouched, and furnishings, textiles, artworks, and objects remained, for the most part, in their original location. The house is now a museum, part of the Pejepscot History Center, which occupies the side of the house in which Samuel and his family had first lived. Restoration work has been ongoing since 2015 with the purpose of keeping the house a time capsule of Victorian America.

Located in the center of town, only a few miles from where I live, I recently spent a most enjoyable afternoon walking through the Skolfield-Whittier house with a knowledgeable and generous tour guide. I listened to her incredible stories about the house and the generations of people who had lived within its walls. In my mind I pictured residents from long ago sitting in the comfortable drawing room, visiting with guests in the stately dining room, and drinking tea



from one of the dozens of antique cups stored in the house's china closets.

The large house is filled with furnishings and objects from another era. There is an old wood burning cook stove in the small kitchen—not all that uncommon in Maine, but they are now more often used to warm the house than to cook meals. Sitting on top of the stove are several metal pots and kettles that surely date from the turn of the last century. Several closets are nearly overflowing with dishes, silverware, glassware, tea cups, salt and pepper shakers, and other assorted items. Scattered atop a dresser are framed photographs of family and friends. In what may have been a children's playroom are a couple of dolls with painted-on faces. And on another old dresser sits an old bottle of Jergen's lotion, while in a bathroom are bottles of mercurochrome, rubbing alcohol, bismuth formic iodine, and a box labeled Helena Rubinstein's Estrogenic Hormone Twins, a youthifying skin treatment first sold in 1931 that included a day cream (twin 1) and a night cream (twin 2).

The house is an experience of vintage, notably different from antique, old-fashioned, retro, or second-hand. The term vintage of course describes things that take us back in time—a time we actually experienced or one we completely imagine, or most often, a combination of the two—a time we have created from actual stories and images that are enhanced with our imagination. Items we refer to as vintage are cherished today because they were cherished yesterday. They are an example of an era's best quality and workmanship, made to be useful and to last for a long time. But what really sets vintage objects apart is the rush of emotion that comes over us. An experience of vintage often results in a sudden recollection of a person, place, or event that carries weight and meaning enough to make our face flush and our heart melt.

I believe in the power of stories—our own stories. No two people have the same story, and stories are meant to be shared and meant to be heard. It's the reason people write, paint, design, sing, perform. Our story takes a lifetime to reach its conclusion, and we work on it every second of every day.

Remembering is the starting point for telling our story, but we don't always remember things perfectly and completely. Instead, we remember bits and pieces, and like an archaeologist, we have to figure out how those pieces fit together and then make some guesses about the pieces that are missing, until one day, possibly, we find that missing piece. Vintage plays an important role in the writing of our stories. It's one of the reasons we keep things from an earlier time—to help us remember.

The Skolfield-Whittier House is filled with beautiful and interesting objects, rich with stories and memories, and some of them crossed paths with mine. One of the photos I saw on a dresser is of two young girls with big fashionable bows in their hair, identical to the bows in a photo I have of my mother and her sister when they were very young. On the same dresser is a handheld mirror with a wooden handle that made me think of the mirror I still have that my mother used every day of her life.

But aside from individual objects, the house as a whole made an impact on me. It was clear that the house was built and occupied by people who were wealthy, educated, and well positioned in society. It's a very large, beautiful house right at the center of a lovely New England town, which itself is rich with stories and memories. Joshua Chamberlain's house is just across the street—his is much smaller and more simple—and the college he taught at and presided over after the Civil War is just a few hundred yards up the hill. The house where Harriet Beecher Stowe lived while her husband was teaching at the college (Bowdoin College) is a ten-minute walk away, as is the church where Stowe was inspired to write the novel (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*) that changed the country forever.

During those hours I spent at the Skolfield-Whittier House, I was transported to another era, an unfamiliar era because my roots are a study in contrasts. My ancestors came from Prussia in the mid to late 1800s and settled in and around Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Farmers and then factory workers, men worked ten-hour days, six days a week. Women also worked in the factories until they married and became housewives. Their small houses were in crowded neighborhoods and not filled with expensive furnishings and objects. In the early 1900s, Milwaukee was a major industrial and brewing center and one of the largest cities in the country—certainly not a quaint, clean, and quiet small town in New England.

That's my story—at least the beginning of it. Both my story and that of the Skolfield-Whittier family are part of our shared history as Americans, and there are millions of other stories swirling through this country that deserve to be heard and pondered. They all start with the act of remembering, sometimes triggered by objects and experiences that take us back in time. Such is the value of vintage.

Christine Brooks Cote founded Shanti Arts in 2011 to revel in nature, art, and spirit. She has called Maine her home for the last thirty years.