ONE HUNDRED YEARS

OF

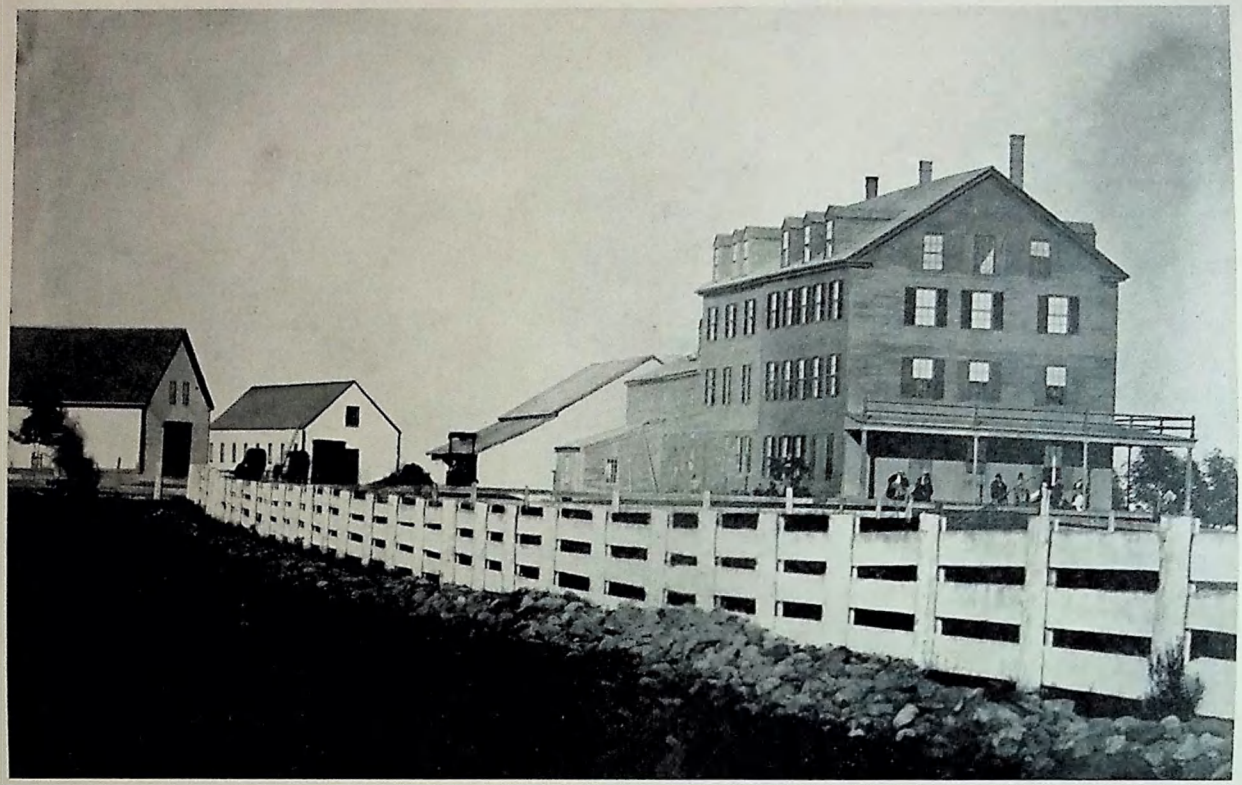
A MAINE HOTEL

1850 - 1950

THE ATLANTIC HOUSE

SCARBOROUGH BEACH

MAINE



From an early photograph taken about 1856

THE ATLANTIC HOUSE

1850 - 1950

"What's past is prologue"—might well be the title of this little sketch in which we will try to give some idea of the beginning and gradual development of the Atlantic House.

It was just a small farmhouse when the doors were first opened to visitors one hundred years ago. Shore-dinners were served, and an occasional over-night guest "accommodated." This was the start of the successful hotel of today.

Before we take up the story of the house itself, it may be of interest to know something of the history of the land on which it stands, and of the men and women who have managed the Atlantic House through the years.

The name of this section of the New England coast was originally Black Point—then in 1658 "Those places known formally as Black Point, Blue Point, and Stratton's Island thereto adjacent, shall henceforth be called Scarborough." It was still Black Point in 1633, when the part in which we are interested belonged to Thomas Cammock, nephew of the Earl of Warwick. A few years later Henry Jocelyn became the owner. He sold it in 1666 to Joshua Scottow of Boston.

At this time the French and Indian wars were raging. Whole communities were wiped out, houses burned, and the inhabitants massacred. The settlers in their little clearings went in constant fear of their lives.

When Falmouth was destroyed and the danger drew near to Scarborough, Joseph Scottow offered to give one hundred acres of his land, on which "a fortification should be erected for the defence of the town." The offer was accepted: "Saturday March 13 (1681) a unanimous vote of the Towne passed to go about the work of fortification on Monday next, to carry it to an end that whole week." The houses were set in a row inside the stockade, eight rods from the outer walls. The stockade was large enough to take in all the inhabitants of Scarborough, and covered the present site of the Atlantic House. It was abandoned in 1690 upon the approach of the enemy, and completely destroyed. Today a marker at the edge of the woods shows where the outer boundaries of the stockade once stood.

Richmond's and Stratton's Island, both important British trading posts, were also abandoned, and later reported by passing vessels as being in flames. When the danger from the Indians abated, the townsfolk straggled back to rebuild their ruined homes.

Upon the death of Scottow in 1698, his son-in-law, Samuel Checkley, fell heir to the Scarborough property, which he later sold for the sum of 100 pounds to Captain Timothy Prout of Boston.

A division of the land was made at the time of Captain Prout's death, descending through succeeding generations to John Prout. It again changed hands in 1850, when John Prout sold it to Enoch Nutter of Dover, New Hampshire. Just when the first house was built after the Indian invasion, no one knows, but the farmhouse standing when Nutter purchased the place was soon known as the Atlantic House.

Nutter saw the possibilities in attracting visitors to this lovely spot with the pine woods and beautiful curving beach, and before long, with the help of his brother-in-law, Elihu Gunnison, a thriving business was under way. It was a highly moral establishment, and according to an advertisement in the *Portland Evening Star* "Positively closed to transients on the Sabbath." News of this resort spread far afield, and thanks to Mrs. Roswell Clark, we have this account of how her family first happened to come to Scarborough.

"In the summer of 1858 my grandfather, James Tillinghast, then living in Toronto, felt a trip to the seaside would benefit his invalid wife and little girl. Not knowing of a good place to board, he asked advice of a conductor on the railroad running between Canada and the Maine coast. This obliging man said he felt sure Scarborough Beach would be just the place. Grandfather wrote to Mr. Gunnison for particulars, and in due time they made the first of many visits to the Atlantic House."

Mrs. Clark is the daughter of the "little girl" who later became Mrs. Stowe. Mrs. Stowe, by the way, came to Scarborough for the next 77 years.

Mr. Gunnison, mentioned by Mrs. Clark, had had much experience as an inn-keeper in Boston, where he first ran the Eagle Hotel, and later owned and operated the Mansion House. He left his son Seward in charge of that hotel until the success of the Atlantic House was assured. From that time on the fortunes of the family were centered in Scarborough.

Mr. Gunnison's talent for catering to guests may have been inherited from his ancestor, the first Hugh Gunnison, who, born in Sweden in 1610, migrated to Boston and opened a "cokes shop" in 1642. Massachusetts records for that date read as follows:

"Hugh Gunnison haveing set up a cokes shop, is allowed to sell beere to his guestes, some at 2d a quart, some at Id, being always to have small beere for such as desire it . . . Ye court voted Hugh Gunnison shall be paid with ye first, either out of customs of wines or ye wampum from Narragansetts."

Whether the patrons neglected to pay their pence, or the Narragansetts failed to come across with sufficient wampum, the record does not state, but for some reason the "cokes shop" was closed and the Gunnison family moved to Kittery.

Skipping a few generations, we come to the Elihu Gunnison, born in 1773, who married Betsey Rounds of Buxton. They had four children—Elihu, Joseph, Eliza, and Tabitha. The latter married Enoch Nutter, purchaser of the Atlantic House. Eliza became Mrs. Royall Williams, and Elihu married Rhoda Foss of Scarborough. Pictures of these people now hang on the walls of the library.

And this brings us to the final chapter in the Gunnison saga; in September, 1860, Enoch Nutter sold the property to his sister-in-law, Rhoda Gunnison, for the sum of $5000. She died three years later leaving her estate "share and share alike"; one-third each to her children Seward and Elizabeth, and one-third to Sarah Ann Gunnison, wife of her son James. For some good reason, both her husband and son James were left out of the will.

Seward and his sister (known to the boarders as Miss Lizzie) took over the Atlantic House, leasing it to their father, who continued its management until his death in 1865. Thereafter, for the next twenty years, it was run jointly by the brother and sister.

In 1885, Seward married Mary Jane Milliken, and that same season The Big Cottage was built as a year-round home. They had two children, Hugh and Rhoda, to carry on the family names. After Seward Gunnison died, and until her own death in 1907, Miss Lizzie took sole charge of the hotel.

The James Gunnisons, meanwhile, had built the Kirkwood, a rival boarding-house on the adjacent acres, which were Mary Ann Gunnison's share in the estate. Since this is not the story of the

Kirkwood, suffice it to say that after many years, under various changes of management, it was closed. The empty house became a fire hazard and was finally pulled down. Nothing now remains to show where it once stood except the bed of wild thyme and the ragosa roses over-running the foundations.

A number of the Kirkwood boarders gravitated to the Atlantic House—among them Sir William and Lady Meredith of Montreal, members of whose family continue to come, down to the fourth generation.

After the death of "Miss Lizzie," Seward Gunnison's widow was left to manage the hotel alone—quite an undertaking, and especially hard after the sudden death of her daughter Rhoda in 1916. When advancing years finally made it advisable for Mrs. Gunnison to think of retiring, she began looking about for a successor. Her choice—and a lucky one for the hotel—was Mr. J. R. Knight, husband of her niece, the former Ruby Milliken. Mr. Knight leased the Atlantic House in 1923 with an option to buy it the following year. Eleven years after they came to the hotel, Ruby Knight died. Some years later Mr. Knight married Miss Frances Nason of Saco.

One more word about the Gunnisons before we take up the story of the house: Hugh Gunnison, the last of that name, now lives on the other side of the woods, just beyond the stone marking the site of the old stockade. Some of the rooms in his house, he leases to the Knights, to take care of the overflow of guests in the busy season.

Now for the Atlantic House. Five years after the opening in 1850, the popularity of the place made it necessary to enlarge the small farmhouse. An agreement was reached with Mr. Cobb of Cape Elizabeth, by which, for the sum of seven hundred dollars he would build an addition with "a Piazza on the Front Side," and "to finish the lower storey into two Sitting-rooms, one Dining room, an Office and an Entry. The second storey into two Sitting-rooms, three Entries, and five Bedrooms. The Attick into nine Bedrooms, one Entry and one Sett of Stairs from lower floors to Atticks. The whole done in a neat and workmanlike manner, and completed on, or before, June next." This was the house as the boarders saw it the following summer, and as it appears in the earliest photographs; the entrance on the ocean side, with the road running around the house, fenced in to keep off the cattle. With the welfare of the live-stock in mind, the boardwalk leading down to the beach was raised near

the dunes to afford an underpass for the cattle moving from one pasture to the next.

It was still a farm, with barns and sheds at the back. Produce for the table was all home-grown—the nearby sea providing the where-with-all for the popular shore dinners. Fried clams were much in demand, and soon the lane through the woods was white with the shells used to surface the road.

Guests continued to come in such numbers that once again it was necessary to build on an addition. This was done in 1877, and constitutes the front of the house still in use. Outwardly it looks the same — except for the porte-cochere — but inside it is completely changed. Originally there was a small entrance lobby, or office, with a steep stair at the back. Partitioned off was a parlor for the ladies who would never have dreamed of invading the office, sacred to the use of the men.

Another spot not patronized by the ladies was the bar-room back of the office (kept under lock and key) where Mr. Gunnison dispensed liquor to those convivial souls wishing for something more potent than the water from the spring.

The spring—long since fallen into disuse—was in the garden. Here thirsty guests lined up to have their two-quart Poland bottles filled with the clear cool drinking water. This was a daily ritual before Sebago Lake Water was piped into the house.

By 1911 the center of the hotel (the old part) began to show such unmistakable signs of age that it was no longer thought safe. Mrs. Gunnison decided to have it torn out and a new section inserted —a trick operation, which may account for the uneven floor levels near the elevator. But it does not solve the mystery of why room 90 on the top floor should have been placed between Nos. 64 and 65. That is one of the questions often asked but which can never be answered.

The elevator, by the way, was a welcome innovation for which we have to thank Mr. Knight. He also installed running water and added private baths. Previously all the water used in the old-fashioned wash-bowls and pitchers had to be carried up the long flights of stairs. Every morning a jug of hot water was placed outside each bedroom door—invariably stone cold by the time the inmate of the room was ready to use it.

The partitions on the first floor of the 1877 addition were removed in 1931, the stairs placed at the side, and the small rooms thrown into one. The dining-room was enlarged, creating the coveted window tables, so greatly in demand.

Other changes were made when the old billiard room in the ell went into the discard to afford space for the growing Knight family. Later the screeened porch, opening off the lobby, was converted into the card room, and Mrs. Gunnison's former sitting-room is now the Beauty Parlor. Mr. Knight also did away with the driveway around the house, at the same time widening the piazza and adding the Sun Deck, known as "The Bulge."

Mr. Norman Bingham, who has been coming to the Atlantic House since he was one year old, furnished us with a description of another old building—The Bowling Alley—the remains of which are now used as a woodshed, near the Wells Cottage. In its bowling days, a barber's chair was installed just inside the doorway, where twice a week an itinerant barber from Portland came to trim the faces of male guests, in full view of the bowlers. When bowling lost favor, the front of the alley was hauled away to form the nucleus for the Carlisle Cottage, so-called because of the Arthur Carlisles of Montreal, who passed many summers there. The first occupants of the cottage were the Strout family of Portland, for whom it was built. The Wells Cottage was put up in 1928 for the benefit of John Wells and his family from Chicago—therefore the name.

Aside from bowling, the men at the Atlantic House enjoyed baseball, playing against neighboring teams, some from as far away as Portland and Saco. Other games enjoyed were tennis and croquet, the ladies elegantly arrayed in long skirts and shirtwaists, and always wearing hats. Some croquet players even carried parasols to protect their city complexions, then thought such a mark of feminine beauty.

Dances were held on Saturday nights in the dining-room, with the music supplied by a Portland band. Chairs and tables were piled in a corner to make room for the dancers, who had to put everything back when the dance was over in readiness for next morning's breakfast.

By some strange freak of nature, the woods in those days seem to have been mosquito-free. Hammocks were hung between the trees and there many lazy mornings were spent with needlework and

reading aloud from the popular books of the day. A wide path through the woods led to the Sunset Seat near the Prout's Neck Road, making a pleasant after-supper stroll. On clear evenings Mt. Washington could be seen silhouetted against the sunset sky.

Of course the beach was always the great attraction, though the sights presented differed considerably from what we see today. The era of the sun-bather had not arrived, and bathers, both young and old, were completely covered. The ladies wore suits of heavy black or navy blue serge trimmed with white braid, and long black stockings were a necessary requirement. The men were bolder in their choice—often wearing suits with horizontal stripes of gay colors coming below their knees. The children were dressed for bathing exactly like their elders.

The summer boarders arriving at the Oak Hill and Scarborough stations were met by horse-drawn vehicles known as "Barges"—some with fancy names painted on the sides. One in particular was called the Mayflower. Traveling was quite an undertaking, especially by those with large families of growing children, and many trunks and boxes were required to hold their voluminous wardrobes. Nothing less than a whole season at the beach made the effort worthwhile.

Among the guests returning each summer were many distinguished people—statesmen, churchmen, lawyers, writers, actors, and musicians. Annie Louise Cary, the Metropolitan Opera singer, was a regular visitor. Her husband, Mr. Munson Raymond, laid out and financed the famous garden that is still talked of, though nothing is left of it but the few scraggy willows that once shaded the paths back of the bath-houses. Luckily pictures give us some idea of its beauty. They are a part of the collection presented to the Atlantic House by Miss Margaret Jewell.

It is thanks to her zeal as a photographer that we are now able to visualize life at Scarborough as it was when Miss Jewell came here as a girl.

In 1944, a room next the lobby was set apart, where a group of volunteers have built up the Atlantic House Library. Here are the latest books, ready for an idle hour. Here also may be found the collection of photographs and other material dealing with the early history of the region. The library, like Mr. Raymond's garden, expresses the desire of other boarders to create something that will give pleasure to their fellow guests.

The story would not be complete without some mention of the three great wars which have been fought since the Atlantic House opened. Wo do not know what effect the Civil War may have had on the inhabitants of the house, but in the two World Wars more than one young man who once played on Scarborough Beach, gave his life. The second World War brought a small military encampment to the beach, with armed guards patrolling day and night. Camouflage units were drilled in the woods, and fox-holes dug. Frequently the hotel was shaken by unexplained explosions — whether from depth bombs or not, no one knew—but the debris on the beach next morning bore silent witness to what may have happened during the night.

All through those war summers, in spite of black-outs, spy scares, and the difficulties of rationing, the hotel never closed its doors. It was truly a refuge in a time of trouble.

And now, as 1950 marks a milestone in its history, we end this chronicle with gratitude for "what's past," and with appreciation for those things which have remained unchanged: the beach, the bracing air, the good company—and above all for that intangible something which is the spirit of the Atlantic House itself.

GRACE O. CLARKE.