

# Maine Homes by Down East

## Preserving a 19th-Century Writer's Party Pad

Taking cues from beyond the grave, Carla Baade Turner is returning author Kate Douglas Wiggin's Hollis home to its former glory as a genteel summer retreat (and party spot).



*ABOVE The farmhouse is nestled in the Hollis village of Salmon Falls.*

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For 25 years, the 1797 farmhouse known as Quillcote, which looms in doleful black and white over the Saco River in Hollis, has been painstakingly decorated with help from a dead woman. "Not like a ghost that bangs around and knocks over furniture," owner Carla Baade Turner says. "But I could tell you 15 stories where I started out with plan A for a room, ended up with plan B, and discovered afterward that there was documentation that plan B was what Kate had."

"Kate" is Kate Douglas Wiggin, an educator and author best known for her 1903 children's novel *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, which she wrote while staying in the home as a summer tenant. Wiggin had spent part of her childhood in a cottage across the street, where she watched the expansion of the seven-bedroom farmhouse with Greek Revival styling and dreamed of owning it one day. In 1905, she got her wish, and she and her sister renamed the place Quillcote, meaning "house of the pen." The home became a writing retreat and party spot for Wiggin, a savvy self-promoter who schmoozed with the likes of H.G. Wells and Mark Twain. An unpretentious decorator, she wrote that "all furnishings were to be as beautiful and fitting as possible, but . . . nothing was to be rare or expensive." The grandest gesture is an 1820 mural of a harbor by famed New England painter Rufus Porter she found beneath wallpaper in a bedroom.





*ABOVE* Owner Carla Baade Turner sometimes borrows from the author's wardrobe when giving tours. A harbor mural by 19th-century painter Rufus Porter animates a bedroom in author Kate Douglas Wiggin's former home that is staged with her clothing and other belongings.

Kate Douglas Wiggin summered at Quillcote until her death in 1923. Sixteen years later, the Turner family converted the home into a summer camp and, in the ensuing decades, most of the author's Colonial Revival décor was removed or covered up. In the late 1990s, the aging Turner matriarch sold the house to her son, Carla's late husband, Bill, and the couple, both history teachers and Wiggin admirers, began recreating her abode. They thought of themselves as "stewards," Carla says, never owners.

Along the way, Carla sometimes got what she calls a "killer vibe" — a hunch to pursue a certain color or pattern that she would later discover mirrored Wiggin's choice. Like the time she abruptly stopped painting the kitchen trim green and returned to the paint store for a colonial blue that turned out to be Wiggin's selection. The Turners became increasingly confident they were on the right track when Bill, alone in the house one day, claimed he heard a woman's voice say, "Come on in; you're going to like it. It's a whole lot more like it used to be."

Indeed, Quillcote feels like a living museum, with painted floorcloths, damask and Toile du Juoy wallpaper, displays of willowware, and loads of Victorian-era furniture and artwork that approximate pieces depicted in Wiggin's albums and journals. Whole parts of the house remain staged when not in use, like the bedroom with the Porter mural, where Wiggin's silk robe is spread on a lacy canopy bed and her velvet slippers peek out from beneath the frame.



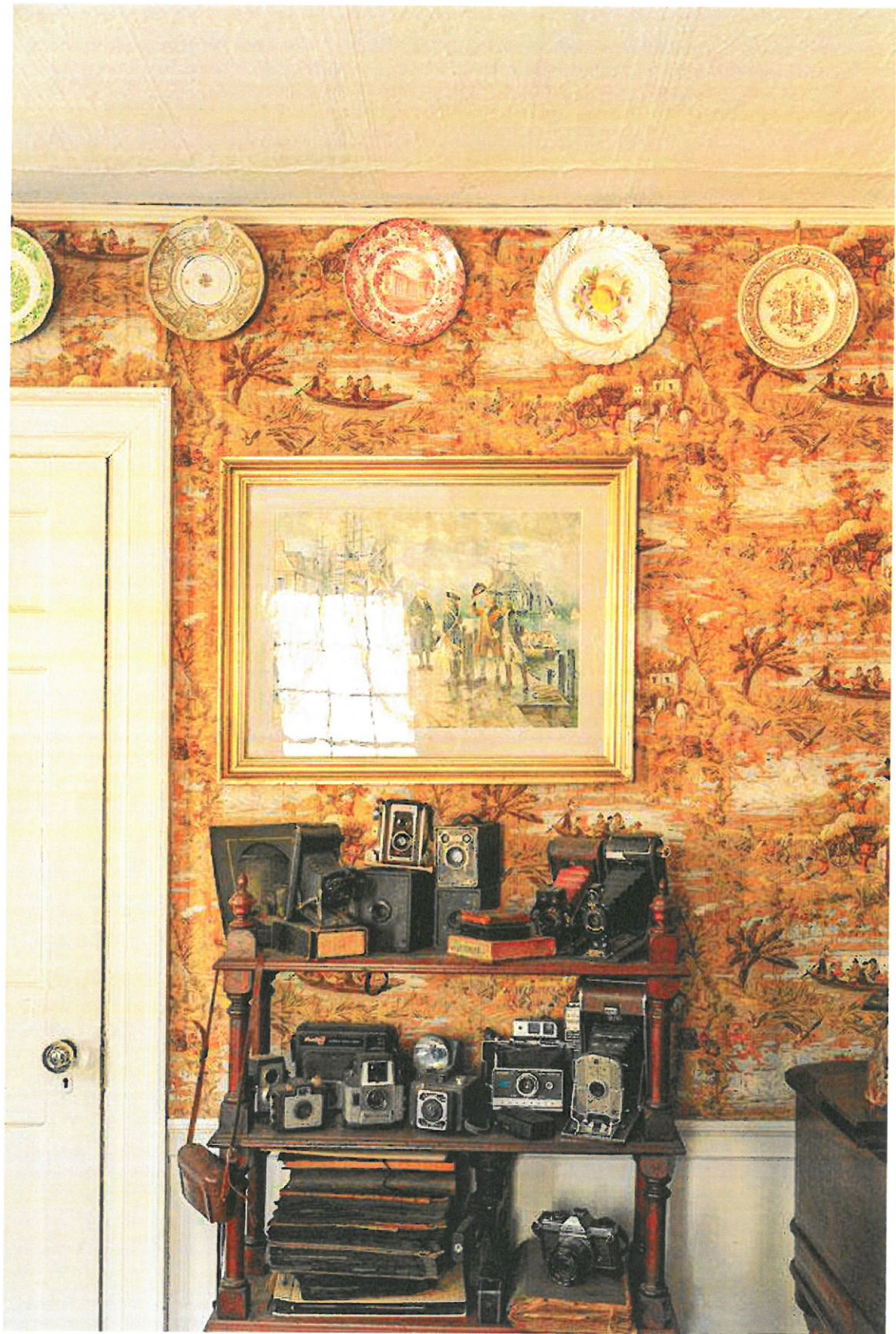


*ABOVE Wiggins's beaded-velvet pumps, beaver-fur hat, and embroidered-velvet bolero are displayed on her steamer trunk in the bedroom with the Porter mural. Nearby, a Victorian-era dressing table is laden with Wiggins's toiletries.*

After Bill died in 2014, Carla channeled her grief into the restoration. She glazed most of the home's 65 windows by hand, rebuilt a side porch, covered the dining room ceiling with pressed tin, repainted the floors, and relentlessly reorganized. "There wasn't a piece of furniture I didn't move, thinking, well, if I just rearrange the furniture, then my life will be better," she says. Today, Carla's partner (and amiable ghost skeptic), Frank Walsh, has helped temper her furniture-moving impulses, but her drive to preserve, and even embody, Wiggin's memory is unwavering. She rereads Wiggin's autobiography over her morning coffee, absorbing details to inform her Quillcote tours, which she gives by request to school and other local groups. During the visits, she often wears Wiggin's black moire skirt and matching beaver-fur hat and pauses in the hallway to note a portrait of the author she thinks looks uncannily like her. Sometimes, the kids get confused and call her "Kate."

Still, even kindred spirits can disagree. Recently, Carla was removing Wiggin's peeling wallpaper in the main stairwell and discovered a mural, likely another Rufus Porter, this one of bare trees dotting yellowed, late-autumn fields. "It was like, 'Oh my God, I found King Tut's Tomb!'" says Carla, who is now waiting for representatives from Bridgton's Rufus Porter Museum of Art and Ingenuity to weigh in.







**ABOVE** *In the music room, the author's camera collection mixes with devices owned by Turner and her father-in-law. Perhaps another Porter mural was recently discovered under wallpaper in the stairwell.*

In the meantime, she lost sleep. "Every time I do a project or make a change, I always think, would this be all right with Kate?" she says. "And I just couldn't understand why Kate would have papered over that mural." She lay awake on the night of the discovery, trying to envision concealing the painting, as Kate Douglas Wiggin had.

And then, morning's clarity. "Covering up that mural would be like finding something in an archaeological dig and saying, 'We're going to put it back where it was,'" she says. And so, after more than two decades of taking decorating direction from beyond the grave, Carla has finally defied her ghost. "I want to be able to look at the mural," she says. "I don't know, I guess I like it."