

Town of Gouldsboro Historical Society & Museum

At The Old Town House
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ALICE "MA" PEASLEY MAINE SEA COAST MISSIONARY SOCIETY

Ministry Services in Gouldsboro 1923-1940

Researched and compiled by Annette P. King

In 1917, Alice M. Peasley was employed as the first member of Maine Sea Coast Missionary Society's staff by Rev. Alexander MacDonald, founder of the Mission. Besides being missionary pastor to two "little churches" on the Gouldsboro Peninsula, her duties included teaching grade school children on Crowley Island and in South Addison. Under her leadership the Mission's work touched hundreds of people scattered over 60 square miles of down east coastland. She served the Society for 28 years, often traveling by sea in order to reach families from Frenchboro to Bar Harbor on the *Sunbeam*, a marine vessel owned and operated by the Mission.

Mrs. Peasley's long career brought wisdom and maturity to her work, earning her the title "Dean of the Staff." She was also credited as founder of the Mission's rug industry, a business that flourished from 1932 until 1942 under her direction. She was often called to speak at functions because of a lively sense of humor. Of all her talents, it may well be that her devotion to her Lord and her unusual compassion for all those in need was most deeply felt. She was known for her deeds of kindness and labors of mercy. There are still (1998) people in South Gouldsboro who remember her well and continue to refer to her fondly as "Ma" Peasley.

Assigned to South Gouldsboro in 1923, she arrived when the economy was at its lowest ebb, the church was in debt, and there were no resources to generate income. She immediately set out looking for assets available and found that courage and willingness to work were the prevailing tendencies. She heard how some women could remember hooking rugs, as their mothers had taught them. Hooked rugs were gaining in popularity in the early 1920s. Mrs. Peasley dreamed of capitalizing on the trend and began teaching the women to make hooked rugs that would become marketable. Careers began that would last nearly twenty years under the training and supervision of Mrs. Alice M. Peasley.

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One does imagine an arduous undertaking. For instance, every rug group throughout the Mission's large parish faced similar problems: lack of experience; a growing shortage of rags; and acquiring good quality burlap -- a must for the rugs' foundations. Mrs. Peasley's extraordinary imaginative ability resolved daily problems, or she sought and found people who could help.

At first there were few designs available and the colors used were unattractive. A conversation with Mrs. Leonard Kelloggs, an associate of the Sea Coast Mission, produced gifts of catalogs and patterns to the South Gouldsboro parsonage. The photography in those catalogs showed beautifully colored rugs with useful descriptions written on every page. The women studied these for new ideas. Mrs. Kelloggs also offered some of her old rugs as patterns and furnished the burlap needed to make new rugs at a time when no money was available to purchase it.

By the end of the first year six rugs were sold and the proceeds went toward the church's debt. The sisters wept with joy when the debt was paid and repairs were begun. In time, higher quality rugs were produced due to the good burlap purchased from money earned.

Most of the work took place in the shed "chamber" of the South Gouldsboro parsonage. The women put in long hours and agonized humbly over the quality of their work. 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, but only after regular hours -- an example of neighbor helping neighbor.

When the Frenchboro sewing circle heard of the success Gouldsboro's group was achieving, they asked eagerly about starting their own hooked rug industry. Mrs. Peasley began with the simplest designs and wrote in her notebook that these first rugs were so uneven "their topography might well be taken for a study of the rugged coast that produced them." In Frenchboro material was scarce; the old clothes used were often inadequate. The second summer enough



Mrs. Peasley

profit was made to buy \$24 worth of new cloth. Mrs. Peasley bought dye when needed and mailed rugs as orders were accepted. She did all the cutting, dyeing, and the markings. "It took from three to six years for most hookers to develop the freedom and imagination required to master the many steps, to be trusted to work alone and maintain the integrity of the rug."

An example of the passion from which these women worked was made evident one afternoon. Mrs. Peasley was helping out. There was only one tulip to finish and the rug in point would be completed. The dilemma

happened when not one rag could be found in the house. Looking down at Mrs. Peasley's stockings, a worker remarked they could work that color in nicely. The stockings were removed immediately, washed and dried on the oven door. Miraculously, the tulip came to life and the rug was finished on time. Mrs. Peasley concluded, "This was not the only instance where clothing was sacrificed to meet an emergency."

By mid-July, 1924, the South Gouldsboro women were working to produce a "good roll" of rugs. There was one particular floral rug they had named "Methuselah." It was longer than any they had made, testing their endurance to the end. The women met earlier than usual on July 1st, determined an all-day session would finish Methuselah. Late that afternoon found them still at work with no sight of reaching their goal. By two o'clock, the sky was overcast and daylight began to disappear. The workers continued feverishly. At three o'clock a tempest burst over the town and it became almost too dark to see in the little loft. Lightning darted through the room and thunder roared over their heads. Finally, a kerosene lamp was lit. There were at least two women seen keeping their steel hooks darting in and out courageously while the other sisters looked on too frightened to continue.

The rug was finished that night. A prayer of thanksgiving was offered to God for his mercies in guiding them in this new work and protecting them during the tempest. Thus ended the first year of hooking rugs in South Gouldsboro.

The work began in very early spring and continued until late fall when the rugs were sold or mailed. They were now able to buy material and burlap in bulk. Rugs of good quality were produced and the summer of 1927 was a most prosperous one. Almost every rug offered sold and many orders were taken.

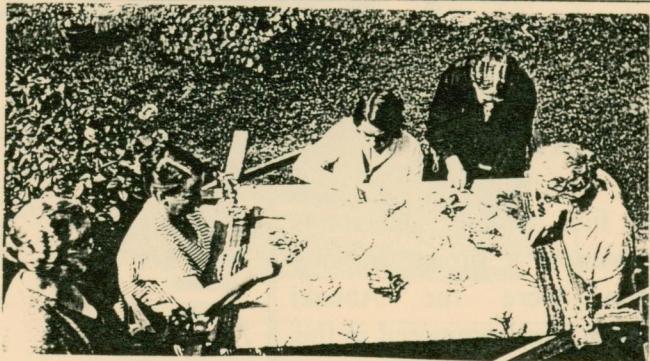
In 1930, Mrs. Peasley spent the winter in Bar Harbor. She also visited friends in Portland for an unspecified length of time. Upon returning to Bar Harbor, she found her rented rooms damaged by fire. Everything she had left behind was burned. The greatest tragedy was the loss of a little book she called her other self. Gone and recalled only by memory were all tangible records from the beginning of the Sea Coast Mission rugs: addresses of buyers, rug patterns, and individual records of the work the hookers themselves did.

Through the 1930's, there were as many as thirty women doing very well. A Mrs. Hammond of Gouldsboro became the pattern maker. There were others who could now be trusted with dyeing and many of the women became not only proficient in hooking, but were developing vision and imagination. During those ten years, "the largest and most beautiful collection of rugs" were offered for the maximum price in the rug market, to friends of the Sea Coast Mission Society. Among a list of hookers, nine names from Gouldsboro are found: Annie Bunker, Mary R. Bunker, Nettie Bunker, Christine Cook, Lucy Cook, Etoile Earnst, Florence Hammond, Hilda Hammond, and Belle Norris.

The Sea Coast Mission rug industry remained a cottage business for nearly twenty years. Mrs. Peasley had feared the quality of the rugs would lose integrity, endangering their characteristic charm if the output became of industrial proportions. A small stock warranted rugs exclusive in design to customers who found prices reasonable for the work offered.

These rugs were of the highest quality and could not be compared to machine or stock pattern rugs. Nevertheless, with demands for change, and the approach of a new decade, rug-making from cottages became increasingly difficult. Rags once donated by workers were often kept for private use, making it necessary to purchase material. Commercial order

houses began accepting orders that amounted to a year's supply, payments in advance. Among numerous radical changes necessary to survive, storage problems were never resolved. The inevitable closure of the hooked rug cottage industry of South Gouldsboro slowly came about 1940.



South Gouldsboro women hooking a rug in a family dooryard
both photos courtesy of Sea Coast Mission Society

Alice M. Peasley retired from the Sea Coast Mission in 1945, completing 28 years of service. She died in Graniteville, Massachusetts, July 27, 1963, age 84.

Note: An expanded version of this article along with sources are available at the GHS Museum. We urge those with other data, recollections, or anecdotes about Mrs. Peasley to share them with us.

SHARE YOUR HISTORY WITH US

The historical articles in this newsletter are examples of bringing Gouldsboro history to life. Do you live in an old Gouldsboro house? Do you know the chain of ownership? Could you find it in the Registry of Deeds? Do you remember life as a child in Gouldsboro? Or anecdotes of the past? School experiences? Work experiences? The clothes you wore? The games you played? The cars you drove? Or horses? Or boats? What did you celebrate? How? What things made you happy? What made you sad?

Write it in your own words. A paragraph, a page, a chapter, a book -- we'll add it to our collection at the Museum. Start right now. Don't put it off