

05.13.2024

MESSAGE THROUGH TIME AFTERWORD

Emma Duncan Crooker was born Sept. 17th, 1836, in Bath, Maine, to Charles Crooker and Rachel Sewall Crooker. At age eighteen, she attended the *Ipswich Female Seminary*, Ipswich, MA., 1854-1855. She married shipbuilder Arthur Sewall (her third cousin), in Bath in 1859. Her first son, Harold Marsh Sewall, was born in 1860; her second son, William Dunning Sewall, was in 1861. Her third son, Dummer Sewall, was born in 1864, and died at age two.

Her husband, Arthur, envied her education at IFS. His education came in the form of direct shipbuilding experience, including a trip to Nova Scotia aboard one of his father's ships to procure timbers to make into masts for schooners.

“Emma was shy and reserved, at times reclusive, yet never passive. Emma personified Thomas Merton's philosophy when he said,

Our real journey is interior. A matter of growth, deepening, and surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts.

Emma's independent thinking was her driving force; she was shaped by this more than any single event in her life. Intense devotion to intellectual and philosophical clarification steered her to a life of the mind. It was the way she thought about things – the deliberate integration of formal education with her strong female sensitivity and pioneering spirit – that informed the artist-photographer.

Photography gave Emma license to explore the values and insights acquired by her inquisitive mind. She was unafraid, even proud, to draw from all these parts of herself in her search for the common thread, the unifying theme. This inner-directed thought gave her a way to step out of herself, and the cultural assumptions about her class and sex, to empower her photographs. By defying social boundaries of what was possible, she far exceeded the expectations of women in her day.” – “Message Through Time,” by Abbie Sewall

1860's – 1870's. Summer trips with her sons kindle desire to create imagery.

1884. Travels by railroad in U.S., and starts to experiment with photography using the dry-plate method.

1880's. Joins Postal Photographic Club, originating out of Fitchburg, MA.

1894. Invited to join the Boston Camera Club (perhaps the first female to join); receives two Postal Photographic Club first prizes for *On the Marshes* and *The Mowers*.

1895. Receives three Boston Camera Club awards: first prize for most artistic merit for *Unloading Marsh Hay*; first prize for technical merit for *An Afternoon in February*; and the diploma for greatest general excellence. Four photographs hang in Paris at the Photo-Club of Paris: *The Clam Diggers*, *Fording the River*, *Small Farmhouse-interior*, and *Feeding the Hens*.

1896. Receives Boston Camera Club first prize for *Harvest Time*, *Indian Summer*, *Autumn Ploughing*, *Study for Miss Wilkins*, and *The Village Blacksmith*.

Husband Arthur nominated for Vice-President at Democratic Convention, Chicago; William Jennings Bryan and Sewall defeated by McKinley and Hobart after bitter partisan treatment by the press.

1897. Received Boston Camera Club award for best figure composition for *The Search* and *Village Blacksmith*.

1898. Receives Boston Camera Club award (sterling silver bowl) for Illustrated Subject Competition for *When the Day's Work is Done*.

1899. Small Point (Maine) summer home, The Dunes, is completed. Alice Cutler, niece/companion of sixteen years,

dies.

1900. Arthur Sewall, husband, dies.

In mourning over loss of husband and niece, Emma becomes reclusive, spending all but the coldest months, at The Dunes.

1905. Completes folklore history of Small Point area, *The Rivers and Marshes of Small Point*, including her depiction of the 1849 Wreck of the Hanover. Published posthumously.

1906-1919. Continues reclusive lifestyle in the fashion of other Transcendentalists of the day (Emerson, Thoreau, Emily Dickinson, with an emphasis on the search for meaning.

1919. Sept. 29th, Small Point, Emma dies in her sleep.

A FEW PHOTOGRAPHS BY EMMA D. SEWALL

from

A Message Through Time: The Photographs of Emma D. Sewall 1836-1919
by Abbie Sewall, Emma's GG granddaughter, Harpswell Press, 1989.



Emma and Arthur at home in Bath, Maine





The Fairbanks House, oldest home in Mass.



The Clam Diggers



Whetting the Scythe



Fording the River



He Cometh Not – Alice Cutler on the rocks at Small Point



Pulling Traps



When the Day's Work Is Done



The Search

MESSAGE THROUGH TIME

The Photographs of Emma D. Sewall 1836-1919



ABBIE SEWALL

Note:

I grant permission to use photographs by Emma D. Sewall if credited with the following information:

“Title of work, by Emma D. Sewall from *Message Through Time: The Photographs of Emma D. Sewall (1836-1919)*, by Abbie Sewall, Emma’s GG Granddaughter. Harpswell Press, 1989. All rights reserved.”

I am pleased to report that the creative life of this early pioneering photographer has not only been preserved but continues to receive visibility today. It started with my discovery of her as a teen. Later in my thirties, I was able to piece together her life and work into my book, *Message Through Time*. During a time when women’s lives were valued for how many children they bore, not for what they accomplished independently, the book became a six year’s long challenge to uncover the life of (another unseen) Victorian woman. As an example, Emma’s obituary was four lines long, while her husband’s obituary was four pages.

While researching and writing about Emma, I had to be careful that the inspiration I felt through her photographs and creative spirit did not become embellished by my own imaginings of who she might have been. My publisher ensured my writing remained biographical, as in ‘just the facts.’ Since then, all societal and cultural boundaries have fallen, even in literary genres. Thankfully, today’s biography can also be magical, or spiritual, include fiction and emotional bias. Had I been allowed by my publisher I would have included my personal story in *Message Through Time*. However, thirty-five years after publication, I have a deeper understanding of my relationship with Emma, and I am free to write about it here. Age has granted me hindsight and clarity, so perhaps the timing is perfect.

Emma’s spirit filled my heart more than anyone I had known, and provided the context for a larger world, despite the fact she lived three generations before me. Not only did I feel I knew her, I felt I was her.

Although I never found a journal or diary (she probably destroyed it), writing was one of her creative outlets. Late in life, she authored *The Rivers and Marshes of Small Point*, a lyrical folklore history of the

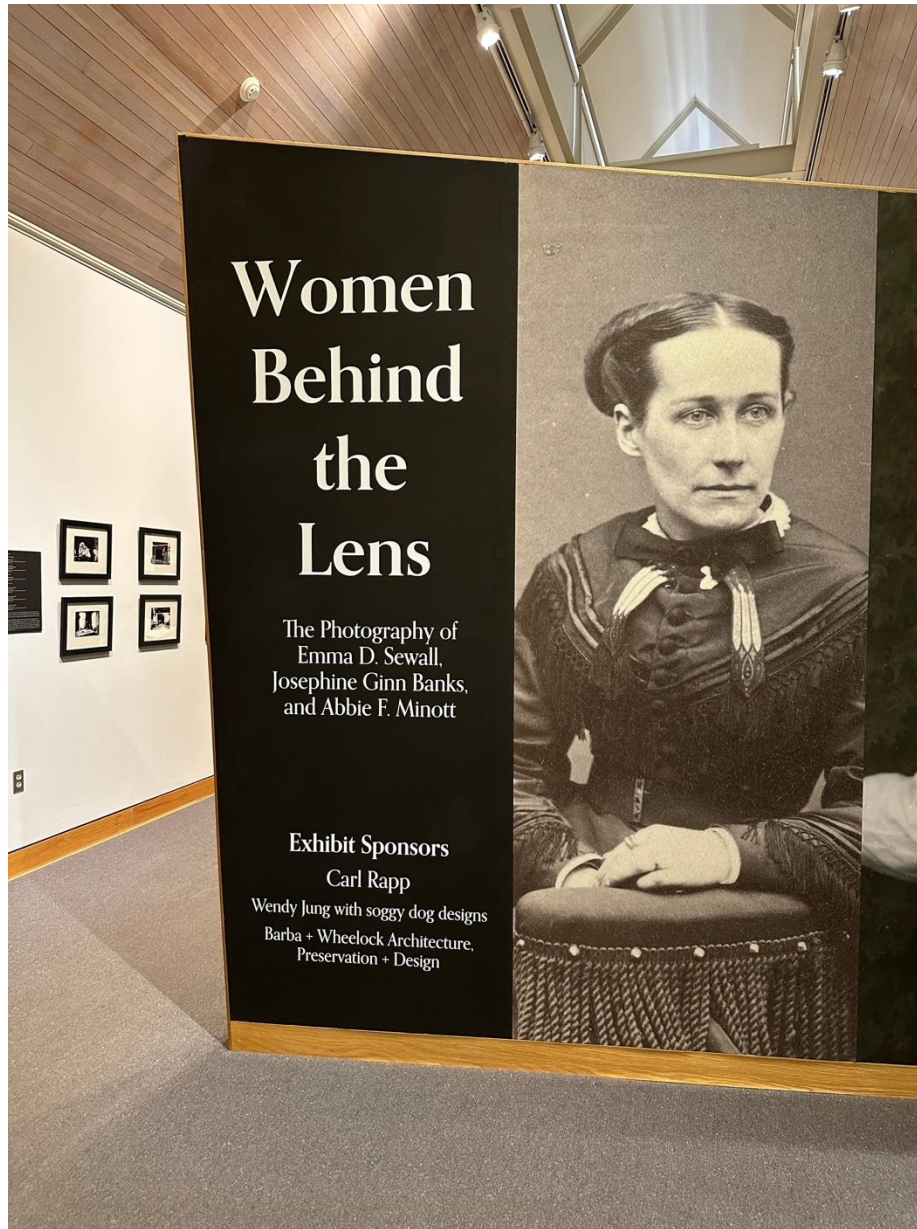
part of the Maine coast she had grown to love. She also composed a primitive rolodex of axioms – one for every day of the year -- as a birthday present for her son, William. Each truism is another window into her soul and could be read as a kind of diary. Many of the axioms were from Transcendentalist thinkers. The books she left behind point to a love of Nature and Botany, French, poetry and history. Among her books were the Transcendentalists (Emerson, Dickinson, Thoreau, etc.), as well as the teachings of Emanuel Swedenborg, the Swedish mystic and philosopher.

The life she chose was always outside the limelight of her husband's shipbuilding and political career. Feeling the pressure, Emma reluctantly succumbed to the requests by the press for a photographic likeness of the wife of Arthur's candidacy for Vice President of the United States of America. She gave the press only one portrait of her for use during the entire 1896 Presidential campaign, and only towards the end of it.

Most of her time was spent privately, at first as a young mother with her sons, and later with her camera and photography. While she learned photography in the late 1880's, she could have chosen as subject matter the elites and luminaries from her husband's broad social circle. Instead, Emma preferred working with their servants and fishermen, blacksmiths and farmers, as if she knew the world was about to change with the dawn of the Industrial revolution. Or perhaps because she felt more comfortable with people closer to the earth.

The publication of *Message Through Time* has established Emma's legacy and kept it alive. Emma's photographs have spread through a multitude of uses: a handmade soap label, historical trail signage in Bath; a fine art cherry wood carving on permanent public display by master carver, John Bryan; inclusion in various books and exhibits. Most recently, Emma is represented in the book, *A History of Women Photographers*, by Naomi Rosenblum (1994); and in *Maine Photography 1840-2015*, by Libby Bischof, Susan Danly and Earle Shettleworth (2016).

2022 was a big year for Emma. Her photographs were included in the exhibit, *At First Light*, at Bowdoin College; a Boston Camera Club exhibit at the Wellesley, MA. Library called *Past & Present*; and at the Maine Maritime Museum in Bath Maine, *Women Behind the Lens*, a three-woman photo exhibit featuring Emma D. Sewall, Abbie F. Minott and Josephine Ginn Banks.



Maine Maritime Museum, *Women Behind the Lens*, (Dec.2022 – Dec.2023)

EMMA AS MOTHER

The above abbreviated sketch of Emma doesn't tell the whole story. I can't ignore Emma's influence on my life. It started like this. I stood alone in the living room of *The Dunes*, Emma and Arthur's beloved summer home in Small Point, Phippsburg, ME. At the time, I was a sheltered, aimless fifteen-year-old girl visiting relatives in Maine from my home on an island in the Pacific Northwest. Something happened in that moment that can only be described as an out-of-body experience. While gazing at scores of antique wavey-glass framed photographs by Emma on every wall in the room, I was transported. I experienced a cord of bright white light emanating from my core, traveling across the room and through the plane of the

photograph(s) to the other side. Behind the photographs, behind the windows of her vision, the bright light led me through, and I was left with the questions that would change my life forever. Who was this woman to me? What do I need to learn from her? In that moment, my DNA reconfigured into an obsession, a passionate flame of desire – to know her.

Emma was the first woman in my fifteen years of life to present as independent from her counterpart. My mother, and the mothers on either side of my childhood home, as well as other mothers in the neighborhood from the upper middle-class culture of my youth, were tragic, voiceless, and alone – despite being married with children. Cut off from any greater purpose, the need to perform work or have a career, depressed and stupefied by nightly cocktail hour on top of prescriptions for Valium, these women were ‘privileged’ enough to be relegated to an isolated life of domesticity. That was my experience of mothers in the 1950’s and ‘60’s. My mother was so lonely she forced her twice weekly cleaning lady to have a cup of coffee with her before she cleaned house and changed sheets. The mother in the house to the left of ours was not seen outside her bedroom for my entire childhood. According to her children she existed, but I never had proof. The mother to the right of our house dabbled in art until committing suicide. Alcohol and Valium were a lethal mix. The unspoken truth of my mother’s tragedy was that she bore only daughters to the last son in the direct line of Sewalls, one of New England’s first families. (We all know that science has proven it is in fact the father who determines the sex of the offspring).

I didn’t know it while writing *Message Through Time*, but in hindsight, the truth is I adopted Emma as my *de facto* mother. No matter that she had been dead nearly half a century. Returning to school after viewing Emma’s work for the first time at *The Dunes*, I was fortunate enough to take photo class at my small, all-girls private high school. From then on, I lived and breathed photography as if it were the Holy Grail. As if, by spending half my life in the darkroom mastering the craft, I would somehow feel as complete as the child who had a mother. By age fifteen onwards, Emma became crucial to my existence, while my biological mother continued to dissolve into a dejected and miserable shadow of a person. Emma’s spirit in me communicated the vital connection I desperately needed in a way that my own mother never could.

I anchored my life in her spirit. I became a photographer, or you could say, I was “Emma in blue jeans.” Her aesthetic became mine. Invisibly, Emma taught me everything I know. I became a modern-day Pictorial* photographer, in which Beauty is content. But in college, the message conveyed to me by my photography professor was that ‘Beauty is shallow; on its own, Beauty lacks content.’ My re-arranged DNA could not accept that as true.

*** Pictorialism, an approach to photography that emphasizes beauty of subject matter, tonality, and composition rather than the documentation of reality.**

-- <https://www.britannica.com/technology/Pictorialism>

Literally, I’ve spent half my life in the darkroom – alone, where I had some creative control over what life had dished out to me. Emma saved me, I’m sure. Once out of college, I worked as a photojournalist for a small-town newspaper. Next, I photographed Maine characters for the book, *The Voice of Maine*, by William Pohl and myself. For fifteen years, I worked as a stock photographer for *Getty Images*, and as a wedding photographer up and down the coast of Maine.

From 1983-1989, while my two children were young, I researched the life of Emma for *Message Through Time*, which involved making 4 x 5 copy negatives of Emma’s prints and glass plates, scouring the attics of relatives (needle in Victorian haystack), researching the archives of museums and historical societies for scant documentation of this post-Puritan woman of early New England. Following publication of *Message Through Time*, I also taught black and white wet photography at a small New England prep

school for nineteen years. In short, becoming fully engaged in photography was my way of being close to my mother.

One of the many discoveries made along the way was the value of learning history. None of my teachers ever articulated to me, or I failed to see the obvious – that the importance of history is that it connects us. All those stories are our stories, and they made us who we are. In school, I never understood why we needed to know about British Imperialism, tribes in Africa, or even early American colonialism. What did that have to do with me, and my life? The answer came to me through Emma. To learn who she was I had to know the time and context in which she lived, the societal issues, politics and religions of the day. At age seventy-two, my curiosity for history and genealogy is unquenchable. Thank you, Emma.

I also discovered that five generations of my ancestors were followers of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), the Swedish Christian scientist, philosopher, and mystic. Emma's father-in-law, William Dunning Sewall (1795-1877), and a few other Bath, ME. Swedenborgians built Bath's *Church of the New Jerusalem* that still stands today.



Church of the New Jerusalem, Bath, Maine

Johnny Appleseed spread the writings of Swedenborg along with apple seeds. Several of the Transcendentalists represented by Ralph Waldo Emerson, the founder of the movement, Henry David Thoreau, and Emily Dickinson followed the teachings of Swedenborg. William James, the “father of modern psychology,” Walt Whitman, William Butler Yeats, Robert Frost are just a few who were influenced by Swedenborg's teachings. Not all these names attended a Swedenborg church, of which there are still many across the globe, but they were “attracted to Swedenborg since he allowed art to have

a psychological dimension, linking it to (wo)man's inner quest for spirituality and transcendence.”

-- <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1541643990?sourcetype=Scholarly%20Journals>

This description of Swedenborg's link between art and the spiritual psyche is a perfect match to Emma's reserved, internal life where private intensity reigned.

Recently, I have revisited Swedenborg, and was reminded that I too, am a Swedenborgian descendant, which is a philosophy closely aligned with Buddhism. Until recently, I had forgotten that I was baptized in the Bath *Church of the New Jerusalem* when I was seven years old in 1959. (I have the Bible and documentation to prove it). I find it so strange that neither my parents nor my grandparents ever spoke to me or my sisters about this spiritual/secular view of the world, of which I am the sixth generation of Sewall's to subscribe.

Emanuel Swedenborg wrote 110,000 books, periodicals, and special collections. I am lucky that some remain in our family library. As a child, I always felt left out of the fold, for my parents did not attend a church, which meant I grew up outside any church community. I wish I had known that I *did belong* to a spiritual community, which could have helped guide my life. For the more I read of his teachings, the more assured I feel of my intrinsic beliefs, and the more connected I feel to something that makes sense and is larger than myself. In retrospect, Emma's life also transmitted the teachings of Swedenborg to me by the way in which she made art and lived the internal life of the mind.

“Swedenborg believed that (wo)man could use his "internal" mind to interpret the external universe, and, by doing so (s)he would reach a higher state of mind in contact with spiritual essences.”

-- <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1541643990?sourcetype=Scholarly%20Journals>

So how has Emma influenced my life? What was my life as a student, as a mother and wife, as an adult? For one, I needed glasses. I didn't see the night stars until I was a senior in high school. Without glasses high school homework and reading were difficult. Second, as the oldest of four daughters, I was preoccupied with trying to fix my parents' all-consuming drama of unhappiness. They were from the Greatest Generation, that generation who would rather die than admit failure or weakness, or ask for help. Presenting to the world from a place of strength at all costs, success and white privilege were paramount. In my parents' case, it was literally the death of them, and Emma was my salvation.

“You are not your thoughts. Thoughts come and go, but you are not your thoughts.” I've heard that spoken to escape 'monkey mind,' and self-criticism, to get deeper into your essence, as a spiritual being. Admittedly, in my case it was the opposite. Unaware I was creating a lifeline, I conjured a reality through my out-of-body connection to Emma, and as I gained knowledge of her life.

At the time I researched, wrote and printed her photographs for the book, I was under the impression that I was constructing a photo-biography of my great-great grandmother, simple as that. Many years later I realized I was furtively creating my mother, and photography was the tool to get me there.



For Emma D. Sewall, *The Clam Digger*, by Abbie Sewall.
This photograph was taken at the same location as Emma's *Clam Diggers*.



Abbie Sewall was born in 1952, and grew up on a small island near Seattle. She graduated from Goddard College in 1975, and pursued a career in photo-journalism before co-authoring *The Voice of Maine*, published by Thorndike Press. Abbie lives with her two children in Bath, Maine.