A Day in the Life: ELLSWORTH

RUTH FOSTER
AN ELLSWORTH ICON

explore
WOODLAWN MUSEUM

THE GRAND'S
NEW EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
NICK TURNER

PARKS & PUBLIC SPACES

AND MORE

BDN

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Ellsworth is the city you pass through to get to almost any point in Down East Maine. Located at the junction of U.S. Routes 1 and 1A, Hancock County’s historic shire town is also served by state routes 3, 172, 179, 180, 184 and 230. At summer’s peak, experienced drivers can navigate High Street’s Bar Harbor-bound traffic and the tree-lined arteries that slice through downtown.

Things slow down a bit in December, a good month to linger and experience Ellsworth at its best. Brimming with history, music, food, and some of the finest shopping this side of Freeport, the city of about 7,800 rolls out the welcome mat with a Christmas parade, house tours, theater productions, and downtown decorations.

“Ellsworth was the first city I ever visited,” said historian and author Sanford Phippen. “Growing up down the road in Hancock Point, it was where I saw my first circus, attended carnivals, basketball games at City Hall, enjoyed takeout food at Jasper’s, and saw my first movie, ‘Dumbo,’ at the Grand Theatre.”

Phippen included his memories of the city in the books “The Police Know Everything,” “People Trying To Be Good,” and “Sturge,” a memoir that he edited of his late friend, Sturgis Haskins, with whom he spent much time in Ellsworth. Today, he teaches Maine literature at the city’s Hancock County Higher Education, affiliated with the University of Maine at Augusta. He said that, with all it has to offer, Ellsworth has grown in a good way.

“Certainly, this place has changed, like all cities,” said Darlene Springer, an Ellsworth native and town historian. “For the past decade or so, our slogan has been ‘Ellsworth: Business, Leisure, Life.’”

Springer has amassed a photographic collection of the Union River town’s churches, businesses, fire hose company and schools. Many are for sale at Tim Torrey’s Old Creamery Art and Antique Mall at 13 Hancock St. She put together a book chronicling the city’s worst disaster, the fire of May 7, 1933. Started by an arsonist, it destroyed much of downtown. Firemen ran for their lives, leaving hoses attached to hydrants still running.

Ellsworth survived that inferno, rebuilding much of downtown, as it had after the great 1923 flood. It also weathered the 19th century lumber center’s decline, erecting in its place a thriving commercial, arts and retail hub. L.L. Bean, Renys and Courthouse Gallery Fine Art, established in 2006 by Michael and Karin Wilkes, draw visitors. Maine Coast Memorial Hospital continues to expand, and the Jackson Lab has converted a former Lowe’s home supply center into research space where it will employ hundreds.

The Ellsworth Historical Society offers a December open house, with the sheriff’s house, located at 40 State St., decorated in a Victorian style. Be sure to ask about the town’s
founding in 1763 by Benjamin Milliken and Benjamin Joy, lured by the region’s timber and water power. Dams and sawmills were built, along with the first schooner in 1773. Union River Settlement later became Ellsworth, and celebrated in 1838 when the county seat was moved there from Castine, and in 1869, when the Legislature made the town a city.

There is also history and culture to explore in the Ellsworth Public Library, 20 State St., based in a historic 19th century mansion. Public events are scheduled throughout the month.

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High tea and tours are December highlights at Woodlawn museum, the 1820s-era home of wealthy land agent Col. John Black. The Grand Theatre hosts the Nutcracker ballet and other productions during the holiday season. Hungry shoppers have a choice of downtown restaurants, ranging from The Mex, Finn’s Irish Public House, Riverside Café, and Cellar Bistro.

Your first visit to Ellsworth likely will not be your last. A return visit next summer may include rides on the Down East Scenic Railroad, a visit to the Telephone Museum and Birdsacre, and outdoor concerts in Harbor Park. There is no end of places to explore in this welcoming community.
WHERE HISTORY COMES ALIVE
Exploring Woodlawn Museum, Gardens and Park

BY MATT CHABE

The house sits alone at the top of the hill, its gaze fixed over a vast lawn and what was once an unobstructed view of the Union River. For nearly a hundred years, this sentinel bustled with family activity. Entire generations were born, grew, lived and died here.

No one’s lived here since 1928, but that doesn’t mean the Woodlawn Museum in Ellsworth is silent. It still bustles, but in a different way. Thousands of visitors come to walk its halls each year and experience 19th and early-20th century life for themselves through the house and its surrounding grounds.

The Woodlawn estate (known locally as “the Black house”) was built between 1824 and 1827 from plans commissioned by John Black, the house’s first occupant. Black, credited as an early founder of Maine’s lumber trade, moved his family into the home in 1827. For nearly 24 years, the Blacks lived in the house, acquiring fashionable furniture from Boston shops like chairs, bureaus and bedstands. John Black died in 1856; his second wife, Frances, followed in 1874.

The house then passed to John’s son, George. When George died not long after in 1880, the house was passed on to his son, George Nixon Black, Jr. (or “Nixon,” as he was known). Born in Ellsworth, Nixon was a shrewd and successful businessman who spent most of his time in his Boston estate. Nevertheless, he cherished Woodlawn and summered there, indulging in horses, dogs, parties and antiquing trips.

A view from the dining room into the south parlor. Furnishings from John and Mary Black's earliest years can still be seen here, including a porcelain tea and coffee set dating to 1802, the year of the Blacks's marriage.
During these years, Nixon added an assortment of antiques to the house but left his grandparents’ furnishings in place. Before he passed away in 1928, he made arrangements and requests to have Woodlawn preserved as public space. With remarkable foresight, he left many handwritten notes—still visible today—describing the legacy of individual furnishings.

Today, the house and grounds are stewarded by the Hancock County Trustees of Public Reservations. Its furnishings remain virtually unchanged. It’s easy to imagine generations of the Black family walking among the halls. Ledgers remain on desks, linens still rest on beds, and portraits of friends and family adorn the walls. Souvenirs and keepsakes abound of the Black’s remarkable history.

Woodlawn and its grounds are open to the public 365 days a year, and the staff boasts that they haven’t missed a day since 1929. Over 3,000 people visit the museum each year, treating themselves to tours of the house and its grounds. Almost half of those visitors comprise students, getting up close to objects and learning the value of history in an intimate, immersive way.

Woodlawn’s expansive grounds feature New England’s largest croquet court, which hosts friendly games and tournaments. Most events are open to the public, and the “regulars,” said Joshua Campbell Torrance, Woodlawn’s Executive Director, are gracious to newcomers but have a “friendly competitive streak.”

In addition, each summer Woodlawn hosts the Ellsworth Antiques Show, the longest-running antiques show in the U.S. Dealers from around the nation come to this renowned event to present an array of quality antiques and art to casual browsers and shrewd collectors alike.

To ensure the continued preservation of this public space, the Woodlawn board of Trustees recently embarked on an ambitious fundraising campaign, the “Campaign for Woodlawn.” The campaign will raise funds to build and improve space for programs, visitor services, events, gatherings and more.

For nearly 200 years, Woodlawn has stood on the hill just outside of downtown Ellsworth. Despite that, Woodlawn might be more well-known to visitors from outside the region than from within it. It might be time to pay the Woodlawn estate a visit yourself.

This elliptical staircase rises in the center of the main house. The tall-case clock was a gift to John Black from American Revolution General Henry Jackson, according to a handwritten note inside.
When you hear the name Ruth Foster, you may immediately think of the long time children’s clothing store in downtown Ellsworth. That, however, is simply window shopping.

What is behind that storefront is a caring and giving woman known to many as an example of trust, respect, equality, perseverance, kindness and consideration.

Micki Sumpter, Ellsworth’s Economic Development Director, has known Foster for about 20 years.

“[Ruth] keeps active, always working on a project and the community benefits from her work,” said Sumpter. “She practices what she preaches and is good for all people.”

Others equate Foster to being a strong public servant, the epitome of volunteerism, and a pillar of the community.

After raising two daughters in her 40s, she wanted a new challenge. That triggered a political career. Foster served on the Ellsworth City Council and was mayor during some of that time. “That was the greatest job,” she said.

But Foster didn’t stop there. She then traveled to Augusta, serving four terms as a state representative and then two terms in the Maine senate, leaving a lasting impression for her ability to mediate, persuade, resolve and compromise.

Foster is known for her many political contributions, especially her 1984 landmark legislation concerning the welfare of Maine’s children that remains in effect today. While on the judiciary committee, Foster developed the law which made mediation mandatory in contested divorce cases. The Maine Supreme Judicial Court honored Foster for her work, and she was named Legislator of the Year in 1988 at the Maine State Alcohol and Drug Abuse Conference.

For State Senator Brian Langley of Ellsworth, Ruth Foster has been a mentor. “Ruth has tremendous institutional knowledge with a keen political mind,” he said, and he still receives guidance. “In the back of her store there are two camp chairs and a table, and that’s where we sit. She has no shortage of insight or opinions, and I cherish the ability to talk with someone who has had this job.”

Admirers refer to her as “one of a kind.” Her attention to Maine and the greater Ellsworth community did not stop with her political career. Foster is founder of the Maine State Cultural Affairs Council, served as president of the Stanwood Wildlife Sanctuary and Woodlawn Museum, and she has served on the boards of Bar Harbor Bank & Trust, Maine Coast Memorial Hospital and Maine Coast Memorial’s Health Foundation. “I have been on boards and this and that,” she said.

In addition, she’s been the proprietor of a children’s clothing store which has anchored Ellsworth’s Main Street retail district for the past 33 years. “When I was in the legislature, I had people coming to my house all the time, and so I needed an office,” she said. After retiring from politics, Foster turned that office space into a profitable business. “I didn’t even know how to run the cash register, but I wanted to have fun with whatever I did next.”

As for what is next for the spry 88-year-old, that is not known, but it’s clear there are no plans for retirement. As only Ruth Foster could say it—“Who retires? You don’t retire.”
Day in the Life: Ellsworth

A NEW ACT AT THE GRAND IN DOWNTOWN ELLSWORTH

New exec director brings fresh acumen to old favorite

For Jim Pendergist, a 30-year-plus supporter of The Grand in Ellsworth, The Grand represents vibrancy: “I love the excitement, the atmosphere, and the ever-changing cycle of events.”

Nothing is stagnant, everything changes, Pendergist observed: “The vibrancy and diverseness of the Grand is what makes it successful.”

Since 1938, the historic art deco theater on Ellsworth’s Main Street has offered entertainment from Metropolitan Opera performances to films, from children’s workshops to live theatre.

Now, there’s a new captain at the helm of this vibrant ship—Executive Director Nick Turner. Turner comes to Ellsworth via Fort Collins, Colo., where he most recently served as a co-founder and sponsor of the Fort Collins Fringe Festival and a theatre artist-in-resident in the Integrated School of the Arts Program. In addition, he was a co-owner and managing producer of Nonesuch Theatre and served as CEO of the Candlelight Dinner Playhouse, a state-of-the-art, 380-seat dinner theatre in Colorado.

“I do an astounding amount of research and preparation into anything creative I’m about to venture into,” said Turner. “Most of it pales in comparison to the imaginative impulse and inspiration I get from other people.”

You could say The Grand’s new executive director brings a “new performance” to the stage: “I do a little teaching, a little directing, a little writing, and a little acting,” he said, “and I focus on joy above all else.”

The Grand relies on money from programming, memberships, grants, donations and fundraising to operate. In Turner, The Grand’s board of directors saw someone with the experience and mindset to help the theater grow.

“Nick has experience with for-profit theaters. He understands how to set and manage budgets and how to attract sponsors,” said Carla Haskell, president of the The Grand’s board of directors. “We really liked this aspect of his background, and it set him apart.”

Haskell said having Turner as a new team member to work with the board will position The Grand “as an exciting, vibrant place for art, education and entertainment in a big way.”

Turner acknowledged the task at hand.

“It’s my responsibility to give patrons a reason to come through the doors and a reason to be proud of what they see,” he said. “My ‘talent’ for engaging and encouraging creatives and being inspired to pursue joy in what we create together is what I see for The Grand. I firmly believe everyone is creative and has the potential for genius.”

Ellsworth native Teri Sargent grew up a patron of The Grand.

“Saturday afternoons were spent watching movies at The Grand,” she said. “I remember bringing my children to the Nutcracker Ballet, seeing live performances, a magician or a puppeteer. All are held fondly in my heart.”

Sargent said when The Grand holds an event today, the downtown comes alive with patrons dining and shopping.

“It’s a magical experience for both young and old,” she said.
EXPLORE ELLSWORTH
Things to do

PARKS

HARBOR PARK AND MARINA
Home of the Ellsworth Marina with summertime events including concerts in the park, a boat dock and slips, and picnic tables.

KNOWLTON PARK
An open green space with picnic tables, playground and splash pad.

S.K. WHITING PARK
Features a tower clock and benches.

DONALD A. LITTLE PARK
Features picnic tables

MERRILL PARK
With benches

SWIMMING AREAS

SAND BEACH
at Branch Lake

MILL POND PARK
at Branch Lake

NICOLIN PARK
at Green Lake

WALKING TRAILS

BIRDSACRE SANCTUARY
An excellent place to hike during the summer or snowshoe and ski during the winter.

BRANCH LAKE PUBLIC FOREST
Three miles of trails passing through various forest types along a stream to a large marsh and to the shore of Branch Lake.

INDIAN POINT TRAIL
The spectacular view of Ellsworth and the Union River is easily worth the short hike out to the end of the point.

WOODLAWN PARK
Cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, running and walking.

RIVERFRONT TRAIL
Behind the Ellsworth Public Library

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PLACES OF NOTE

ELLSWORTH PUBLIC LIBRARY
Located downtown on the banks of the Union River.

DOWNEAST YMCA
The YMCA offers programs for all ages, childcare and events throughout the year.

THE GRAND
A historic performing arts center located in the heart of downtown Ellsworth. Offering live from the Met, children’s performances, live theater and movies.

WOODLAWN MUSEUM
Provides a glimpse into the social and domestic conditions of the 1800s as well as an interactive museum for many events and organizations. The grounds include miles of walking paths. Ellsworth’s largest park. Open year round.

STANWOOD BIRD SANCTUARY
This facility is a gem in the middle of the city, consisting of 157 acres of land, four miles of walking trails, a museum and many species of birds.

ELLSWORTH WATERFRONT PARK AND MARINA
Home of the Ellsworth Marina with summertime events including concerts in the park, a boat dock and slips, picnic tables, and a fabulous display of wildlife.

OUTDOOR MOVIES
In Knowlton Park. Free outdoor movies by Under The Stars and Ellsworth Arts.

ELLSWORTH CONCERT BAND
Weekly performances during the summer months at Harbor Park & Marina on Water Street.

COURTHOUSE GALLERY
Contemporary and period Maine artists in a beautiful historic space listed on the National Historic Register.

TIMBER TINA’S GREAT MAINE LUMBERJACK SHOW
A live lumberjack show featuring chopping, sawing, ax throwing, log rolling and more. Fun, family friendly entertainment with “the Olympics of the forest.”

DOWNEAST SCENIC RAILROAD
Join this historic tourist passenger rail on a round-trip excursion from Ellsworth to Washington Junction and back. The ten-mile trip takes approximately 90 minutes.

THE TELEPHONE MUSEUM
Real working telephones, switchboards, and switching systems from throughout history are featured at this hands-on, interactive museum.
Ellsworth is proud of its school department, and rightfully so. Now, it’s wearing that pride on its figurative sleeve.

The school recently unveiled an academic and athletic “hall of fame” program to honor exemplary alumni from throughout the years.

“We wanted to recognize some of the great things that our alumni are doing, and celebrate that,” said Dan Clifford, Ellsworth High School’s Principal.

Every year, said Clifford, the school invites successful alumni to return to speak to the students.

“It’s really just to let [the students] know that there are people out there that took the same classes, have walked the same hallways, had the same teachers that [they’re] having right now,” he said. “And to show that [the alumni] are a product of the education at Ellsworth High School and [students can be] like that person.”

The hall of fame programs—one each for academics and athletics—stagger biyearly. The first of them, the academic hall of fame, rolled out last fall, inducting seven alumni into its ranks. Later this year, the athletic hall of fame inductees will be announced. A dedicated committee for each hall of fame reviews nomination forms from the community and weighs them against their own criteria.

“You hear a name and you need to research,” said Clifford. “For the academics, it’s [criteria like] what they’re doing now, and how successful they are, and what career they’re in. For the athletic, it is mostly based on their high school career. And so that is looking at old yearbooks and at individual awards and team awards that they may have been a part of.”

Inductees are recognized at the high school’s fall homecoming weekend during the football game, and then later at an induction dinner.

Clifford is optimistic about the effect the recognitions will have on his students.
WHAT'S OLD IS NEW AGAIN AT STRIKING GOLD

COURTESY STRIKING GOLD JEWELERS

Go beyond traditional recycling and have your old jewelry rendered into something brand new! For decades, Striking Gold Jewelers in Ellsworth has recycled the gold, platinum, silver, diamonds and other gemstones from customers’ old jewelry to create new custom pieces with unique stories. Jewelers, designers and owners Peter and Leesa Farnsworth welcome you to explore the many new opportunities your old jewelry can offer you.

People recycle their old jewelry for many reasons. It may be broken beyond repair, not your style, or you desire a new family heirloom that combines many pieces and memories. Whatever your reason, you will come away with something new that you will love and cherish. You’ll be surprised at how affordable it is!

At Striking Gold Jewelers, you’ll take a trip back in time—back to when jewelry was made entirely by hand, before the advent of modern technology and the industrial revolution. With the exception of a dremel-style handpiece and the polishing lathe, all work is performed by hand. All work is done onsite by the jewelers. Peter is a master bench jeweler who has been fabricating for over 45 years, while Leesa—also a bench jeweler—has been fabricating for over 29 years.

The process is truly fascinating. Your old jewelry is melted down then hand-rolled through steel plates into different shapes. The torch is the “ultimate eliminator” of bad memories, yet it perfectly preserves the meaningful ones.

Don’t have any old or broken jewelry? No problem—Striking Gold can use the same hand fabrication processes using newly-recycled pure gold. Either way, your new piece of jewelry will reflect your personality because you assist in the design process. Choose from the many unique designs Striking Gold offers in-store, or bring your own design for a piece that’s truly one-of-a-kind.

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