

# Maine Home

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## Shingled Modern

Classic meets modern on the banks of the Benjamin River

**Bo Bartlett  
& Betsy Eby**

An artist couple's life  
on Wheaton Island



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# Rockport Victorian

A beloved mansion is lovingly restored



This nineteenth-century Queen Anne Victorian was in disrepair when a new owner undertook a major renovation in the 1990s.

## HISTORY

by Debra Spark

Photography Brian Vanden Brink

If you are, in large part, responsible for your village's economy, you might well expect to have the grandest house around. Limestone baron H. L. Shepherd did. A nineteenth-century businessman, legislator, and entrepreneur, he engaged in the trade and extraction of the very commodity that gives the coastal community of Rockport its name. In the 1860s or 1870s—information on the exact date conflicts—he built himself a three-story Queen Anne-style Victorian with a two-story carriage house. Touting the virtues of Rockport, an 1893 publication declared, "Here is located Mr. Shepherd's elegant home, which in architecture, beauty of construction, and elaborate interior decorations and furnishings, is not excelled in town; while the extensive grounds, as laid out by the landscape gardener, with terraces, shell walks, and drives, neatly trimmed hedges, and close-cut lawns, add very much to the beauty of the surroundings." But Shepherd's fortunes were complex, and he died childless. Did he fret about his legacy? If he could have looked out from the wood-paneled walls of his handsome library and into the future, he would have seen no captain of industry alighting from his carriage, but instead Mary Alice Foster, a stylish and petite Texan woman, stepping out of a Lexus.

Foster died in February of 2008 after a four-year struggle with endometrial cancer, but for most of the final decade of her life the Rockport home was her project. The former wife of an oil executive, Foster relocated to Maine in the early 1990s in part to recover from a painful divorce. For many years, she wintered at a different address in Rockport and summered on Lake Megunticook, but then the Shepherd house came on the market.

"Don't be overwhelmed. We've got nothing but time," Foster said to Ray Pendleton, the painter who came to be the home's long-term caretaker, when the two first walked through the house. By then the home had fallen into considerable disrepair, but Foster's talent—according to Mark DeMichele, vice president and chief operating officer of Camden's Maine



Coast Construction—was her “vision,” her ability to see “the finished product long before anyone else could.”

In the end, it took seven years to restore the home. Some of the improvements were structural. Among other things, Maine Coast Construction put a new foundation under the barn, and they raised and leveled the house, which had settled so much that the second-story doors could not be closed. They also put in new electrical and hot-water heating systems, gutted and remodeled the bathrooms, added a new porch and turret, and repaired the home’s slate roof and the cupola atop the barn. With other contractors, Foster added cherry cabinetry and a black soapstone sink to the kitchen, and she had a compressor put into the wooden walk-in refrigerator, which was once cooled by blocks of ice.

As much as Foster loved the style and accoutrements of the Victorian era, her tastes were not of a piece. When she had DeMichele renovate a connector leading from the back of the kitchen to the barn, she added what she called “the Adirondack rooms.” The new space was intended to be an apartment for Foster’s sister but more closely resembles the interior of a hunting cabin, with its moose head, exposed log beams, stone fireplace, and surprising birch-bark vanity with antlers, varnished mushrooms, and acorns as pulls.

Elsewhere, the restoration projects were largely cosmetic but still substantial. Everything in the house needed to be cleaned, including the five fireplaces with their elaborate carved wood and ornamental tiles. Wallpaper was removed, walls were plastered and painted, and the woodwork was stripped and refinished. There were surprises along the way. Among them, the frieze of griffins behind the dining room’s wallpaper, which Foster had a painter restore.

Foster didn’t just oversee all this work; she was thoroughly committed to joining in. Foster’s best friend, Marty Martens, remembers stopping by to visit and finding Foster up on a ladder with Q-tips and oil, cleaning the intricate leaf work on the capital of a fluted column in the library. Other times, Martens would arrive to find her friend scraping down a radiator with a wire brush or discover her hidden in a closet attending to some small detail. Ray Pendleton—who devoted so much time to painting the home’s exterior, reglazing the windows,



Mary Alice Foster took intricate care of the cherry wood in her home's library (opposite). Once, a friend found her using a Q-tip to clean the molding on the top of these fluted pillars.

Marty Martens, one of Mary Alice Foster's close friends, says that after doing the structural renovations of her home, Foster was happy to "get into the pretty stuff," including attending to the furnishings of this attic room (left).

This ornate fireplace (left, bottom) is in what once served as the home's piano room.

Mary Alice Foster stripped this staircase (below) herself. She was always well turned out, friends and family say, but one friend says, "If you looked at her hands, she didn't come from a beauty parlor." Her sister adds, "She was always down in the basement, getting her hands dirty and refinishing antiques."



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and tackling other details—built Foster a work table in the basement, where she would, in her sister Nancy Kate Hamilton’s words, “redo stuff she bought in a junk store and make it look like a masterpiece.” Like many others, Brian Leonard of Village Cabinet and Remodeling Co. in Camden remembers Foster’s willingness to go to great lengths and expense to perfect her home. During the days when Leonard was renovating the kitchen, Foster bought a door from the Texas governor’s mansion at auction. She intended to have it shipped from Texas for use as a back entrance. The door arrived damaged beyond repair, but Foster didn’t give up. She had it replicated locally.

During the restoration, Foster found a pair of lady’s boots hidden in the wall behind the kitchen’s back staircase. Foster’s daughter, Jennifer Kate, says, “There was some sort of superstition that you put the shoes up there to clear away bad spirits.” Foster’s sister, Nancy Kate, recalls the story, but remembers it a bit differently: “There was a legend about putting a witch’s shoe behind the wall to keep curses away.” If that was the way it was done back in the day, then Foster wanted it done correctly. She left the boots in the wall.

In addition to the extensive renovation, Foster lovingly furnished the place. After her death, Thomaston Place Auction Galleries sold those higher-end items that the family didn’t want to keep. A survey of the auction catalog gives a sense of Foster’s tastes. Among the many nineteenth-century items are a portrait of a Victorian boy and girl, an inlaid Italian chest of drawers, a Queen Anne-style Welsh dresser, a

sewing box inlaid with bone and ivory, and an elaborate French gilt figural mantel clock. Foster was a collector of cut glass, perfume bottles, spittoons, milk cans, and beaded purses, among other things. Ken Foster, one of her three children and the owner and principal designer of B4&After Renovation Design in Camden, remembers, “She liked anything particularly unusual, especially if it was old.” Along with the antique jewelry and



**During the renovation, Maine Coast Construction built a slate-roofed, gazebo-like porch on the left side of the house (top). Mary Alice Foster was committed to historically accurate renovation, so the new porch replicated an existing porch. Her daughter remembers that her mother once found a photo of her own living room in an antique store. It was a photo of the living room as the original owners must have furnished it in the late 1800s. Just the thing for a woman determined, in her daughter’s words, “to restore her house as much as possible to the original state.”**

**Maine Coast Construction undertook a major repair of the cupola of this carriage house/ barn (left). Originally, the building stored grain, which generated heat. Mark DeMichele, vice president and chief operating officer of Maine Coast Construction, says the cupola once served to ventilate the barn. Over the years, the trim had deteriorated, so Maine Coast Construction dismantled the trim and replaced it with nonwood components to prevent it from rotting again.**



Mary Alice Foster worked on this kitchen with Brian Leonard of Village Cabinetry & Remodeling Company in Camden. Says Leonard, "We started with an empty shell. She and I designed it, and I built it." But, he admits, every time he stepped backward in the kitchen, there she would be, eager to work. The finished kitchen features a library rolling ladder, high cherry cabinets, a black granite peninsula, a soapstone sink, and an Aga gas range, which took two days to assemble.



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flatware featured in the auction, Foster had owned a gold-painted wooden boot, once used as a trade sign, and a set of English mahogany bed steps with a pull-out potty seat. Looking through the catalog one fall day, Marty Martens stopped at the picture of a mahogany cellaret. She remembered when Foster bought the item during an antiquing trip the two women took to England: “It’s the only thing I ever saw her hesitate to buy.” More often, Martens remembers Foster’s quick eye. Once, when the two women were at a yard sale, Foster found an Oleg Cassini mink coat—worth close to \$20,000, according to Martens—priced at \$25. “Please,” said Martens, knowing what a tenacious negotiator her friend could be, “don’t ask for a better price.”

Foster’s interest in antiques extended well beyond her own possessions. For two years, she owned a Camden antique shop, and for many more she was a dealer at Antique Treasures, Martens’s West Rockport store. One of the many organizations with which Foster was involved was the General Henry Knox Museum in Thomaston. In 2009, a donation from Foster helped the museum procure documentation of General Knox’s original appointment to George Washington’s cabinet.

Gardening was another of Foster’s great pleasures. Her home had an extensive garden with a trellised arbor, a bridge, and sculptures. “It was a common sight to see her out there eight hours a day,” says her son Ken. He’s referring to the garden, but a visitor was just as likely to find Foster digging dandelions out of the lawn or undertaking some such task.

It’s hard to find a person who knew Foster who doesn’t comment on how handsomely turned out she always was. She was one of “the great southwestern belles,” says Kaja Veilleux of Thomaston Place Auction Galleries. “She was always wonderfully dressed, a really lovely person,” says Cheryl Oliveri-Daly, a broker for Camden Real Estate. “I always admired her. She was such a lady and so sweet and so beautifully put together. But then she was down in the basement getting her hands dirty and refinishing antiques. She had kind of an aura. Everybody felt that way about her.”

**MH+D**

*For more information, see Resources on page 106.*

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