

OLD TOWN MUSEUM

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www.theoldtownmuseum.org

Established 1976

The Old Town Museum is a volunteer effort dedicated to preserving Old Town's history.

James W. Sewall Company of Old Town, Maine:

An Oral History of the Early Years

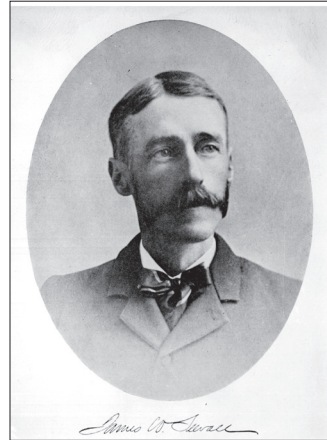
**By Diane Vatne, PhD,
Communications and Proposal Manager**

Founded in 1880 as a forestry and civil engineering company, James W. Sewall Company of Old Town is the oldest continuously operating forestry consulting firm in North America, yet a comprehensive history of the company has never been written. Fortunately, lively oral interviews of Joseph Sewall (JS), his sisters, and two employees were recorded in 2001-2002.

Company history is closely tied to the Sewall family and to Old Town. Its founder, resident James Wingate Sewall, Sr. (1852-1905) studied math (and possibly engineering) at Bowdoin College, graduating in 1877. JS tells us, "He taught surveying at MIT, I know that. I think it was only for a year. Maybe they canned him after a year, he wasn't good enough, but I suspect he was. He taught then he went off into private practice. That's why I always figured the company was really in a sense founded in 1880, when he got through at MIT and got into the surveying business." James Sr. opened his business in an old frame house on Center Street in Old Town, right next door to St. James Church.

At that time, communities began to create water systems. JS says, "He got involved with water, with sewage systems...laying out systems for a whole city. Like when he went to Nashville (TN)...[but] he did ultimately end up surveying some of the townships here in northern Maine."

"Then he got involved with David Pingree. David Pingree thought an awful lot of him...They had to map the forest to find out how much there was of certain species of growth age. How much was bog, they just simply traveled our lines in there, measured them and constructed a map, connected the like areas...as land came for sale on the market, they'd go up and appraise it. Possibly after they got it, probably survey it, make sure the corners were marked and accurate distance and so forth. In the Rangeley district is where they did an awful lot for the Pingrees... So he worked with Pingree until he died. He



James W. Sewall Sr.



James W. Sewall Jr.

never worked for anybody else as far as I know."

James, Sr. died in his early 50s, and his brother and partner Joseph died in his early 30s. "They said he picked up malaria from their survey work down south earlier on. But it might have been yellow fever--mosquito carried diseases which were a lot in those years. They did sewer systems and water systems. That's why they all got sick."

Upon his father's death in 1905, James Wingate Sewall, Jr., a sophomore in college, returned home and took over his father's business at about age 21. JS tells us, "My father, while he wasn't trained as an engineer, he was registered as an engineer. In fact he had a very early registration. But he learned a lot, he was a great student. He could read and he had textbooks and he did this and did that. He was probably one of the premier foresters in this part of the world. Many people have told me that. He really knew his stuff better than anybody in the world."

Early on, James Jr. partnered with Jack Appleton to form Appleton and Sewall Company, with offices in Old Town, New York, and Washington. JS explains, "In those years, they were aiming to do silvicultural work, in other words, tree care, on some of the big estates around New York and Washington, and so on, that had a lot of trees that needed a lot of attention. But Jack Appleton died, again, very young, when he was 35 or something like that. He died of a brain problem of some kind, whether it was a tumor in his brain or what, I don't know. But he

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Old Town People Share Their Memories of Old Town

By Pam Dorr

Here we are again with the wonderful memories of Old Town, Maine. If you read the last issue of the newsletter, you know we took a trip down Memory Lane to when our fair City was in its prime. This time I asked friends to share those memories once again but to recall memories from the cold winters and happy holidays of yesterday. I'll start with a few of my own: *I recall my favorite time just before Christmas was making my father walk to the Penobscot Trading Post with me*



to see the toys. They didn't get that many because the store sold so many other items, but Mrs. Podolsky kept most of the toys in the second of the two rooms. She would get the most beautiful toys at Christmas, and I wanted to point out my favorite doll so my father would tell Santa to get down there before someone else bought it. Santa usually brought that right doll to my house on Christmas morning!

If you visited Treat and Webster Island, you know the Shuffle In. I recall, when we were in Girl Scouts, going caroling all over the Island. After we were finished serenading everyone, we would go warm up with hot chocolate in the back room of the Shuffle. We might not have been able to sing very well but we all loved that tasty winter drink!

Two things people liked to do to pass away the winter hours in days gone by in Old Town was skate and sled: *As a kid, nothing says "winter" like skating at the rink across from St. Joseph's Church. It was the best place in the world and was so popular. (Nothing was more fun than)...playing "crack the whip", sipping hot chocolate in the warming shack, and skating 'til your ankles couldn't take it anymore. The shack always smelled of wet mittens drying near the woodstove. (Sue)*

They had a warming shack and sold snacks so we would go right after supper and skate until 9p.m. (Margie)

(I remember) the lights that went on so we could skate at night. (Diane W.)

My grandfather Doucette took care of the rink. It was a special place for skating and being with my grandparents and uncle. (Dianne L.)

If we weren't at the skating rink, we were speeding down Academy Hill on our old wooden sleds, steering for all we were worth to stay out of the snowbanks on the sides. Imagine closing off a street just so kids could sled down a hill! (Sue)

Those indeed were the days! There was always something to do because the children were always excited over the snow and the adults were happy to create good times and keep them safe.

Some people had a few memories of those fall days just before Frosty made his way into the City. Those early chilly Fall times made for great events. *I loved Halloween at St. Mary's School. After lunch we arrived in costume. We had a parade down Main Street, up Center Street, and down Brunswick Street to arrive back to school through the Helen Hunt yard. Following this was a Halloween party with games put on by the 8th graders. (Debbie)*

Halloween always brought memories of Hunter's Breakfast early the next morning. Halloween night would mean decorating the windows of all the stores downtown. We all got to paint them after school. Then they would crown the Hunter's Breakfast Queen that evening. She was always a student at Old Town High School (at least in my memory, which does fail at times now). Early in the morning, often after a sleepless sleepover, we would hike down to the park. *I remember the smell of wool hunting clothes of the men (Diane I.) as they got ready to embark on the first hunt of the season.*

After those first snowfalls, everyone looked forward to Christmas! *"I remember the big red bells they hung at Christmas downtown, and I believe lanterns too. I remember being disappointed when they started using the "Happy Holiday" signs instead. (Shannon)*

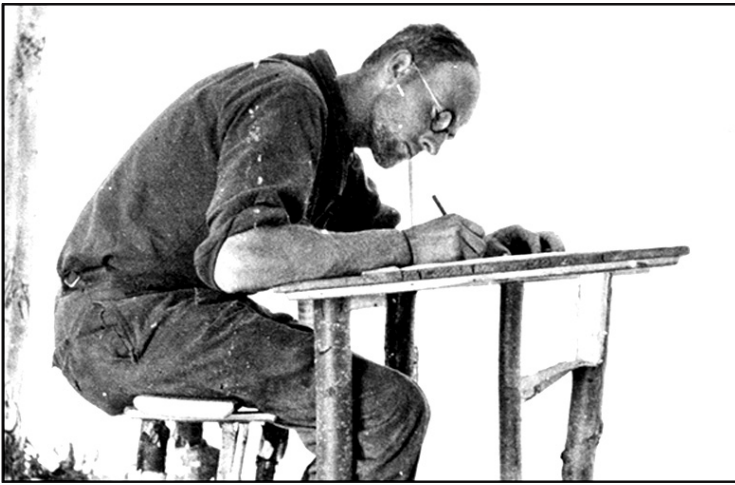
Those were the days and those were the parties! *When I was four years old, we lived in Great Works by the mill. We always went to my great aunt and uncle's house on Christmas Eve to celebrate. We would open our gifts and have our big Christmas dinner the next day. All the relatives would stop in for a visit. I waited all year for this event but one year we had a big blizzard and my uncle couldn't pick us up from French Island because the roads were so bad. We didn't have a car. We were sitting in our living room in our pajamas when we heard a scratching at the door. Their dog, Buddy, made it all the way to our apartment in the blizzard. Best Christmas ever! (Beverly)*

3 *I remember Christmas on the Island. We were a large family and enjoyed both sides. We would walk all around the Island visiting them all. (Dianne L.)*

How about the Christmas party at the Island School! (Pat-ty)

The Island School always had a Christmas party for the kids that lived on the Island. One Christmas I had measles and couldn't go. I was so disappointed that I wouldn't see Santa and get a present, but I got a huge surprise when Santa came to my house and brought me a gift. I never found out who

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PL Whitney, 1917, with furniture made from small logs and at right a Crew with a sled full of wood, c. 1917

Memories

Santa was but it left a lasting memory. (Sandy)

It wasn't always Christmas or a holiday that stayed in our mind but just a whole lot of SNOW! *I think it was the winter of 62 or 63 that we had the big snowstorm that left several feet of snow. I can remember my parents going out to a New Year's Eve dance at the American Legion and having to walk down a path in the middle of Pine Street because the road wasn't plowed and then having milk delivered by Mr. Pinkham on a snowmobile with a sled on the back. (Margie)*

My friend and I were going to a sleepover in Milford. The roads were not plowed. We carried our sleeping bags and pillow. It took us a while to get there! (Marlene)

I remember that year! I was babysitting downtown in a second floor apartment in the building where Main St. and Water St. join. I am not sure what was on the first floor. I remember walking home around midnight with snowbanks higher than I was. There was not a car to be seen or another person. I walked in the middle of Main St. because no sidewalks were plowed or walkable and I still remember the incredible perfect silence and beautiful snow. It was magical! (Karen)

Sometimes it wasn't about the snow. It was about the COLD! *I remember riding into school with my father and sitting down at the Shoe Shop until it was time to walk to school. One morning really sticks out for me. I was in my junior year in high school and one morning the temperature was -50 degrees. I nearly froze to death walking there to get an education but it was worth every bit of it, and let's not forget the two feet of snow that would close everything for a day or two. (Joyce)*

Of course, not all of us were out in the cold skating, sledding, or making snow forts. *I remember going to the Strand and sitting there for hours watching the movies. We would get popcorn from Grants. I remember looking at the Poster for Peyton Place. Even now when I see it on TV, I still find it shocking! (Alice)*

No matter what we were doing in the winter and holiday time in Old Town, we were having fun and building the memories that are the history of our City today. *This brought back so many memories! Babysitting and having to walk home! There would be so much snow that everything was muffled. I have always loved that small city! I have traveled extensively but I still miss my home. Winter in Old Town could be tough but is was also great! (Mary)*

Sewall Company

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was young and that was the end of that association."

James, Jr. continued in the forestry and survey/engineering business, hiring crews of woodsmen to work for the winter. JS explains that there were "Oh 6 or 8. Usually had about 3 cruisers, 3 tallymen. You might have some people that just moved canoes and dogsled drivers. There's a party chief. He had maybe 3 cruisers and 2 tallymen and himself and a cook. He might have a canoe man or two. Then you had the old moose sleds. On snowshoes...it's just like a horse. That was rugged stuff."

"[Wood cooks were] Very important. They kind of kept everything together. When they weren't drinking, as most woods cooks did. They'd go up for the winter...They got the wood and split the kindling and find a dead cedar and slit it up. So they had to be wise to the way of the woods pretty much. They helped set up tents. They built tables out of stuff. They really were self-sufficient people."

Back in the Old Town office, JS's sister Margaret Page tells us that Frances Ketchin "would see that the people were there and ready to go. If they were to leave Monday morning at 6:00, why everything had to be ready." There was a bunkhouse over the office. JS adds, "She was a combination of brains and diplomacy and stamina and every other thing. Any good thing. She did everything. She organized, and she worked—if required she worked 7 days and nights a week, never heard any complaint about that. She really was in love with the company and the people in it. She was a mother confessor to a lot of these younger guys coming along. She told them what was what and how to do it. She was just an awfully nice person. But firm. Determined and firm and loyal too, to the core. My father was away a lot. When he was away, she ran the place and don't think she didn't."

James, Jr. died in 1946 at age 62 of leukemia. His son, Joseph Sewall (1921-2011) took over the business after he got out of the service at age 24, and ran the company for 46 years. Sewall was trusted for knowledge that came from technical skill and experience. As JS said, "We like to think that we are totally beyond reproach, as far as the answers we supply them." The same is true to this day.

Improvements made to Old Town Museum

There have been a few changes in the museum this past year. In October of 2017, the ceiling in the storage room collapsed with several of the suspended ceiling tiles mysteriously falling onto the floor. The need to repair this ceiling began the improvement process. In May of 2018, the suspended ceiling was repaired and new tiles and suspension frame were installed. As many may have noticed, there is a lingering musty smell in the museum along with stifling humidity during the summer. The Board approved the investigation of the humidity problem and finding a solution. After contacting the TC Hafford company, "All Things Basementy," the Board agreed to contract with them to seal our earth floor basement. Through August and September, TC Hafford installed an impermeable membrane on the earth floor area and raised the concrete slab in the furnace area. Dehumidifiers and a venting system were installed. During this installation, it was discovered that the waterline had broken near the entry to the basement. It is in the process of being replaced. During the last few weeks of the 2018 museum season, we were without water as the line had been shut off until the repair is completed. In addition to these projects, there has been a stair case built to the former choir loft of the museum building. This staircase comes off the face of the loft and connects to the museum floor at the south side of the museum. We can now use the choir loft for collections storage. It is hoped to transfer the collection from the existing storage area to the loft area. We hope that this move will allow a needed reconfiguration of the display spaces as we move some materials to the former storage area.

To date, the cost of these repairs have been as follows:

1. Repair of the storage area ceiling 800.00
 2. Loft staircase 1200.00
 3. Basement sealing 34000.00
 4. Waterline repair 3000.00 (estimated)
- Total 39000.00

Though these repairs seem significant, they will enhance the operations of the Museum for years to come. Your donations to the museum are greatly appreciated as we work to display our Collection.

Old Town Museum, P.O. Box 375, Old Town, ME 04468

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353 Main Street
P. O. Box 375
Old Town, Maine 04468

Established 1976

Individual \$30	Senior \$20
Family \$50	Life \$400
Group or Business \$175	Donation: \$ _____

Membership entitles you to voting rights at the Annual Meeting.

The Old Town Museum is a 501(c)(3) organization.

If you are interested in volunteering at the Museum, please check here