



Business History

Dirigo Hotel

Address: 45 High Road

City: Southwest Harbor

State: Maine

Map and Lot: Map 5 – Lot 43

Map: CS 1887 - Dirigo Hse

Date Founded: 1881

Duration: 1881-1960

Original Owner: Holden - Cummings Milliken Holden (1837-1895)

Date Built: 1881

1881: "The Hotel Dirigo was built about 1881 for Cummings Holden, who conducted it as a popular summer hotel for some years. An item in a newspaper of 1884 speaks of the excellence of the meals served at the Dirigo and the courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. Holden, who were ever solicitous for the comfort of their guests. After the death of Mr. Holden, his nephew, S.R. Clark, took over the management of the house and built a large addition to the original building...Mr. Clark was ever popular with his guests and the house was always filled for the season. In 1923 the place was purchased by Leslie King, whose heirs now own and conduct it as a summer hotel." - Traditions and Records of Southwest Harbor and Somesville, Mount Desert Island, Maine by Mrs. Seth S. Thornton, p. 164 - 1938.

1892: "Mr. and Mrs. Holden of Hotel Dirigo, have returned from Boston, where they spend their winters and are busily engaged in preparing for the early arrival of summer guests. Hotel Claremont has already made a good beginning, and rooms are engaged for a large number of visitors who will arrive in July. Right here a good thing comes to me which will bear repeating. When interviewed and urged to join the Hotel Mens' Association, whose avowed platform must take every prohibitionist blush with shame and boil in indignation, the Claremont proprietor declared "that politics had ever been and ever would be founded on principle and not for the grand and lucrative business of selling rum would he perjure his conscientious ideas of right by endorsing such grossly wrong sentiments." Let us hope and trust there are many more like-minded hotel men in Maine." - The Ellsworth American, July 2, 1892.

S.R. Clark was Schuyler R. Clark, the son of Wilford E. Clark, brother of Julia Ann Clark Holden who married Cummings Milliken Holden, and therefore Cummings Holden's nephew.

Clark - Schuyler Randall Clark (1872-1953)

1923: "In 1923 [Sic] the [Dirigo] was purchased by Leslie S. King, whose heirs now own and conduct it as a summer hotel." - "Traditions and Records of Southwest Harbor and Somesville, Mount Desert Island, Maine" by Mrs. Seth S. Thornton, 1938, p. 164.

Leslie S. King (1879-1936) purchased the hotel on October 17, 1922.
King - Stanwood Hart King (1905-1996) and his wife
Thurston - Elizabeth M. (Thurston) King (1905-2009) ran the hotel from c. 1927 until it
burned on September 3, 1960.

1960: The Dirigo Hotel burned on September 3, 1960. Note that the Southwest Harbor Town Report for 1960 says the hotel burned in October of that year.

1960: "...about two A.M. I noticed a strange rosy glow coming through the gap in the curtains [at the Sinkler's cottage, "Wasgat Cove" on Manchester Road in Northeast Harbor]...The woods to the northeast were bright orange, like sugar maples in October after a hard frost...

"I got up and looked out a window facing west. The whole sky was crimson and swirling billows of black smoke were rolling up [Somes] Sound propelled by the violent storm, pushing ahead of them fountains and festoons of sparks...even the water looked like molten lava. I roused Wharton...We decided Hinckley's Boat Yard must be burning. That was about two miles away as the crow flies...

"However, it proved to be ...nearer than we guessed. It was a nice old-fashioned wooden hotel [the Dirigo Hotel in Southwest Harbor], which had been struck by lightning and burned to the ground...

"I shall never forget...that inferno of fire sweeping up the narrow Sound." - "Leaves Folded Down" by Louise E. [Elkins] Sinkler, privately published in a limited edition of 300 copies and a second edition of 500 copies of which the Southwest Harbor Public Library copy is number 228, Haverford House, Wayne, Pa., 1971, p. 203-204.

1960: "When the Dirigo Hotel burned on Monday night, September 12 1960 during Hurricane Donna, I was twenty-two years old and a member of the Southwest Harbor Volunteer Fire Department.

In the morning everyone else went off to work and I stayed at the Dirigo fire site all day Tuesday, occasionally spraying water on the smoking remains of the hotel. With me was the fire department's "pumper", which was a tank truck that had been converted from an oil truck.

Later, when the fire department bought the La France tank truck, this "pumper" was sold to the Swans Island Volunteer fire department. Subsequently, while on the way to a fire on Swans Island, the pumper rolled over and was demolished.

In those days Eugene Robbins [Eugene Sprague Robbins (1904-1994)] was fire chief. "Buzzy" Beal [Elmer Lawrence "Buzzy" Beal (1920-2010)] was assistant chief and everyone was alerted to local fires by "red phones" located in the houses of the volunteers and, in Buzzy's case, also at Beal's Wharf on Clark Point. There was also a red phone at the town office.

When a fire was called in, the red phone rang and the first person to get the call went to the fire station and pulled the alarm that blew the fire whistle according to a code that designated the location of the fire. For instance one long blast meant ten and four short blasts would be four for a total of fourteen.

All the townspeople had cards in their homes that explained the code, so they'd know where the fire was." – Oral History given by Kenneth Urban Hutchins (1938-) to Meredith Adelle (Rich) Hutchins, Mrs. Kenneth Urban Hutchins – 02/2011

For more information about the old hotels on Mount Desert and others of their era see - "Summer By The Seaside: The Architecture of New England Coastal Resort Hotels, 1820-1950" by Bryant F. Tolles, Jr., 2008.