

The Story of a Shingle-Style House with Secrets

by Jeanne Schinto

Photos courtesy Jane Goodrich

“The construction of Kraggsyde began with a season of stones,” Jane Goodrich writes in her enthralling first novel, *The House at Lobster Cove*, a fictionalized biography of George Nixon Black Jr. (1842-1928), owner of the formidable late 19th-century house of the book’s title—an actual place. “There is not a man in New England who does not know about stones,” Goodrich’s narrator declares. Driving along New England’s back roads, many of us invariably admire the picturesque beauty of the old walls made from stones that men long ago wrested from the earth and piled up to mark the boundaries of property. The Boston architectural firm that designed the house at Lobster Cove in Manchester-by-the-Sea, Massachusetts, “counted on the bounty of such stones” when drawing up plans for Kraggsyde’s foundation. But these “breakers of backs and plows” are something to be reckoned with if one wants merely to farm. As the narrator understates it, New England’s stones “sent more than one man west.”

The design for Kraggsyde, a shingle-style summer “cottage,” was drawn in 1882 by Peabody & Stearns. Built between 1883 and 1885 for Black, bachelor heir to a fortune from his father’s Boston real-estate deals and a grandfather’s trade in Maine lumber, it was situated on the edge of a six-acre parcel of land with a 70-foot cliff overlooking the Atlantic. The exact location was a peninsula called Smith’s Point, but those who go in search of it, as Goodrich once did, will be disappointed. The house was demolished in 1929, shortly after Black’s death.

Victorian Gothic novels often end with a house in flames. Even some contemporary novels do. (Spoiler alert:

A fire concludes Nancy Horan’s *Loving Frank* [2007], which recounts Frank Lloyd Wright’s extramarital affair with Mamah Borthwick.) Kraggsyde, however, ends with the modern version of a conflagration, a teardown. It was dismantled by a crew that salvaged what could be sold for reuse during the Great Depression.

Then, in 1955, Vincent Scully, an architectural historian and Yale professor, published *The Shingle Style and the Stick Style*, a book that metaphorically resurrected Kraggsyde and made an icon of it. Posthumously christening it “a masterpiece,” Scully wrote that “Peabody & Stearns never again, to my knowledge, created a house of such quality.” Architecture apprentices have been studying the house’s plans and its widely reproduced images ever since.

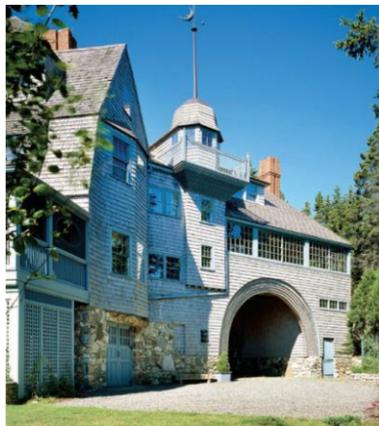
As “barely a teenager” growing up in Vermont in the late 1970s, Goodrich came across Scully’s book in her father’s library. For reasons she doesn’t fully understand, she was captivated by Kraggsyde and “its romantic perch above the sea.” She clipped its photograph from the book and pasted it into a scrapbook. Seven years later, as a college sophomore, she happened upon the same book, and just like that, she and her husband-to-be, James Beyor, decided to build a replica of it. Beyor, a master builder by trade, and Goodrich, who in 1986 cofounded Saturn Press, recognized as a pioneer in the resurgence of letterpress craft printing, did exactly what they said they would do, on Swan’s Island, Maine. Working nights and on weekends for years, they re-created with their own hands all of Kraggsyde’s 13 rooms, 13 fireplaces, four chimneys, and two piazzas, and sheathed it all in 130,000 square feet of the kind of shingles that prompted Scully to give the shingle style its name.

Surely it’s a unique situation for a novelist to live in a replica of a central setting of her historical novel. But I hasten to add that this book is about much more than the building of a summer house by a rich Bostonian (the city’s biggest taxpayer in his day). It’s the story of a man’s life, including the two loves of that life: his Harvard friend Francis “Frank” Crowninshield (1843-1866), who survived multiple battles of the Civil War but died of consumption; and his eventual romantic partner, Charles Brooks Pitman (1860-1918), a Massachusetts Institute of Technology dropout who met Black while working on the surveying crew of a house being built near Kraggsyde. And although it is fiction, employing imagined dialogue, feelings, and scenarios, it is, as Goodrich explains in her afterword, “based on ten thousand facts.”

Black, known to his family as Nixon to distinguish him from his father, was born in Ellsworth, Maine. In the 1820s, his paternal grandfather, Colonel John Black (b. 1780), built a house there, one still standing and open to



Kraggsyde, Manchester-by-the-Sea, Massachusetts.



Partial view of Kraggsyde II, Swan’s Island, Maine, home of the author Jane Goodrich. Photo by Bret Morgan (www.bretmorgan.com).

the public for tours. Well known to those who show or attend the Ellsworth Antiques Show every August, it is Woodlawn (www.woodlawnmuseum.com). That is the place where Goodrich begins her tale, and immediately we know we are in the hands of an accomplished storyteller capable of delineating the web of accurate details required of all successful historical novelists. In Goodrich’s case, these range from the medicines in an apothecary shop, “where leeches could be seen wriggling” in a glass jar, to the habits of lumberjacks, who emerge from the Maine woods in spring and head straight for the dentist “with toothaches they’d nursed all winter.” Indeed, Goodrich’s imagination brings to life all sorts

of people, things, and milieus. These include a scowling Irish housemaid with her fists on her hips, the Boston Brahmin class’s “complex catalog of cousinship,” the decor of a summer house (“gifts from houseguests, unwanted prints, duplicates of articles not needed in winter homes”), the way of life in a one-room schoolhouse with students aged five to 15 and a teacher well over her head, and the gait of a flea-bitten stray dog that Nixon as a boy cannot resist bringing home although he knows his father will disapprove.

Of Nixon’s adoption of that dog, the novel’s narrator observes, “Some determinations cannot be fought against.” It’s a theme reprised throughout the novel as Nixon acknowledges, accepts, and finally acts on the natural inclinations of his sexual preference.

Secrets are another recurrent theme here. Frank Crowninshield’s consumption is long hidden from his family; Nixon’s homosexuality is fully closeted for decades; and Kraggsyde itself seems to Nixon like a receptacle of that secret. “Underneath it all Nixon imagined the cave,” the narrator says. “Cool and dripping, filled with seaweed and shells, feathers and cast-up stones. Holed out in the cliff below, it was like a secret.” Charles Brooks Pitman, on his first visit to Kraggsyde, has a similar thought, feeling “as though he were stepping inside Nixon himself, a man still mysterious, silent, with all his treasures hidden.”

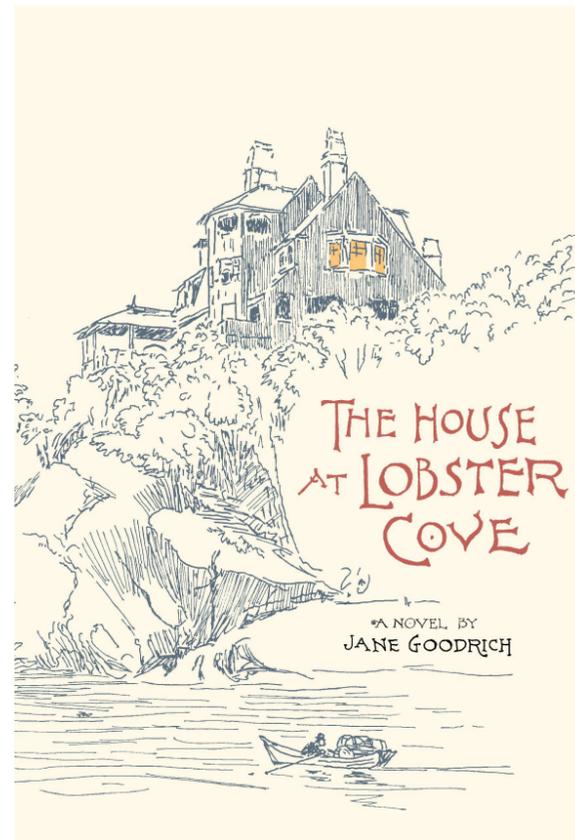
In time Nixon and Pitman, 18 years apart in age, moved in together. When they weren’t living at Kraggsyde or traveling, they resided at Nixon’s Boston townhouse, at 57 Beacon Street on Beacon Hill. (Designed by Ephraim Marsh in 1819 and still standing, it may have been one of the first houses built on Beacon Street with a bathroom, according to the *AIA Guide to Boston*.) Nixon didn’t appreciate Woodlawn, but Pitman did. On a visit there, he reveled in the “untouched trove...passed down from Nixon’s grandparents, true antiques of the time of the Revolutionary War and the country’s early history.” Nixon had grown up with art and artifacts, including a miniature of George Washington. David Cobb (1748-1830), one of Washington’s generals, was Nixon’s great-grandfather. But Pitman was the collector half of this couple—an enthusiastic participant in an initial phase of the Colonial revival.

As does PBS’s *Downton Abbey*, *The House at Lobster Cove* uses real-world events as its backdrops: the Civil War, the Great Boston Fire of 1872, an anti-Irish immigrant atrocity that took place in Ellsworth in the 1850s. Also as does the TV series, it sometimes edges up close to melodrama. But moments of heightened emotion are an expected and enjoyable part of authentic mid-19th- to early 20th-century historical fiction, and Goodrich delivers that reading experience along with cinematic

The House at Lobster Cove

by Jane Goodrich

Benna Books, an imprint of Applewood Books, 2017, 388 pages, soft-bound, \$24.95. To order, see the website (www.applewoodbooks.com/The-House-at-Lobster-Cove-P6380.aspx) or visit your local bookseller.



The drawing on the cover of *The House at Lobster Cove* is a quick sketch done by one of Kraggsyde’s architects, Robert Swain Peabody, circa 1885. It is housed in the files of Boston Architectural College, unidentified, but Jane Goodrich is more than confident that it’s Kraggsyde. The book’s publication date is May 1.

descriptions of interiors and reports on the doings of social climbers, snobs, servants, and relatives whose presumed inheritances have been thwarted. Readers will also undoubtedly enjoy the cameo roles written for many cultural figures of the period, e.g., Laura Coombs Hills, John La Farge, Frank Weston Benson, William Sumner Appleton, Isabella Stewart Gardner, and Oscar Wilde.

Of Gardner after the deaths of both her husband and her only child, the narrator notes: “Calling on a vast and gritty courage she must have found within herself, she became a world traveler, an astute collector, and the mistress of a salon of fascinating individuals who were inordinately handsome, unmarried men whom Nixon recognized immediately.” As for Wilde, there is this exchange between Nixon and his sister Agnes. She: “What exactly is Oscar Wilde famous for?” He: “For being himself....”

Over the many years it took for Goodrich to research and write her book, she naturally wondered if her subject would have approved of her interpretation of his life and her bringing him and his passions into the light. She found her answer in his will, which not only left nearly everything to Pitman but named him as his “lifelong friend” and recognized “the steadfast and faithful friendship which existed between us for many years....” (Alas, since Pitman predeceased Nixon, both Kraggsyde and the Beacon Street house went to Pitman’s brother Harold, who promptly sold each property.) There was also a \$25,000 bequest to Francis Crowninshield (1872-1947), namesake nephew of Nixon’s Harvard friend and first crush. Editor of *Vanity Fair*, the younger Frank never knew why he was the beneficiary of “an old Boston philanthropist” he’d never met. As the narrator tells it, he suspected Nixon had been an admirer of the magazine but then dismissed that idea, because Nixon hadn’t been a subscriber. OK, then maybe he was a friend of his parents. But if that were the case, why weren’t his siblings also named in the will? “What Frank did not know was that he merely had the right name.”

One might suppose that, besides the will, Goodrich had a wealth of other primary materials to draw from, but when Nixon died he left fewer than a dozen pieces of correspondence, all involving business matters. She did, however, find many other clues to the man in that same revealing will, as well as in the far-flung letters, diaries, and photographs of his “supporting cast” that took her to numerous archives and libraries here and abroad. Those cast members included, of course, Pitman, whose sense of humor extended to his own will, in which he left to Nixon a “half-interest in a four-poster bed.”

That very four-poster bed is one of Goodrich’s 10,000 facts. It can be seen at Woodlawn in Ellsworth, Maine, along with many of the other props used in the “staging” of this tour de force.