

**Moments in Malta History**  
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*In Honor of Women's History Month (March) –  
Katherine Anne Porter, American Novelist: Her Home in Malta*  
By Teri Ulrich

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In honor of Women's History Month (March), Malta remembers great American novelist, Katherine Anne Porter, who made her home here in 1941. This uniquely talented woman—a maverick in her lifestyle, personality, politics, and craft – will always claim a special connection to Malta through the beloved modified Georgian farmhouse at 165 Cramer Road which she named “South Hill” and wrote lovingly about in her short story, *A House of My Own* (1941).

Born into poverty in 1890 in Indian Creek, Texas, Callie Russell Porter (as she was first named) shined on the American literary scene by 1922 and was the subject of public fascination for decades until her death in 1980. She was an acclaimed novelist (*Ship of Fools*, 1962) and wrote many short stories; her works are said to be largely autobiographical—revealing her own personal turmoil and moral conflicts, but also her acute political consciousness of the international climate of the post-World War I years, World War II, and the rise of Communism and Fascism. Ever the brilliant and sensitive artist, Katherine Anne Porter (as she came to call herself) had alternate stretches of immense productivity as a writer and bouts of melancholia and ill health. Her style and beauty were matched only by her literary genius, making her a widely-popular novelist still today.

Always an avid traveler and having grown accustomed to moving frequently to secure writing and teaching jobs, Porter nonetheless longed for permanency and roots. She wrote to a friend in the late 1930's: “The truth is, I want to have a house of my own, where I can put my books and papers and little dear worthless belongings and I want to sleep and wake in that house, and work in it, and fuss with it a little for the rest of my days.” (from Darlene Harbour Unrue, *Katherine Anne Porter: The Life of an Artist*, 2005, p. 183).

Biographer Unrue writes of how Katherine Anne found her “dream house” in Malta in January 1941 while on retreat at Yaddo, the writers' colony in Saratoga Springs. She “reached the summit of the Albany Post Road that overlooked the valley, [and she] saw her dream house, a two-story, seven-room house sitting on a knoll behind tall maples surrounded by rolling woods and meadows and facing a forest preserve [Luther Forest] of eight thousand acres of pine and spruce trees.” (Unrue, p, 183) She offered \$200 as a

downpayment; \$1800 would complete the purchase, due in May. She told the realtor: "...this is my house. That is settled. I am going to have it." (Unrue, p. 184).

Katherine Anne set about on an ambitious remodeling plan—moving walls, demolishing porches, installing plumbing and heating and lighting—preparing to move in on May 15, 1941, her fifty-first birthday.

The importance she attached to this house emanated from deep psychological longings for independence, stability, and security—things she had not had in her fragmented life from childhood to adulthood. The joy she took in buying South Hill and her soulful feelings about how this special place would heal her hurts, inspire her creativity, and ground her are revealed in the words of a letter she wrote to her fifth husband (whom she divorced soon after) in late January 1941: "And here I am, happy in some way that I was never before....;if only I can have my place to stay and be able to work to keep it pleasant and to care for it properly, I want nothing more....and everything I lost before in this world will come back to me there. Just think, when I plant a tree now I can stay to see it grow, when I work and spend what I have on the house, I do not have to leave it just when it is becoming pleasant to live in. Just think, never again do I have to depend upon anyone else for anything and I can make what plans I like, then carry them out in my own time and way, and the house and the whole landscape around it will look as I would like them to, little by little, year after year." (Unrue, p. 184)

She worked at making payments on the house by taking on speaking engagements at colleges, by finding assignments to teach, and by continuing to write. Nonetheless, the cold upstate New York winter, the social isolation she felt, and the overwhelming tasks of rehabilitating and maintaining the house daunted her; she left South Hill late in the year for trips to rejuvenate her state-of-mind and fragile health, while trying to persist in her writing and financially support her fine tastes, her travel, and the "house of [her] own."

The dream of South Hill was not to last for Katherine Anne. Despite great, but sporadic, enjoyment of her home—parties with literati like Truman Capote and visits by Eudora Welty (who took memorable photos of Katherine Anne there) – the house became too much for her, and she abandoned her initial notion of making this her permanent home.

In 1946, Katherine Anne Porter received a phone call from Toni Willison, wife of another acclaimed American novelist, George Willison (*Saints and Strangers*), some of whose writings Porter had reviewed. Mrs. Willison mentioned that she and her husband were looking for a house in upstate New York—a coincidence which allowed Katherine Anne to solve her problem of having to upkeep South Hill. Arrangements were made for the Willisons to purchase the home, on which Porter would continue to hold the mortgage. This financial arrangement caused the Willisons and Porter to remain in regular and affectionate contact for decades; their correspondence can be found today at the University of Maryland Library, home of the Katherine Anne Porter Society.

So, the Willisons became Malta residents by the late 1940's and flourished at South Hill. Their son, Malcolm, now a writer and educator of note, wrote a magnificent poem for *Malta Memories* about his mother, Toni, at the family home.

The Porter-Willison House was designated a Malta Town Landmark in 1991 and today is the home of Thomas Nolen.

Driving by this stately home today with its beautiful architecture and bucolic surroundings, it is easy to see why Katherine Anne Porter fell in love with it at her first visit there in January 1941. Her passion for the house drew her heart back to it for years, although her temperament would not allow her to make it her lifelong residence. It is fascinating to reflect on the possibility that the spirit of the mercurial and brilliant Miss Porter is still alive there today—charming us into a walk back in time at a place where one of American's literary icons found a house of her own.

To Malta, Katherine Anne Porter will always, in part, belong.