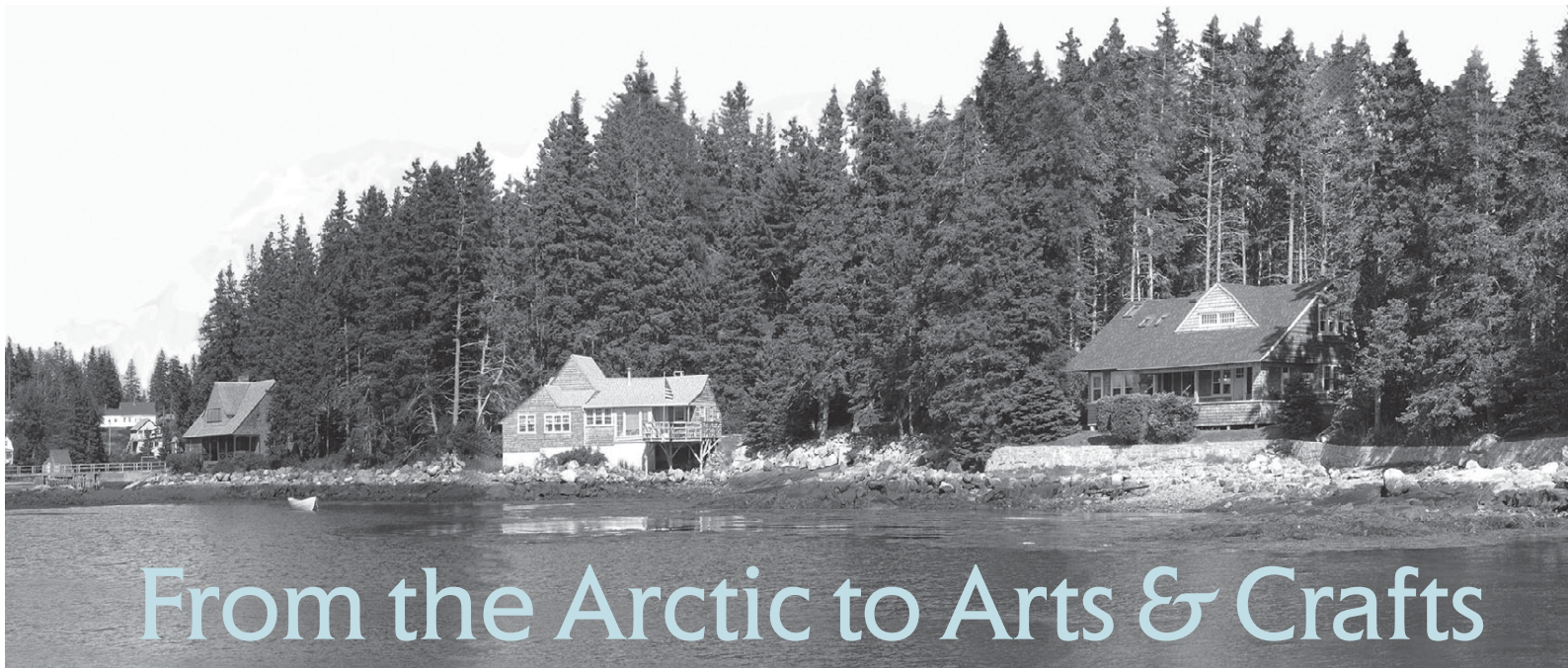


*A Polar Explorer Embraces
the Simple Life in Maine*



From the Arctic to Arts & Crafts

A Polar Explorer Embraces the Simple Life in Maine

By Kamissa A. Mort

In 1906, thirty-five-year-old Russell W. Porter arrived in Port Clyde, Maine, intent on finding a plot of land from which he could sustain himself and his two hobbies: astronomical observation and art. Although born in Vermont, Porter's path had led many thousands of miles before turning homeward to New England. He had trained as an engineer in his home state, studied art and architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology from 1891-1896, and joined Robert Peary's voyage to Greenland as artist and surveyor. Eight more Polar expeditions followed—to Baffin Island, Labrador, the Yukon, and the Russian arctic, where the team was stranded for three years after their ship, the *S.S. America*, was crushed by the ice. In between expeditions, Porter somehow found time to win two gold medals for innovative Beaux Arts architecture, to help design a "Monument to Progress" for the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, and to learn the precise art of telescope-making.



Collection of the Mort family.

Above Russell W. Porter (1871–1949) was an artist, architect, astronomer and arctic explorer. A craftsman in many media, he hand-made his own telescopes using mirrors he ground himself, as shown in this photograph, circa 1915.

Top Planned and built by Porter, each Land's End cottage had its own distinctive character, reflected in its name. Here, harborside, are (left to right) Gabled Ends, the Penguin, the Grey Gull, the Green Cottage (not Porter-built), and the Mooring.

Opposite A gifted artist, Porter captured, in watercolors, the porch of The Farmhouse, an 1820 home he purchased as part of the 50-acre property that became Land's End. The chair, table at lower right, and telescope are all Porter designs.



Photograph by Greg Mart.

The leap from exploration to a rustic existence on the Maine coast was not as extreme as it might seem. Porter's time in the Arctic had taught him to relish nature and an intentional lifestyle. The desire for what his contemporaries called "the simple life" guided him to Port Clyde, a tiny fishing village, home to just 300 year-round residents. So small and insular was Port Clyde that one family, the Marshalls, maintained three of the major operations in town: the post office, the general store, and the lighthouse. With \$950, all the money from a recent inheritance, Porter bought 50 acres on Marshall Point at the very tip of the Port

Clyde peninsula. He dubbed the site "Land's End" and set out to begin his "simple life."

Constructing a Colony

The life Porter embarked upon in Maine may have been simple, but it was not solitary. Not only did he meet and marry Alice Marshall, daughter of the Port Clyde postmaster, but he also hand-built a number of tiny cottages, which he hoped to fill with like-minded lovers of art and nature. "Here at Land's End we drop the veneer of city life, put on our old clothes and live in peace," reflected Porter in his 1911 diary. "It has



Collection of the Mart family.

Photograph by author.



Photograph by author.



Above This plaque, handcrafted from bronze by Russell W. Porter, marks the entrance to his seasonal community, Land's End.

Top The Christmas Tree Cottage, named for tiny pine tree cutouts on its shutters, faces out to the Atlantic Ocean.

proved itself to be – an ideal place for weary city pilgrims to gather and rest.” By that time, his enclave had grown to a total of fourteen cottages ranged along the granite shore of Marshall Point, each with its own character and motif to reflect the Arts and Crafts design and lifestyle.

Although Porter was drawn to the elaborate, neoclassical Beaux Arts style of architecture during his studies at MIT, the structures he built at Land's End seem to have been inspired by nature, his time in the Arctic, and local architectural traditions. He oriented the structures toward the best vistas of Port Clyde Harbor or the rolling Atlantic Ocean, and strove to integrate his buildings as seamlessly as possible into their natural surroundings. For instance, the long, low eaves of the cottages he named the Christmas Tree (1911) and Swiss Chalet (1912) mimicked the moss-covered beds of granite encircling them. At many houses, tree-bark pergolas guided residents from the outdoor wilderness into raw wood-paneled interiors in a pine-scented transition. Such techniques, combined with Porter's penchant for locally-found materials like fieldstone, raw pine, and cedar shingles, made these cottages shrines to nature as well as shelters from the wild.

Interiors, Furniture, and Lighting

Porter conceived of Land's End as a whole, with every cottage's unique exterior, furnishings, decorative details, and lighting fixtures meticulously planned in advance. The Penguin Cottage, begun in 1911, exemplifies his Porter's approach. Named for the wooden penguin Porter carved and cemented into its fieldstone chimney, the Penguin Cottage manifests the polar theme in every aspect. Porter designed curtains, hooked rugs, and lanterns, all with this chosen motif. He crafted a copper lantern (see next page) to hang over the kitchen door, giving it a distinct oriental influence with a steeply tapered roof and base. The top is decorated on two sides with the silhouettes of penguins, which Porter

Right top Porter served as designer, builder, landlord and handyman of Land's End. Here, he stands on the porch outside the Penguin Cottage, sawing the legs off of a chair.

Right The Swiss Chalet, also known as Maralo Cottage, as seen in 1912.

Below Gabled Ends Cottage (completed 1917) demonstrates Porter's awareness of Shingle Style and Arts and Crafts precedents, including the California houses being built by fellow MIT graduates Charles and Henry Greene.



Collection of Mary Ballard.



Collection of Mary Ballard.



Photograph by author.



Photograph by author.

marked by poking holes through the copper. At night, when the lantern was lit, little penguins shone brightly across the Point.

Porter's drawing, *The Living Room Fireplace*, shows his completed vision for the cottage's interior. Light shines through transparent curtains dancing with tiny embroidered penguins, and two penguins face each other proudly over the carved wooden mantle. The fireplace is surrounded by pine board-and-batten paneling, Porter's wall treatment of choice. In fact, raw or dark-stained pine woodwork is featured in every cottage Porter built, with knots and imperfections embraced and cherished rather than excluded or ignored. In some cases Porter even left the bark on lighting fixtures or furnishings, celebrating the natural beauty of his found materials.

Life at Land's End

Historian Karal Ann Marling has looked closely at the American art colony movement, noting that most of these enclaves appeared between 1880 and 1910 and fell into one of two categories. Some were impromptu colonies that grew organically as a few landscape artists, drawn to a scenic area, eventually formed a community; others were planned from the first, with specific ideologies and goals set out ahead of time. Land's End falls into the second category. Porter's diary outlines his intent to create an colony filled with creative, like-minded folks who could commit to living a simple life. Despite this goal, due to poor marketing and Porter's less than tenacious business sense, Land's End developed into a seasonal vacation community rather than a self-sustaining art colony.

However, Porter did not fail in his attempt to create a peaceful haven for "weary city pilgrims." Land's End attracted a variety of visitors, from artists to engineers to business tycoons. One group that virtually took over Land's End was independent, young, single women—all progressive, politically active, card-carrying suffragists. Alma Waterman, Jane Hyde, and Edith and Francesca Roberts were outspoken advocates for women's rights who summered at the Lobster Trap, the Hyde-Away, and the Penguin Cottage respectively. They bobbed their hair, held voting demonstrations, and performed dramatic

Left, top and bottom The Penguin lantern, which Porter sketched in graphite circa 1912, still hangs on a Porter cottage today.



Left Porter created this drawing as he sat in the completed Penguin living room. Notice the decorative details and penguin motif as well as the Latin inscription (meaning “for you the hearth fire glows”) that Porter added for a favorite pair of tenants.

Right This stained glass depiction of the *S.S. America* was designed and assembled by Porter around 1913 as a memorial to the ship that was his home during his last Arctic adventure. Ice destroyed the ship in 1902.



tableaux, which must have been quite a spectacle to the people of Port Clyde. The Penguin occupants, sisters Edith and Francesca Roberts, were special favorites of Porter’s, who worked on the cottage for six years, making adjustments and additions to fit their specifications. One special feature added at the Roberts’ request was a mantle inscription reading *TIBI SPLENDET FOCUS*, a Latin phrase meaning “for you the hearth fire glows.” While the inscription was obviously appropriate because of its location, there was also contemporary significance

to the phrase. Made popular by Kate Douglas Wiggin’s 1903 novel *Mother Carey’s Chickens*, the phrase connoted the joy of community, hard work, and living close to nature, much like Porter’s vision for Land’s End.

During the summers Porter organized a variety of island adventures and art outings. His constant goal was to bring his residents as close to nature as possible so that they could experience its power and inspiration. Excursions to the islands always included painting lessons, and often lasted overnight so that Land’s Enders

could star-gaze. Porter himself had been obsessed with the night sky since viewing an eclipse in 1893. From that point forward, he was enamored with astronomy and optics, teaching himself how to fashion his own mirrors, eye-pieces, and telescopes—skills that helped a great deal during his Arctic career, as he was able to calculate the most reliable latitude readings with a portable telescope he had made. When Porter arrived in Port Clyde, he determined to build an observatory to house his latest invention, a 16-inch refracting telescope. Despite his years in the North, however, he found himself less than pleased with the chilly Maine nights, which could reach almost freezing temperatures even in the summer. For more comfortable viewing, Porter designed a new “gentleman’s observatory” connected to his home, with a built-in telescope and sundial. After that, Porter and many Land’s Enders could enjoy the skies on cold nights without leaving the warmth of the indoors.

Legacy

In 1919, with new projects beckoning, Porter decided to discontinue the development of Land’s End, where he had constructed fourteen cottages, a guesthouse in the form of a Scottish castle, a community library, and a colony pier. He sold off the cottages to the most

committed Land’s End residents and set off to pursue opportunities that eventually led him to Pasadena, where he joined the team constructing Mt. Palomar Observatory and its innovative new instrument: a 200-inch telescope, the largest of its kind in the world. Porter was irreplaceable as the scientific illustrator for the project, often interjecting architectural insights that helped shape the unprecedented structure. He documented the telescope in cutaway drawings, an art form he pioneered (fellow artist Maxfield Parrish dubbed him the “Cutaway Master.”) His contributions to the field led his colleagues to honor him by naming craters on the Moon and Mars named after him.

Below left With its overlapping flat surfaces, straightforward construction, and button-pattern cutout decoration, this pine armchair recalls the designs of C.R. Mackintosh, Frank Lloyd Wright and the Wiener Werkstätte. Both this chair and the rocking chair were made by Porter for the Swiss Cottage, where they still reside.

Below right Though constructed by Porter for the same cottage as the armchair above, this 1912 rocking chair is much more akin to the slat and spindle designs popularized by Gustav Stickley. The pegged wooden joints connecting the arms to the legs are left visible, demonstrating the honesty and simplicity of the chair’s composition.



Collection of the Parsons family.
Photograph by author.



Above In Lobster Trap Cottage, Porter purposely placed the large hearth adjacent to a bank of tall windows (not visible in photograph). Even on chilly days, occupants could sit comfortably in the corner nook or rush-seated chair and enjoy panoramic views of the Atlantic.

Right Russell W. Porter and his wife Alice Marshall Porter stand on the rocky shore in front of the Penguin Cottage. With his two favorite accessories, pith helmet and safari jacket, Porter appears ready for one of the island excursions that he organized daily for residents.

While he never again lived at Land's End as a permanent resident, Porter and his family returned every summer. His affection for the small village ran so deep that he requested to be buried there upon his death. Although Porter passed away in 1949, his dream of creating an art haven lives on. Through the years, Port Clyde has inspired many artists, including N.C. Wyeth, Andrew Wyeth, Rockwell Kent, Kenneth Noland and Greg Mort. Directly and indirectly, Porter's vision of an artists' colony influenced all of them.

In 2007, Land's End celebrated its 100th anniversary. That summer, a group of concerned residents gathered to discuss the future of the community and the conservation of the cottages. After petitions to the Maine Historic Commission, Land's End was nominated to join the registry as a Historic District in the fall of 2008. This new designation ensures that Porter's legacy will remain preserved and protected for generations to come.

Now based in Washington, DC, Kamissa A. Mort grew up summering in Land's End with her parents and twin brother. This article grew out of the thesis she wrote while pursuing her MA in the History of Decorative Art through the program offered by the Smithsonian Associates and Corcoran College of Art and Design. She sends a special "thank you" to the community of Port Clyde and to the National Archives and Records Administration for their help and support, and to Mary Ballard for use of her photographs.

Collection of Mary Ballard.



Collection of Mary Ballard.

To Learn More

For information on Russell W. Porter's arctic exploration and astronomical innovations, see *Russell W. Porter, Arctic Explorer, Artist, Telescope Maker*, by Berton C. Willard.

Five Land's End cottages are for rent every summer on a weekly basis. For more information on how you can visit Port Clyde and live in history, visit www.truehall.com or contact Diane Hall at 207-372-8952.

To explore a collection of art, artifacts, and photographs pertaining to Land's End and Russell Porter, visit the Marshall Point Lighthouse Museum (PO Box 247, Port Clyde, ME 04855; www.marshallpoint.org).