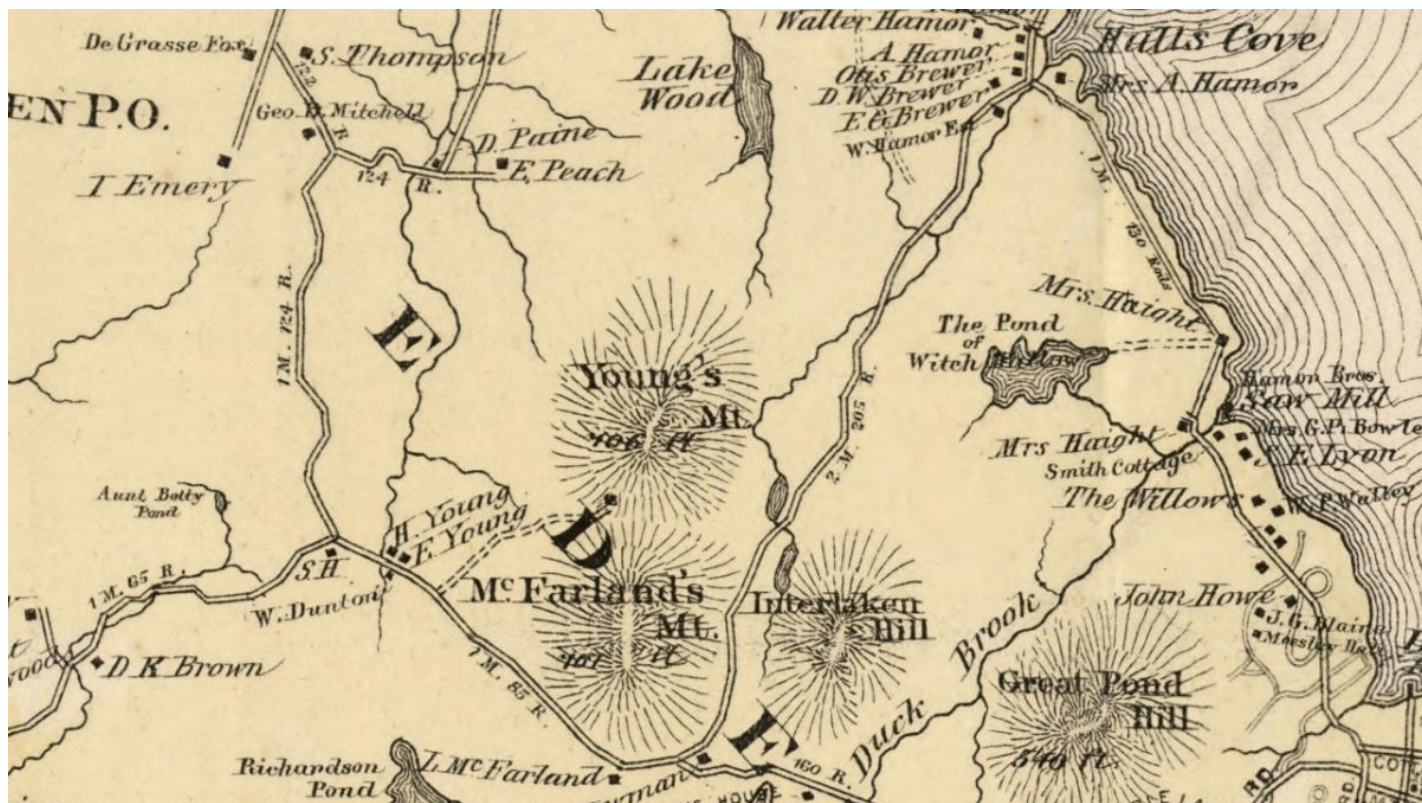




This 1887 map by F.D. Foster shows the Pond of Witch Hollow, site of the first known pest house in Bar Harbor. According to local historian Bill Horner, the pest house was later moved to Eagle Lake Road. So-called pest houses were small town-run hospitals built in secluded areas to care for people with infectious diseases. FROM THE ISLANDER ARCHIVES

(Printed from [url=https://www.mdislander.com/maine-news/hidden-history-the-pest-houses-of-mount-desert-island](https://www.mdislander.com/maine-news/hidden-history-the-pest-houses-of-mount-desert-island))

Hidden history: the ‘pest houses’ of Mount Desert Island

July 19, 2020 by [Becky Pritchard](#) on [News](#)



MOUNT DESERT — In 1966, town voters approved the burning of an old vacant building near the town garage on Sargeant Drive known as “the pest house.” The action was applauded later that year in a Dec. 15 article in the Bar Harbor Times, praising the town’s efforts “to eliminate eyesores from the landscape.”

The burning of the old pest house marked the end of the history of “pest houses,” or small town-run hospitals equipped to isolate people with illnesses deemed a public health risk. Every city, and nearly every town, had one to contain the spread of infectious diseases such as smallpox, diphtheria, scarlet fever and typhoid.

Per regulation, they were built apart from the rest of the town: not “within one hundred rods of any inhabited dwelling-house,” according to the 1847 law book *The Maine Townsman*. Portsmouth, N.H., in the 1790s, even had a Pest Island, as reported in an August 2017 [story by New Hampshire Public Radio](#).

Pest houses were so common in the 19th century that they made it into art and literature. Artist Charles Quincy Goodhue from Portland, Maine, drew *Munjoy Hill* in the 1840s, depicting a brick pest house, isolated from other homes and surrounded by cow pastures. Nearby were the graves of smallpox victims.

In the epic 1847 poem, “Evangeline,” by New England poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Evangeline meets her long-lost lover, Gabriel, in a pest house in Philadelphia, where he dies in her arms.

In Bar Harbor, there were at least two pest houses over the years, according to local historian and retired doctor, Bill Horner. The first recorded location was on the shore of the Pond of Witch Hollow, currently known as Witch Hole Pond in Acadia National Park.

It was at the “pest house at the ‘Witch Hole’” that a young boy of 10 was sent in 1895 when he came down with typhoid fever, according to a Dec. 18 Bar Harbor Times article. The town selectmen and representatives of the board of health made the decision to send him there after his mother and two siblings had died of the illness.

According to Horner, the town voted in 1904 to move the pest house, selling the Witch Hollow lot to Frank Brewer for \$1,000. In exchange, Brewer provided the town with a half-acre lot on the Eagle Lake Road to construct a new pest house. The new building was two stories with two large wards, a kitchen and servants’ quarters, according to an April 13, 1904, article in The Ellsworth American.

By the 1920s, new treatments were available for infectious diseases. By then the hospital in Bar Harbor had expanded to handle patients who needed to be isolated. In 1925, prominent summer resident and medical doctor, Dr. Robert Abbe, addressed the Physicians of Maine and spoke in favor of “discarding the ‘pest house’ here and in general in smaller towns.” As reported in the Bar Harbor Times, Abbe told the Maine physicians, “the epidemic has practically disappeared, the epidemic of those diseases of 40 years ago, smallpox, diphtheria and typhoid.”

The Bar Harbor Sanitary Committee concurred with this assessment, reporting in September of 1926 that the pest house was no longer in use due to two years of record-setting good health in the town. “There have been no cases in the pest house and only two cases in the isolation hospital,” the committee reported. “The record shows only one case of scarlet fever and only one of diphtheria.”

The town voted the following year to “dispose of the Pest House and lot at Eagle Lake” because they were no longer needed. Selectmen asked for bids, but they were not able to dispose of the land. According to a notice in the paper on April 6, 1927, selectmen were looking to sell the land “at not less than inventory value,” and “reserve[d] the right to reject any or all bids.”

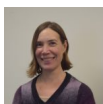
Meanwhile, in neighboring Mount Desert, its pest house, located near Somes Sound, was still in demand. A warrant article in 1928 asked voters whether the town should raise \$1,000 “for repairing the pest house, putting in new sills and making other necessary repairs.” The following year, the town budgeted \$250 for its upkeep.

It is unclear when the building went vacant, but in 1961, the Warrant Committee recommended postponing the demolition of the old pest house rather than appropriating the funds necessary to tear it down.

The old pest house properties remained unused until finally, in 1964, Bar Harbor voters once again authorized the town “to sell the Pest House Lot, so-called.” Two years later, Mount Desert burned its pest house to the ground.

 Bio

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