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# Katherine Prescott Tinker of Cousins Island

By Sheila Humphreys, PhD

The name of Katherine Prescott Tinker (1901-1980) is familiar to the Yarmouth community because of the land she donated forming the Tinker Preserve on Cousins Island.<sup>1</sup> Less familiar is her career as an astronomer. Astronomy was a popular subject among college women in the late 1900s and early twentieth century. Katherine Tinker followed Maria Mitchell (1818-1889), the best-known American woman astronomer and the first woman faculty member in astronomy in America at Vassar College where she created a strong program. But women astronomers like Katherine Prescott faced barriers after earning their doctoral degrees. Access for women to telescopes was limited. Women were prevented from nighttime observation because there were no sleeping accommodations for them. Thus, the first women astronomers were employed as human “computers,” a job title referring to a person who performed tedious calculations during the day processing data generated by the men’s observations of the night sky. Coeducational colleges and universities did not hire women as professors of astronomy, so they found academic positions at women’s colleges like Smith, Mount Holyoke and Vassar. Katherine Prescott Tinker of Cousins Island was no exception to this pattern.

### Early Life

Katherine Prescott was the daughter of Dr. William Herbert Prescott, a physician practicing in Boston. Her mother, Kate Homans Hunnewell Prescott was a member of the prosperous Hunnewell family in Boston. Dr. William Prescott was a Harvard Medical School graduate and a psychiatrist. At one time Dr. Prescott served as assistant superintendent of the Boston City Hospital and public health official for the city of Boston. Katherine Prescott grew up in the Back Bay neighborhood of Boston where Dr. Prescott maintained his medical offices in his home at 285 Marlborough Street. They pre-



Katherine Prescott, “A Co-ed Comet Calculator”  
Photo: Oakland Tribune, December 1927

viously had lived at 553 Boylston. Katherine Prescott’s grandfather, Francis Hunnewell, lived with the Prescotts. As a high-school student Katherine recalled her intense interest in steam engines but not astronomy in particular.

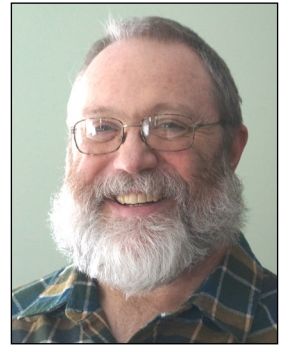
### Education in California at UC Berkeley

Katherine’s decision to travel to California in 1919 to enroll at the University of California, Berkeley, was unusual for a young woman from the East. Katherine was a very successful college student and earned a bachelor’s degree in 1923 in both physics and astronomy. On the basis of her undergraduate research she was elected to Sigma Xi, a scientific research honors society, and gained admission to the doctoral program in astronomy at UC Berkeley

<sup>1</sup><https://www.yarmouthcommunityservices.org/copy-of-fels-grove-farm-preserve>



# From the Chair



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## Question:

What cash award (named for a former Yarmouth resident) provides incentives for Maine high school students to research Cumberland County history?

## Answer:

If you said the YHS Wellcome Prize, give yourself a gold star. Named for Elsie Wellcome (1893-1918), the Wellcome Prize consists of six awards divided into two categories (written and film) each with 3 monetary amounts (\$1000, \$500, and \$250). The prize is open to any Maine high school level student. Topics for the films or papers need to be connected historically to Cumberland County Maine in some way.

Films should be approximately 8-10 minutes in length. Student filmmakers may choose to work in teams (prize money would be split among members). Written papers should be between 1500 and 2500 words and should include citations and a bibliography of sources consulted.

There is still plenty of time to research and create a paper or film this summer. Entries will be accepted through 5:00 P.M. on October 1, 2023. Entrants are welcome to use the facilities of the YHS to assist in their research. Visit [yarmouthmehistory.org/the-wellcome-prize/](http://yarmouthmehistory.org/the-wellcome-prize/) for more information on how to enter.

In addition, the YHS Museum is now open on Saturdays 10 A.M. to 4 P.M. It is a perfect spot to bring out of town guests to show them a taste of Yarmouth history.

**Binks Colby-George**  
Chair, Board of Trustees

## Wellcome Prize

Three prizes awarded for both Film & Research Paper

### PRIZES

1st prize \$1000

2nd prize \$500

3rd prize \$250

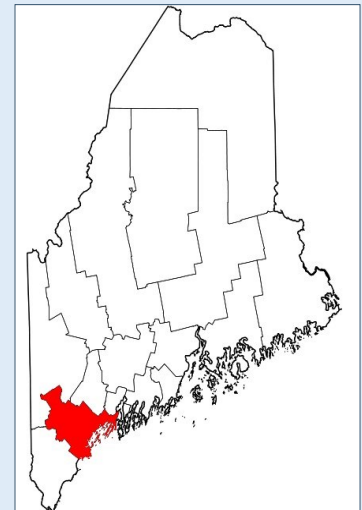
Offered by Yarmouth History Center.

A competition open to all Maine high school students.

Create a video or write a research paper on any historical topic relating to Cumberland County.

Entrants should be in high school during the fall of 2023.

<https://www.yarmouthmehistory.org/the-wellcome-prize/>



## Garden Volunteers Needed at the History Center

Light Weeding & Watering

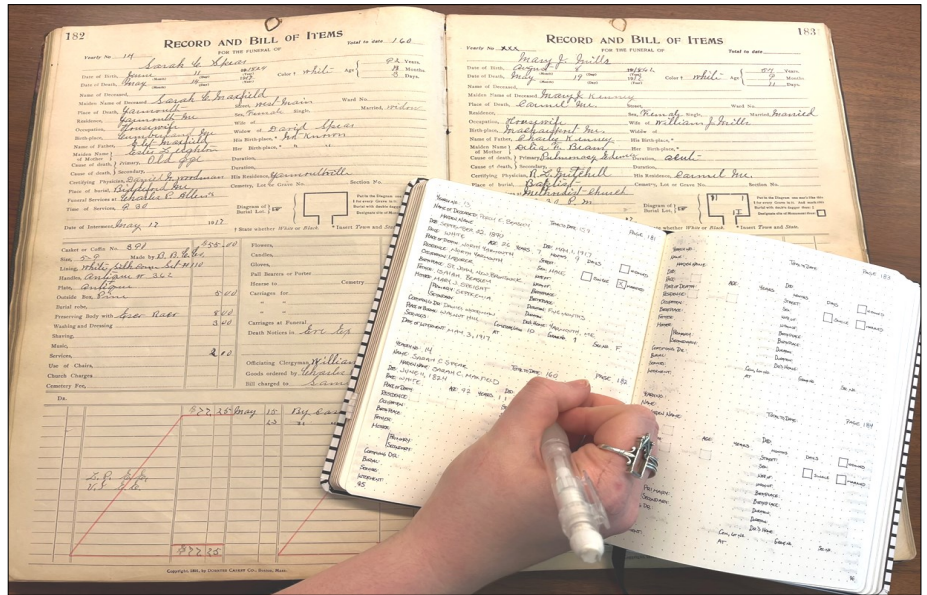
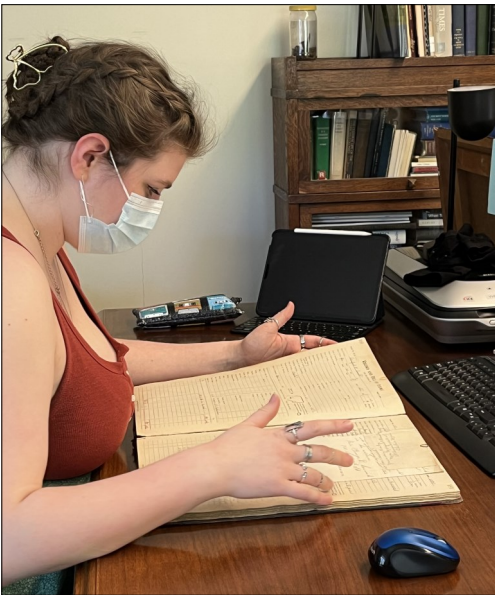
If interested please contact: [info@yarmouthmehistory.org](mailto:info@yarmouthmehistory.org)

# Harry B. Mitchell Funeral Home Records

In March of 2021 Diane MacMillan donated a gift to the Yarmouth Historical Society. The gift was four volumes of funeral records from the Harry B. Mitchell Funeral Home, a business that operated at 125 Main Street (now 124 Main Street) for almost fifty years. The volumes of these records, dating from 1901 to 1946, reveal details about the Yarmouth residents and serve as a valuable resource for future researchers.

The records are not only a source for genealogical research, but they offer a profile of the community during this time. A line or two of data about an individual would be significant to someone researching an ancestor, but when one detail recorded over five decades, like cause of death or occupation, is gathered and compared it can provide information about the state of the community's public health or its economic stability.

Museum assistant Grave Atwood is digitizing the four volumes to make the contents more accessible.



Above left and right: Atwood interprets handwriting to record data digitizing. Mitchell Funeral records, Vol. 1 and Atwood's notes.

## Source Preservation and Data Accessibility Grave Atwood, Museum Assistant

One of the many curatorial tasks performed at the History Center is digitizing records. This allows us to use our primary sources more efficiently in the future when researching and is an important step in making the information in primary sources more easily accessible. Having a digital record can also help to preserve primary documents and records by minimizing the amount of handling of potentially fragile books and other sources.

Currently, I am working on digitizing four editions of the Henry B. Mitchell Funeral Home Funeral Registers. The four editions date from 1909 to 1946 collectively, recording funerals conducted through the funeral home. Records like these can be home to a wealth of information, but can also be unwieldy to search manually, especially considering each volume has 300 pages. Additionally, the oldest register is just over one hundred years old and, despite being in good condition, is still fragile and any handling of the book can risk damaging it.

Creating a document that can be searched digitally also allows us to find individual entries more easily and to look at trends within the entries. The registers, for example, document information about the deceased including but not limited to birth name, birth and death dates, birthplace, cause of death, place of burial, and mother's maiden name, and the occupation of the deceased.

This is an incredible source of information for a researcher who discovers their ancestor's funeral was managed through the Mitchell Funeral Home. When building a family tree, for instance, having the names of both parents of the deceased, including the mother's maiden name, and their birthplaces can provide new clues when one hits a dead end in their research.

Accessibility of information and preservation of primary sources are two of the important jobs that we do at the History Center and digitization projects like this one helps achieve both these goals.

# In and Around the History Center



Above: 1845 Portrait of Oakes Smith by John Wesley Paradise, American engraver and painter. Image from the collection of the National Gallery of Art..

## Lecture Series - June Dates

### June 14, 7:00, *Tales (and a Tail) in the Return of Elizabeth Oakes Smith to Literary History*

Professor Timothy Scherman shares insight from his new book about Elizabeth Oakes Smith, a poet, novelist, feminist lecturer, essayist, playwright, and mother, who was born in North Yarmouth in 1806.

### June 28, 7:00, *Making Maine: Statehood and the War of 1812*

Joshua M. Smith, Director of the American Merchant Marine Museum, speaks about his recent book, which covers important episodes that occurred in North Yarmouth, including a tax revolt in 1814.

The Lecture Series is sponsored by the Leon and Lisa Gorman Fund. All lectures will be offered in person at the Yarmouth History Center.

Right: Image of Maine's original state flag design, 1901-1909.



Village Creatives artists' reception at the Stonewall Gallery.

## Village Creatives in the Stonewall Gallery

On Friday May 12 the Stonewall Gallery hosted a steady stream of visitors for an artist reception for the Village Creatives exhibit *Nature's Palette: From Earth to Sea*. The exhibit includes the work of four talented Yarmouth artists Jen MacDonald, Angela King Nasveschuk, Kristina O'Brien, and Mary Post.

Collectively their work conveys the many delights of observing the world around us, from seeing patterns made by outgoing tides and the colors of a sunset to investigating the structure of marine creatures and abstracted flowers. The show will be on exhibit through June 30.

## Save the Date

### Member and Donor Appreciation Event

Friday, August 18, 5pm to 7pm

### OPEN HOUSE

Old Meeting House, Hillside Street  
Tour the church and learn its history.

Refreshments will be served.

# In and Around the History Center



Executive Director Katie Worthing hosts Yarmouth's Cub Scout Pack #13 on a history tour.

## Cub Scouts Pack Energy

The members of Yarmouth Cub Scout pack 13 brought their welcome curiosity and energy to the History Center in May. These five third-graders and their two leaders joined Executive Director Katie Worthing for a tour of the museum, where the group examined the details of a 19<sup>th</sup>-century dress, looked closely at photographs of Yarmouth's mills, and tried out one-room-schoolhouse desks. Thanks to a thoughtful local donor, these Scouts also got to look through student workbooks from the 1940s to see what schoolwork was like for kids their age.

After the museum visit, the group set out for a walking tour through Royal River Park to check out the mill sites along the river, pausing briefly for an action shot at the pedestrian bridge that marks the spot where trolleys used to cross the river.

We are sure our readers will agree that this photo captures the group's energizing enthusiasm for local history!

*If you're interested in bringing a student group to the History Center, please contact Katie Worthing at [kworthing@yarmouthmehistory.org](mailto:kworthing@yarmouthmehistory.org)!*



Volunteer Richard Stower organizes a recent donation of newspaper clippings for the Center's Local History file. (Note: Paper stacks added for effect)

## Volunteer Spotlight: Richard Stower

It was Richard Stower's love for history that inspired him to offer his time to volunteer at the History Center in October of 2021. Since then, Richard promptly arrives at 10:30am on Wednesdays prepared to tackle any project presented to him. Richard has tamed one of the unruliest stacks of old newspaper clippings by sorting, copying, and filing in the local history file.

Now the information contained within the Yarmouth-centric articles is accessible for future researchers and other curious individuals like himself. Richard finds the work "fascinating" and is thrilled to be learning more about Yarmouth's history. One of the things Richard finds most enjoyable is coming across articles about the people that he has heard about through stories of growing up here in Yarmouth told by his wife Nancy Richards-Stower.

Richard's favorite projects so far: indexing the records of Ancient North Yarmouth's early town meetings, Volumes 1 and 2, and organizing (and reading) newspaper clippings from the 1920s and 1930s. We look forward to celebrating Richard's two-year anniversary volunteering at the History Center. Last year he celebrated by treating the staff to desserts from our business partner Clayton's Café and Bakery!



Above left: Katherine Prescott Tinker (1901-1980) Credit: UC Berkeley Astronomy Department.

Above right: Photo of the Talbot and Tinker property, fall 1951. From the collection of the Yarmouth Historical Society.

As a graduate student, Prescott was named a Research Fellow at Lick Observatory. Lick Observatory, located on Mount Hamilton, is a half day's journey from Berkeley. The Lick Observatory, where she was employed as a Research Fellow in Astronomy, was the center of research for Berkeley astronomers. Prescott's records of activity there stretch from 1924 -1937.

The *Oakland Tribune* published an article in 1927 "A Co-ed Comet Calculator" reporting that Katherine Prescott and a fellow student plotted the path of an oncoming comet in 1927. Prescott wrote her dissertation "On the motions of perijove of the fifth satellite of Jupiter" and earned the doctorate in astronomy in 1933. She was the 12th woman to earn a doctoral degree in astronomy at UC Berkeley.

During graduate study Katherine married Howard B. Kaster, a UC Berkeley alumnus of the class of 1922 who was studying astronomy and meteorology. In graduate school, Kaster wrote at least one research paper with her husband: "The Orbit of Comet a 1925" published by the Astronomical Society of the Pacific.<sup>2</sup> Katherine Prescott Kaster divorced Howard Kaster in 1934 after six years of marriage. In a notice of the divorce the *Oakland Tribune* reported that Howard Kaster began to complain about his wife's cooking.

<sup>2</sup> Howard B. Kaster and Katherine Prescott. "The Orbit of Comet a 1925". Astronomical Society of the Pacific, Vol. 37. No 217, June 1925, 145-147.

<sup>3</sup> Katherine Prescott Kaster. *Cousins and Littlejohn's Islands, 1645-1893*. Portland, Me.: Loring Printing Co, 1942.

## Professional Career

After receiving her PhD, Kaster worked for two years at the Mt. Wilson Observatory in Pasadena as a *computer* before returning to her native New England permanently in 1940. When asked about her job assignments at Mt. Wilson, she said modestly, "Oh, measuring velocities, making spectrograms and things like that." She married her second husband Eugene Tinker, a soldier stationed on Cousins Island, in 1943 in a ceremony on Littlejohn. He was killed in Germany in 1945 during WWII.

Under her new married name, Professor Tinker assumed several teaching positions in astronomy at women's colleges in the 1940s. She taught at Vassar from 1944-48, (where one of her students was Vera Rubin, who later discovered dark matter); at Smith College for two years (1948-49); and at Mount Holyoke for a year. At Smith, she taught astronomy and navigation classes. She constructed a scale model of the Palomar telescope at Mt. Wilson for her students. Her final teaching stint was at the University of Maine in Portland, from 1965-69. Tinker continued to publish in astronomy journals through the 1940s.

In 1942, Katherine Tinker published a 140-page history of the two coastal islands in Maine long associated with the Prescott family: *Cousins and Littlejohn's Islands, 1645-1893*.<sup>3</sup> She created a map of the two islands which

*Continued on next page*

had not existed and traced the genealogy of the early families. The Prescott family spent summers on Littlejohn Island where Katherine had been brought as a four-month-old baby.

In 1946 Tinker bought property on Cousins Island from Raymond Talbot but sold off much of the land over the years, retaining fifteen acres. She moved permanently to Cousins as one of just a dozen year-round inhabitants in 1951. Living independently, she farmed with a horse-drawn plow and chopped her own wood for fuel with a chainsaw. Before the Snodgrass Memorial Bridge was built in 1955, she stocked food for the whole winter since the ferry stopped running on October 1, and rowed over to Yarmouth to fetch her mail weekly. In the summer, Tinker sold vegetables and flowers to summer residents on the island.

## Engagement in Island Life

As a Cousins inhabitant, Tinker was deeply engaged in island governance. Tinker was a member of the Planning Board, the School Board, Women's Coordination for Yarmouth, and Civil Defense. She also served as treasurer of the Cousins-Littlejohn Island Improvement Corporation. Concerned about overall planning for the growth of Yarmouth, Tinker claimed "Zoning is good. It is something we need. Let us get at it as soon as possible." During the Cold War, she coordinated exercise drills for the island families, simulating evacuation in case of a Russian atomic bomb. Addressing the women of the islands in the Yarmouth *Shopping Notes*, she urged preparedness by participating in a census of all families, so that all residents could be accounted for in a disaster. She re-

acted against apathy and told the community to be ready. "Your help is needed in Civil Defense... So join up and stop helping the Commies," she wrote.<sup>4</sup>

Tinker lived in the remodeled barn on her property in her later years after the main house deteriorated. Apparently, her writings and records filled both structures but very unfortunately were largely lost upon her death. The isolation of island life suited Katherine Tinker. "I've always figured the island is more my home than any place I've lived," she told a reporter in 1956.<sup>5</sup> In 1970 Katherine Tinker created a lasting legacy for the Yarmouth community by donating her fifteen acres of land on Cousins Island through The Nature Conservancy with the direction that it be maintained in its natural state as a sanctuary to protect plant and animal species.

## Acknowledgments

An earlier version of this essay was written for the University of California *150W History Project* ([150w.berkeley.edu](http://150w.berkeley.edu)), a history of women faculty and alumnae of UC Berkeley since 1870. I am indebted to Nanci Young, College Archivist, Smith College, and to Katie Worthing, Executive Director, Yarmouth History Center, for sharing documents from their archives. All errors are my own; edits or additions are welcome.

Shelia Humphreys, [shumphreys@berkeley.edu](mailto:shumphreys@berkeley.edu)

*Sheila Humphreys is a summer resident of Woolwich, Maine, and was a Smith College 1963 classmate and friend of Yarmouth native Margaret Soule (1941-2010), former board member and Chair of the Yarmouth Historical Society, for whom the Margaret Wallace Soule Archives Room at the Yarmouth History Center is named.*

<sup>4</sup> *Shopping Notes*, March 3, 1960, available through [yarmouth.advantage-preservation.com](http://yarmouth.advantage-preservation.com)

<sup>5</sup> "Ex-Lady Astronomer Lives Off Land." *Portland Press Herald*. Sunday November 11, 1956, p.1.

## Katherine Tinker Preserve

*"I gave the remaining 20 acres – more or less – to the Town of Yarmouth to be used by the school for environmental and/or ecological studies and forbade its use for other purposes."*

Katherine P. Tinker 1970

The Preserve has the following conservation protections:

*"—the property may be left as a relatively natural area to be used by individuals and groups, such as schools and youth and adult organizations...for:*

*Scientific research in ecology and related fields.*

*Conservation and environmental management activities and experiments, including outdoor classes, field trips, and investigations.*

*A sanctuary to protect and preserve plant and animal species."*

Right: Map of the Preserve on Cousins Island.

Inset: Map of Cousins Island circa 1900 property divisions. The Talbot farm, once traversed the island coast to coast.

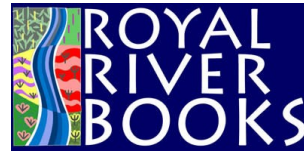




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