

April 2

[Feature obituary: Helen Wentworth, 106, held Acton's Boston Post Gold Cane](#)

By [Dennis Hoeydhoey@mainetoday.com](mailto:Dennis.Hoeydhoey@mainetoday.com)
Staff Writer

It was a question that her friends, her former students, and her family would often ask: What was Helen Dunnells Wentworth's secret to living such a long life?

PASSAGES

Each day the newsroom selects one obituary and seeks to learn more about the life of a person who has lived and worked in Maine. We look for a person who has made a mark on the community or the person's family and friends in lasting ways.

"She'd say, 'I really don't know,' " her daughter, Joyce Cunningham of Acton, recalled.

Mrs. Wentworth died Thursday, just two days shy of what would have been her 107th birthday.

A longtime resident of Acton, Mrs. Wentworth has held the town's Boston Post Gold Cane since 2002 – a recognition given to a town's oldest citizen.

"She was really looking forward to her birthday party," Cunningham said. "We were planning a big party."

Mrs. Wentworth was born March 31, 1905, in the York County town of Newfield. She graduated from Ethan Stone High School in Newfield.

The high school no longer exists because it was destroyed in the great forest fires of 1947 that swept across Mt. Desert Island and York County. The fires destroyed more than 170,000 acres.

Mrs. Wentworth's parents' home in Newfield was burned by the fires. At the time, Cunningham was a student at the former Gorham Teachers College, now the University of Southern Maine.

"It was a pretty scary time. I can remember that we couldn't find my grandparents," Cunningham recalled. "It was like a war zone."

Cunningham said her mother went in search of her parents, who had fled to safety in their car.

After graduating from high school, Mrs. Wentworth started teaching in a one-room schoolhouse, while taking summer courses at Gorham Normal School. She eventually earned a lifetime teaching

certificate.

She taught at schools in Acton, Waterboro and Milton Mills. She was not allowed to teach full time in 1929 – the year she got married – because school administrators would not allow married women in the classroom.

"Teaching was her great love. The one thing she regretted was not having done more of it," her daughter said.

After getting married, Mrs. Wentworth focused on raising her family. In 1935, she give birth to premature twin boys, Harlan and Erlan.

"They were not expected to live," Cunningham said. "But she was determined to keep them alive."

Her sons survived and now live in Acton and Newfield, respectively.

Throughout her life, she taught as a substitute teacher at a number of area schools, earning her students' respect and admiration.

"She evidently had a very profound effect on a lot of people," her daughter said.

A few years ago, a former first grade student of hers held a surprise birthday party for Mrs. Wentworth at a local restaurant.

And on her 104th birthday, a former student from the one-room schoolhouse came to visit her – on what happened to be his 100th birthday.

Cunningham said her mother exercised and ate well throughout her life. She was a petite woman, weighing about 115 pounds. She liked to snowshoe in winter and tend to her flower garden during the summer months.

"She was always busy," her daughter said. "I don't think I ever saw her just sit and do nothing."

Donations in Mrs. Wentworth's memory should be made to the Helen D. Wentworth Educator's Fund. The fund is being overseen by the Acton Congregational Church and will be used to provide financial assistance to church youths or adults who want to become a teacher.

Staff Writer Dennis Hoey can be contacted at 791-6365 or at:

dhoey@pressherald.com

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