



History

Overlooking the picturesque, blue waters of Northeast Harbor, the Asticou Inn has been a tradition along the coast of Maine since 1883. Today, the young and not-so-young, singles, couples and families enjoy its unique coastal location and the luxurious amenities of the Inn itself. But a quick look through old Guest Registers reveals a glamorous past ... the names of some of America's most prominent social and political leaders, and families who came for "the season," often with their maids and chauffeurs - and even their own furniture.

One of the few survivors of the Great Fire of 1947, the Asticou Inn has been lovingly restored to its turn-of-the-century elegance. The following words reveal more than just the story of this historic Inn. It is the story of a fascinating era in America's history.

"...Je l'ay nomée l'isle des Monts-deserts."

When Samuel de Champlain explored the coast of Maine in 1604, he came upon an island of uncommon beauty, with miles of picturesque shoreline and a range of seven or eight mountains that were curiously bare at their summits. "I have named it the Island of the Desert (bare, desolate) Mountains," he wrote in his journal on September 5, 1604.

Claimed by both England and France, the island had a tumultuous history until the French defeat at Quebec in 1756. But English rule was short-lived. Soon came the American Revolution, and the British were gone. Slowly, migration eastward from Massachusetts brought American settlers to what became known as Mount Desert Island.

Today, the influence of the French can be seen in many of the place names on the Island, notably - Acadia National Park, Cadillac Mountain, Sieur de Monts Springs, and Frenchman's Bay.

The Rusticators

Mount Desert Island, with its fresh sea air, quickly became a popular escape from the stifling summer heat of the large East Coast cities such as Boston, New York and Philadelphia.

Dubbed "rusticators," the summer visitors willingly traded their luxurious city homes for the more rugged, "rustic" life on the island. A small tourist industry began to spring up, with Island residents taking in boarders for several weeks, even the whole summer season. Inevitably, hotels were built - each one larger and more luxurious than the previous ones - and soon, Bar Harbor became the summer playground of America's rich and famous.

On the south side of the island, the Savage family had settled in the Asticou section of Northeast Harbor in 1790, and became farmers, foresters and fishermen. Grandson of John, the first Savage settler, Augustus Chase Savage married Emily Manchester and built their home, Harbor Cottage, in 1854, on a hill overlooking the Harbor. Today, it is known as Cranberry Lodge, and is the oldest in the group of buildings called the Asticou Cottages, including Bird Bank, Blue Spruce and the Topsiders.

Soon, Augustus and Emily began taking in summer boarders, the first being Samuel A. Eliot of Cambridge, Massachusetts. And a long and very successful innkeeping tradition was launched!

The Remarkable Savages

A schooner captain and entrepreneur, "A.C." Savage correctly sensed that spillover from the Bar Harbor area would soon greatly benefit Northeast Harbor. In 1883, across the road from Harbor Cottage, he built the Asticou Inn, named for the section of town in which it was located. (The name "Asticou" comes from a Penobscot Indian chief who was summering at Northeast Harbor around the time Champlain began his explorations. It is believed to mean "boiling kettle.")

A fire destroyed the original Inn in 1899, and A.C. and his son George began plans for an immediate replacement, following designs drawn up by A.C.'s architect son, Fred L. Savage. By 1901, the Asticou Inn was back in business, and grander than ever!

Truly a family enterprise, the Inn saw Savage family wives, sons and daughters take active part in the day-to-day management of the business. The women established the Inn's reputation for hearty, homey New England food, and the children contributed the results of their summer berry-picking to a variety of delicious desserts and pies.

In 1922, George Savage passed away, and his 17-year old son Charles was brought back from his boarding school in Boston to help his mother Mabel continue the Inn's now-strong tradition of service and excellence. As an added touch, Mabel took especial pride in creating beautiful arrangements for the Inn's dining tables and public rooms, imaginatively using fresh flowers from the Inn's own gardens.

When Charles married, his wife Katharine Larchar Savage, truly became his partner - in life and at the Inn. She personally oversaw the Asticou kitchen, and became legendary for her pastries, breads, ice creams and desserts. Meanwhile, Charles greeted incoming guests and handled all the front desk operations. Charles was also responsible for the development of the beautiful Asticou Azalea Garden across the road from the In. That fascinating story is chronicled later in this booklet.

The Asticou Inn was by now well established as the acknowledged center of social activity on the south side of Mount Desert Island, and would remain so for many years to come.

"The Season" at Asticou

A perusal of the Asticou's old hotel registers reveals a number of fascinating facts about the guests of the early half of this century.

To begin with, they tended to come from the larger cities, lured, perhaps, by the almost rural setting of the Inn, nestled at the head of Great Harbor and at the very edge of Acadia National Park.

And, where the earliest visitors came mainly from along the East Coast, adventurous Mid-Westerners were now making the long trip, seeking the sand and sea air that were surely a novelty for them.

As the trains pulled into the Bar Harbor train station, whole families disembarked, making the 10-mile journey to the Asticou first by buckboard, and later by the newfangled motorcar. Many were accompanied by their retinue - maids and chauffeurs - who occupied the small rooms on the top floor of the Inn. Right up to the 1950s, there was even a separate dining room for the "servants," and a separate wait staff!

Entries in the hotel registers reveal that guests also sailed to the Asticou in their luxurious yachts. Addresses were given as the "Schooner" this or that. As was the custom at the time among wealthy vacationers, spending "the season" at the Inn was not uncommon. Those who made the long trip to Mount Desert Island considered the Asticou so literally their "home away from home" that they often brought their own furniture - a favorite chair, lamp or dresser! Moving in - and out - must have been a unique experience!

Guests in these early days didn't have the option to "lie a-bed" in the morning. Instead, they were roused by a bellboy, ringing the Rising Bell at 7:30 AM, and the Breakfast Bell at 8:00 AM. Today, breakfast is served to a much more leisurely 10 AM!

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the Asticou Inn was the scene of genteel elegance. Ladies often wore their hats even for tea and a chat on the deck, and, of course, everyone "dressed" for dinner. Afternoons were spent sailing on the Harbor, lazing away with a book on the veranda, or sunning in the Adirondack chairs that dotted the lawn. Life was good at the Asticou Inn.

But, as with all good things, change was to come to the Inn, as it indeed did to the entire country - and the world. War was lurking on the horizon, and even this peaceful corner of New England would shiver in its cold wind.

World War II, The Great Fire, and the "New Order"

Charles Savage was an extraordinary man, with a heightened sense of social responsibility. As WWII raged across Europe and the Pacific, and Americans at every social and economic level were asked to make sacrifices and life-style changes, Charles believed that the Asticou -guests and staff alike - needed to do its part. His treatise "Asticou and the War" declared

"The changed circumstances we all face and our responsibilities to our country require us to re-examine our places in life, our ways we should change, and the things we should continue to do... We must retain our spirit for doing constructive things and for being generous and charitable in our regard for the rest of the world, despite the shameful actions of some nations."

World War II saw the disappearance of many of America's social traditions. But the summer life on Mount Desert Island was only barely changed. Perhaps not quite as many visitors came for "the season," and perhaps the mix of travelers was a tad more proletarian. But, for the most part, life resumed its leisurely pace and affluent aura.

This abruptly changed in 1947. In addition to other world-shaking events such as Chuck Yeager being the first human to travel faster than sound, and the insidious House Un-American Activities Committee convening in Washington, a disastrous October fire would shake Mount Desert Island, the State of Maine and, indeed, the country. Believed started accidentally by a homeless man, the fire swept rapidly out of control and consumed more than 17,000 acres on the Eastern side of the Island. Totally destroyed were sixty of the grand "cottages" of the wealthy Bar Harbor summer community, along with the hotels, restaurants and elegant shops that added to the visitors' pleasure and the Island's economy.

The Island and the entire country were so devastated that on October 25th, President Truman officially proclaimed the area a disaster area. Out of all the destruction, though, one Island institution was completely spared. The Asticou Inn had been untouched in any way by the tragedy all around it. And it actually benefited, as summer visitors migrated in its direction, displaced from their Bar Harbor venue.

The huge mansions were never re-built, and the face of Mount Desert Island was dramatically, and permanently, changed. But on the "quiet" side of Mount Desert Island, away from the bustle of busy Bar Harbor, life in the small communities of Northeast Harbor and Seal Harbor remained quiet, affluent and set apart from the rest of the Island.

In the mid-1960s, ownership of the Asticou Inn passed from the Savage Family, and a new era began. The Inn became owned by the Asti-Kim Corporation, a consortium of summer residents and local business people, dedicated to the continuance of the Asticou as a premier Maine coast destination for discerning travelers from around this country, and overseas. The Corporation made several modernizations to the Inn to accommodate new traveler desires. These included addition of a cocktail lounge off the Lobby (unheard of for an inn at that time!), and a propane-heated outdoor pool, also unusual. Clay tennis courts were added, to appeal to the sports-minded guest.

And history continues to be made at the Asticou. Guy Toole, who passed away in 1998, was an Asticou employee for 44 consecutive seasons. He was hired by Katharine Savage as a teenaged potwasher, and eventually became the Inn's beloved Concierge. Generations of staff and guests remember Guy fondly as a true friend to all. A memorial to Guy perpetuates his legacy. If you are interested, please contact the General Manager.

Whatever your reasons for visiting the Asticou - vacation, wedding, family reunion, business gathering - be assured that this grand lady of the Maine coast will provide you with a memorable experience! This is truly a remarkable hostelry, symbolic of a remarkable time in America's history, and poised to greet new generations of appreciative guests in the new millennium!

Charles Savage: 1903-1979, Innkeeper & Renaissance Man

Charles, the third - and last - of his family to operate the Asticou, was a man of many interests and many talents. He was an enthusiastic innkeeper, always on hand to welcome guests, and making sure the Inn's services were always of the highest standard. But his permanent influence on Mount Desert Island - for residents and visitors alike - is evident in two very different, highly artistic, endeavors.

Charles was a skilled and imaginative woodcarver, and his signs can be seen throughout the Island, at inns, private homes, and the Northeast Harbor Library, where his "Five Canterbury Pilgrims" from Chaucer's Canterbury Tales tops a fireplace mantel in the main part of the Library.

Probably his most lasting legacy, however, was as the chief designer of the magnificent Asticou Azalea Garden, across the road from the Inn. In 1956, noted landscape designer Beatrix Farrand decided to break up the extensive gardens she had planted at her estate at Bar Harbor. Charles Savage undertook to rescue as much as possible of her Reef Point collection, particularly her dazzling azaleas. He was given just one short year to find a suitable location, design the garden, relocate all the trees, shrubs and plants, and - find sufficient financing for this ambitious project!

An alder swamp across from the Inn was chosen for the site, as he felt it would provide much pleasure for the Asticou's guests. The Garden was completed in the required year's time - an incredible task, but typical of Charles Savage's dedication and perseverance. Today, this Japanese-style garden, one of the "hidden gardens" of Maine, provides peaceful, contemplative pleasure, not only to guests of the Asticou, but to the many travelers who visit it annually.

Our thanks to the entire Savage Family for their long legacy at the Asticou Inn, and to the present owners, the Asti-Kim Corporation, for the foresight in restoring it to its turn-of-the-century glory, for future generations to enjoy!

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Acknowledgments

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Asticou Inn - a Bar Harbor Area Hotel & Resort

(800) 258-3373 • (207) 276-3344 • asticou@asticou.com

15 Peabody Drive, Northeast Harbor, Maine 04662