

Twenty-four surviving rugs from the Maine Sea Coast Mission Hooked Rug project shed light on a little known experiment in community and artistry

DISCOVERIES IN SELF EXPRESSION

By Judith Burger-Gossart



For people on the islands and along the coast of Downeast Maine in the 1920s, the era of postwar prosperity and jazz age exuberance might just as well have happened in another country. Their lives were circumscribed by hard work, poverty, and most of all isolation. Just after the turn of the century, in 1905, two clergymen who were concerned about the limited spiritual and physical lives of coastal Mainers created the Maine Sea Coast Mission. It was their inspired idea to acquire a boat that would allow ministers, nurses, and doctors to reach these remote places. Building on this idea

in the 1920s, a member of the mission, the remarkable and remarkably determined Alice M. Peasley, decided to direct her attention to the wives of fishermen by giving them the opportunity to hook rugs, make money, and work together as a community. Thus begins the story of the Maine Sea Coast Mission Hooked Rug Department.

When the mission stationed Alice Peasley in the fishing and farming community of South Gouldsboro in 1923 she found that the church was in dire need of a new roof and other repairs. Her initial idea of having the local women hook rugs to earn money for the church came, in part,

from her knowledge of the Grenfell Mission in Newfoundland, but the rugs produced for the Maine Sea Coast Mission project were to differ markedly in spirit and character from their Canadian counterparts.

Fig. 1. Tropical marine still life rug hooked by Sarah Lunt (1877–1969), Frenchboro, Maine, 1930–1933. Wool and rag strips on burlap, sheared; 48 by 27 inches. The rug is accompanied by a chromolithograph that served as the source for the design. Collection of Alexandra Wolf Fogel.

Fig. 2. Alice M. Peasley (1880–1963) and Reverend Neal Bousfield (1906–1997) aboard *Sunbeam II* in a photograph of c. 1938. Collection of the Maine Sea Coast Mission, Bar Harbor, Maine.

Fig. 3. Women of the South Gouldsboro Circle of the Maine Sea Coast Mission rug project in a photograph of c. 1926. Peasley is at the far left. Maine Sea Coast Mission collection.

Most of what we know about the project, which lasted from 1923 to about 1938, comes from Peasely's records, which are as meticulous as one would expect from a woman of her character. Although Peasely brought no special training to the project, she grew up in Rockland, Maine, where, as a child, she put in "ground work" (the flat background of a hooked rug) for her grandmother, who, she wrote, "made beautiful fruit and floral rugs ninety years ago."¹ As Rockland is very close to

of the South Gouldsboro endeavor they wanted to participate. In 1924 the Frenchboro Circle on Outer Long Island (a large island about ten miles off the coast of Mount Desert Island) was established. Eventually a number of independent rug hookers from Islesford, McKinley, Loudville, Matinicus, Two Bush Island, Little Deer Island, Muscongus, as well as in Frenchboro and South Gouldsboro, also began making rugs for sale, causing a little friction between them and the two initial circles, though Alice Peasely seems to have handled this problem with her usual diplomacy.

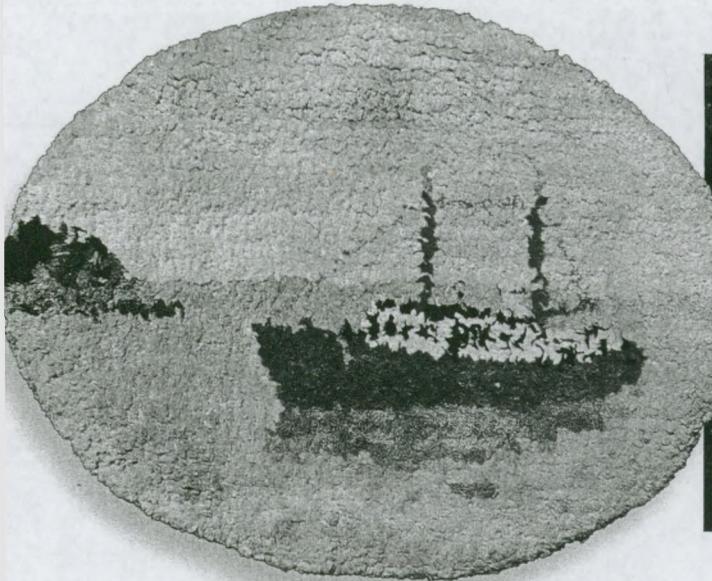


Fig. 4. *Sunbeam II* rug hooked by Henriette Ames (1862–1966), Matinicus Island, Maine, 1925–1930. Wool and rag strips on burlap, sheared; 18 by 24 inches. *Maine Sea Coast Mission collection*.

Fig. 5. Henriette Ames with a welcome rug in a photograph of c. 1933. *Matinicus Island Historical Society, Matinicus, Maine*.

Fig. 6. Ames's house on Matinicus Island on a rug she hooked c. 1933. Wool and rag on burlap, sheared; 15 by 25 inches. *Collection of Warren and Harriet Williams*.

Fig. 7. House with squirrel rug, Maine, 1925–1930. Wool and rag strips on burlap, sheared; 29 by 38 inches. *Maine Sea Coast Mission collection*.

Waldoboro, Maine, both Alice Peasely and her grandmother must have known of the ornate rugs made there in the last half of the nineteenth century.

After a year of working with the South Gouldsboro women to produce hooked rugs for sale, it was clear that Alice Peasely's idea was a sound one. "By the end of the first year rugs were sold and the proceeds went toward the church's debt."² The enterprise, however, extended to needs beyond those of the church. "When one woman asked if her rugs could, possibly, go toward helping rebuild the family's house lost by fire, it was agreed she would get the help of the group."³ In the interests of the community, the bylaws for the hooking circle included the stipulation that "gossiping is positively forbidden during circle hours."⁴ To her credit Peasely recognized the hazards of mental illness in these communities and urged the mission to purchase books on the subject. The rug hooking enterprise was, in her view, more than economic; it was meant to enhance the women's self esteem.

When other fishermen's wives heard of the success

From the beginning of the project in 1923, rug sales grew steadily, peaking in 1927. In 1928 Peasely fell ill and sales dwindled, though they seem to have recovered when she did in 1929. After 1930, probably in response to the stock market crash, sales declined and the operation ceased altogether about 1938. Despite the project's brevity some 650 rugs were produced, although only twenty-four are known to exist today.

P easely photographed forty-four of the rugs for a sales album that allowed customers to select one in the fall and receive it in the spring. Until recently these black-and-white images were the only record of the rugs, but fortunately three of those depicted in the album recently came to light and were donated to the Maine Sea Coast Mission by Mrs. Lyall Dean, a summer resident of Hancock, Maine. Her mother, who, she said, "had an eye for beautiful things," had purchased them from Peasely in the 1930s.

There are, in addition, photographs of some twenty-five other designs. Some of the rugs were one-of-a-kind from an original design that was reproduced multiple times; some were simply one-of-a-kind;

and still others were reproductions of older rug designs. Not all of the rugs have the project's white label with red block lettering (Fig. 12) but many of them do. Of the twenty-four extant Maine Sea Coast Mission Rugs twelve are at the Maine Sea Coast Mission; two are at Acadia National Park's William Otis Sawtelle Collections and Research Center; two are at the Matinicus Island Historical Society; one at the Frenchboro Historical Society; and the remaining seven are in private hands.

The technique that Peasley instructed the women to use involved hooking long loops and then shearing them with scissors to create a firm, close, velvety nap. Doing so added labor and used more material than in flat, unsheared rugs. In describing the aesthetic of the rugs, Alice Peasley was candid about their virtues and limitations, but she was also deeply taken by their spirit. "In artistic value they range from the beautiful to the grotesque. In color from the soft harmony to screaming riot. Yet there is a characteristic 'something' which all these rugs have in common. A spiritual quality and individuality that marks them as the work of a homogeneous group....Whatever they may be, or whatever they may lack, they are sincere and very genuine."⁵

Peasley was careful "to recognize and develop the quaint personal flavor which each worker brought to the work,"⁶ and she encouraged each woman to develop her particular style. By contrast, the emphasis at the Grenfell Mission in Newfoundland and Labrador was on adhering to a standard pattern, size of mat, color, and style of workmanship. Of the five categories of rug design from the Maine Sea Coast Mission project described by Peasley—fruit and florals, primitive house and animal designs, seascape and sea birds, landscapes, and geometrics—examples of all but the geometrics survive.

Recently, rugs made by Henriette Ames of Matinicus, a tiny, remote island about twenty-two miles from the mainland, have come to light and give us a snapshot of the work of one of the women whose life was touched by the Maine Sea Coast Mission rug project. Born in 1862, Ames lived much of her life in the same house on an island of some 140 people for whom lobstering and farming were the chief occupations. A place with a reputation for rough justice and a degree of violence, Matinicus seems to have found in Henriette Ames a calming and civilized presence. At some point in her later years she began to make some quite distinctive rugs for the Sea Coast Mission, probably completing about sixty altogether. Her work reflects the dominant influences in her life. Two of the rugs are small ovals of the *Sunbeam II*, the much loved mission



Fig. 8. Pair of horses at a watering pail rug, Maine, 1925–1930.

Wool and rag strips on burlap, sheared; 26 1/2 by 38 3/4 inches.

United States National Park Service, Acadia National Park's William Otis Sawtelle Collections and Research Center, Bar Harbor.

Fig. 9. Rooster, hen and chicks rug, Maine, 1925–1930. Wool and rag strips on burlap, sheared; 28 1/2 by 40 inches.

United States National Park Service, Sawtelle Collections and Research Center.

Fig. 10. Seagulls rug, Maine, 1925–1930. Wool and rag strips on burlap, sheared; 26 by 20 1/2 inches. *Maine Sea Coast Mission collection.*

Fig. 11. Buffalo rug, Maine, 1925–1930. Wool and rag strips on burlap, sheared; 38 by 29 inches. The design seems to be taken from a buffalo-hunt print in George Catlin's *North American Indian Portfolio* of 1844. *Maine Sea Coast Mission Collection.*

Fig. 12. Maine Sea Coast Mission rug label on the back of the Seagulls rug in Fig. 10. *Maine Sea Coast Mission collection.*

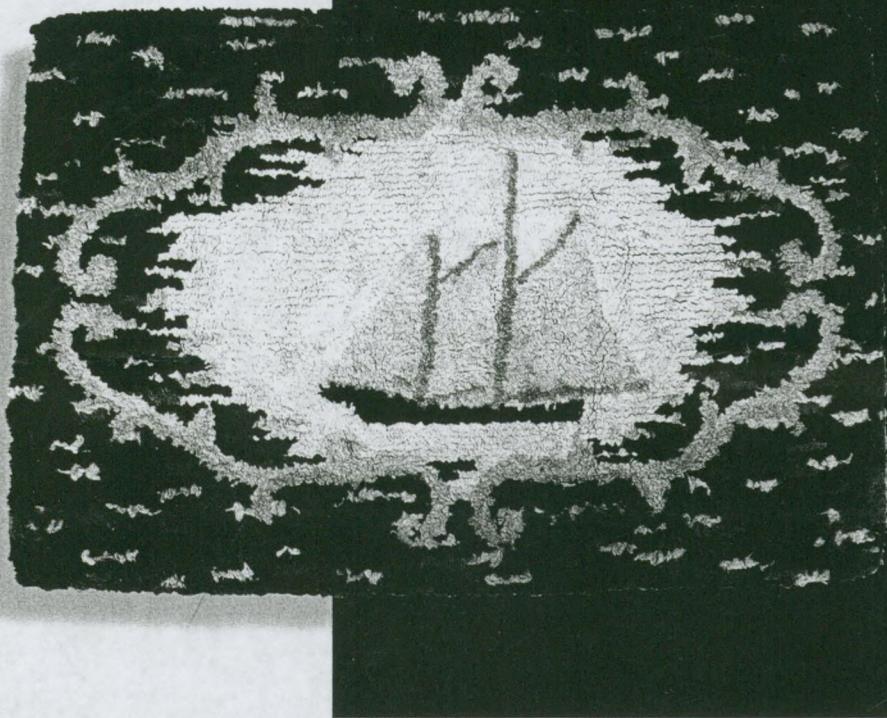
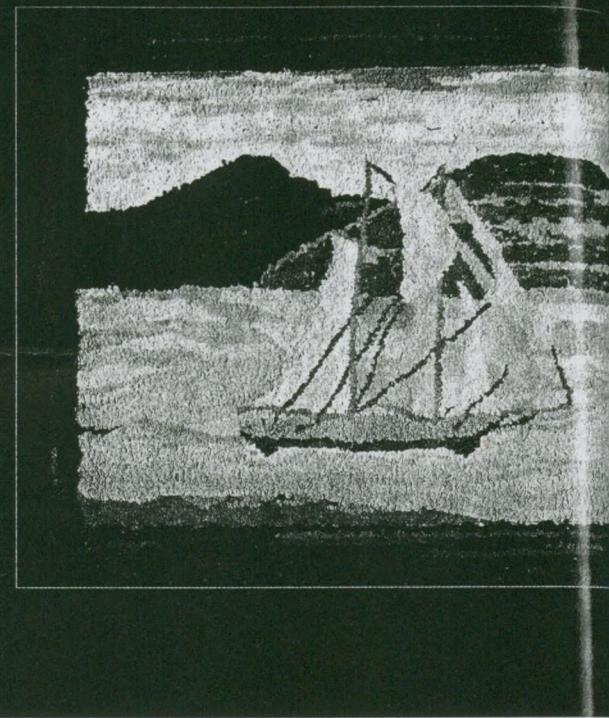


Fig. 13. *Julia Fairbanks* rug hooked by Ames, Matinicus Island, 1926–1932. Wool and rag strips on burlap, sheared; 20 1/2 by 31 1/2 inches. *Matinicus Island Historical Society*.

Fig. 14. *Columbia* rug attributed to Mary Ann Bunker (1872–1933), South Gouldsboro, c. 1932. Wool and rag strips on burlap, sheared; 23 by 44 inches. *Maine Sea Coast Mission* collection, gift of Mrs. Lyall Dean.

Fig. 15. Sailboat and hills of Mount Desert Island rug, Maine, 1925–1930. Wool and rag strips on burlap, sheared; 13 3/4 by 24 1/2 inches. Collection of William Watkins; photograph courtesy of the Maine Sea Coast Mission.

Fig. 16. Autumn scene rug hooked by Bunker, 1926–1932. Wool and rag strips on burlap, sheared; 30 by 39 inches. Bunker recorded the approximately 150 rugs she made in a notebook (now in the Maine Sea Coast Mission archives, box 561 1717), calling what is thought to be this one “Autumn scape, Autumn Birches.” *Maine Sea Coast Mission* collection.



boat that visited the island and connected it with the outside world (see Figs. 2, 4). Another is a floral with an ultramarine blue and black background that sets off a red rose, a pansy, and another flower in its corners. The dominance of the blue speaks of the presence of the sea that surrounds the tiny slip of Matinicus. One rug depicts the *Julia Fairbanks*, a two-masted schooner that was the mail, passenger, and freight boat that ran between Rockland and Matinicus (Fig. 13). Here the fancy scrollwork that frames the schooner suggests the importance of this lifeline to island lives. Among the most charming of Ames's rugs are the two that depict her home. One is a small oval and the other a slightly larger rectangle (Fig. 6). Both radiate the domestic serenity that Henriette Ames clearly valued.

Alice Peasley's written records give us details about the materials, costs, and conditions of the enterprise, but more than that they offer here and there a vivid look at the effect of the project on the participants and Peasley's influence on their creativity. Here is an anecdote she recorded that speaks eloquently for the whole of the Maine Sea Coast Mission rug project: “One woman stood in her doorway bidding me goodbye after a happy afternoon spent in rug planning. ‘You know’ she said with a slow smile, ‘I never thought I’d live to see the day when I could do something somebody else would really want and value’... She had done some lovely rugs

for us and I was suggesting that...she should really reproduce her own backyard.... She looked in silence for a long time and then said, ‘Well, I reckon this is the first time I ever saw my own backyard. A body can’t hook what she doesn’t see.’”¹

Courage and a Willingness to Work: Hooked Rugs of the Maine Sea Coast Mission and Grenfell Mission, 1923–1940, co-curated by Judith Burger-Gossart, is on view at the Maine Sea Coast Mission in Bar Harbor from July 22 to September 27.

¹ Alice M. Peasley, “Maine Sea Coast Mission Rugs, 1927 Notes,” pp. 1–2, “Rugs and Rug Making of the Maine Sea Coast Mission” binder, Maine Sea Coast Mission Archives, Bar Harbor, Maine (unless otherwise noted, Peasley’s documents cited in this article are in the same binder). This quote, which establishes that Peasley’s grandmother was hooking rugs as early as 1837, is one of the earliest, if not the earliest, documentation for hooked-rug making in America.

² Annette P. King, “Alice ‘Ma’ Peasley, Superintendent Sea Coast Mission Ministry Serves in Gouldsboro From 1923–1940,” typescript, p. 3, Gouldsboro Historical Society, Maine, courtesy of archivist Beatrice C. Buckley. See also Alice M. Peasley, “Maine Seacoast Missionary Society, Maine Seacoast Mission Rugs, Year 1929–1930,” pp. 3–4. ³ King, “Alice ‘Ma’ Peasley,” p. 3. ⁴ South Gouldsboro Sewing Circle Record Book, Article 10, Gouldsboro Historical Society, courtesy of Beatrice C. Buckley. ⁵ Peasley, “Maine Seacoast Missionary Society...1929–1930,” p. 3. ⁶ Peasley, “Maine Sea Coast Mission Rugs, 1927 Notes,” p. 1. ⁷ Alice M. Peasley’s reminiscences of the hooked rug program, 1940.

JUDITH BURGER-GOSSART lives in Salsbury Cove, Maine. She has been the curator of hooked rug exhibitions and catalogues, designs and hooks rugs, and is currently writing a book about the Maine Sea Coast Mission rugs.