

*Elizabeth
Bishop's
Postcards*

Exhibition Guide

Colophon

This guide accompanies the exhibition, *Elizabeth Bishop's Postcards*, held at Key West Literary Seminar's Elizabeth Bishop House in Key West, Florida, from March 6, 2025 to May 3, 2025. The section titles, section descriptions, and item descriptions are the work of Jonathan Ellis of the University of Sheffield and Susan Rosenbaum of the University of Georgia, curators of the exhibition; with support from Ronald Patkus, head of special collections at Vassar College Library.

See the exhibition catalog, *Elizabeth Bishop's Postcards: An Exhibition (2025)*, for reproductions and transcriptions of the postcards, and essays by Ellis, Patkus, and Rosenbaum.

Design

Topos Graphics

Production

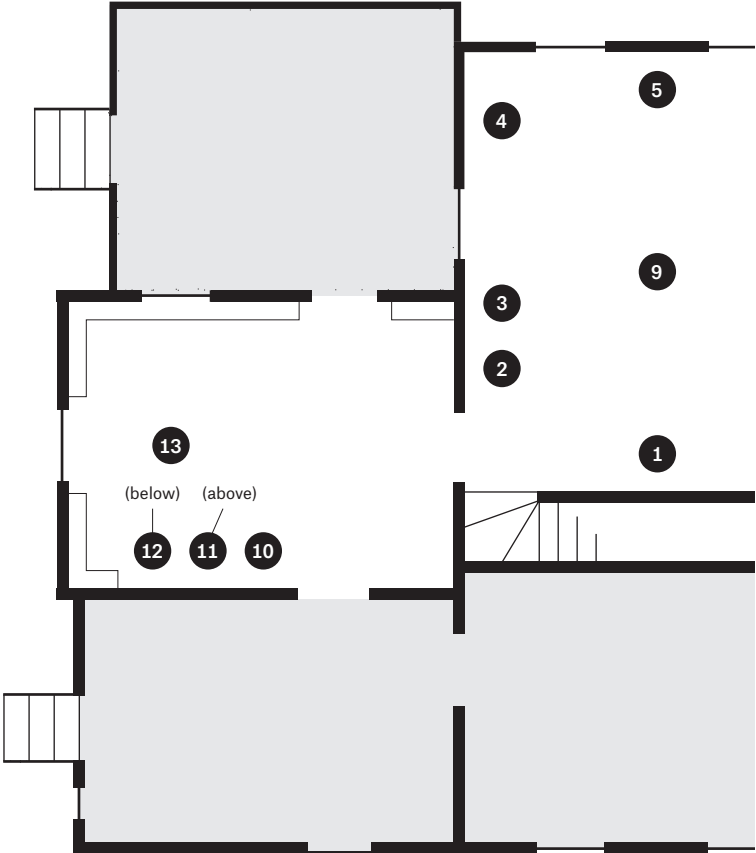
The Prolific Group

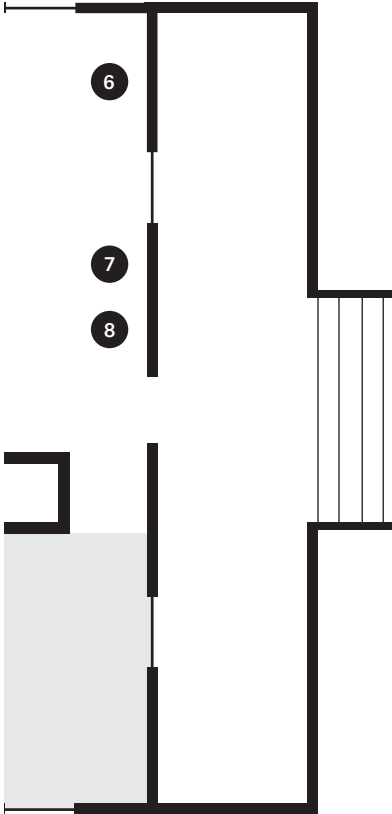
Facing page

Photograph of Elizabeth Bishop in Key West, about 1940. Elizabeth Bishop Papers, Archives & Special Collections Library, Vassar College.



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Introduction

Thirty-two years ago, the Key West Literary Seminar dedicated its annual January event to the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop. The program was the brainchild of John Malcolm Brinnin, one of our founding leaders, who gathered together poets who had known Bishop well, such as James Merrill and Frank Bidart, with scholars, editors, and curators who were on the leading edge of Bishop studies.

Bishop was highly regarded as a poet during her lifetime (1911–1979). Her laurels included the Pulitzer Prize, National Book Award, and National Book Critics Circle Award, a rare “triple crown” of American letters. But Brinnin was among a small group who understood that scholarly and popular interest had grown toward Bishop in the years since her death, a wave which would uncover previously unknown elements of her artistic and intellectual output and, in doing so, broaden her impact beyond poetry alone. At the 1993 Seminar, Bishop’s paintings were exhibited for the first time, curated by William Benton. Her letters received their first public audience, read aloud by Robert Giroux, who was

finalizing his landmark selection of her personal correspondence, *One Art*. Her former Key West home, at 624 White Street, was dedicated as a Literary Landmark by United for Libraries.

Bishop's reputation continues to increase. She is the subject of feature films, documentaries, exhibitions, plays, and countless books. Her work is perennially reissued, reprinted, mined, and reinterpreted for the ever-expanding audience of her readers. And, as readers learn more about the totality of Bishop's creative output, their understanding of her work is also expanding. The latest example is this exhibition of her postcards, drawn from the Vassar College Libraries and brilliantly curated by Jonathan Ellis and Susan Rosenbaum. As we complete our restoration of Bishop's Key West home and devote it permanently to her legacy, we are honored to host this vital exhibition and delighted to contribute to the joy that so many find in Bishop's work.

Arlo Haskell

X marks the spot

One failsafe way of identifying an Elizabeth Bishop postcard is the wobbly arrow or X she liked to add to the front of a postcard to indicate her precise location. The postcards in “X marks the spot” draw attention to the precise places where Bishop is in the world—from Newfoundland in 1932 to North Haven in 1979, via Key West, Washington, Rio de Janeiro, and Seattle in the years between—and to the odd sense that she is not fully in any of these places, at least not emotionally. The “X” on the front of the postcard marks the temporary position of the poet’s physical body in time and space, but it doesn’t give us the full coordinates.

- 1 Unsent postcard of Cumberland Road, Great Village, Nova Scotia. Handwritten note by Elizabeth Bishop on verso. Circa 1910s.
- 2 Postcard to Frani Blough Muser. Photograph of St. John's, Newfoundland. August 20th, 1932.
- 3 Postcard to UT Summers. Photograph of [Simonton at Fleming Street], Key West, Florida. December 18th, 1948.
- 4 Postcard to Dr Anny Baumann. Photograph of Library of Congress, Washington DC. October 13th, 1949.
- 5 Postcard to Grace Bulmer Bowers. Aerial view of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. April 27th, 1961.
- 6 Postcard to Loren MacIver. Photograph of University Inn, Seattle. January 8th, 1966.
- 7 Postcard to Dorothee Bowie. Photograph of steamboat, Brazil. June 8th, 1967.
- 8 Postcard to Loren MacIver. Lucille Corcos "Vassar Campus." Reprinted from *Vogue* (1940). May 6th, 1979.
- 9 Postcard to Frani Blough Muser. Map of North Haven. August 30th, 1979.

Queering the Postcard

In an era when people could not speak openly about sexual identity, Bishop's postcards played an important role in the creation of queer community, notably through her subversive captions for stock images, her use of postcard images to convey unspoken queer meaning, her commentary on gender and the gaze, and her practice of writing collaborative postcards with her female partners to other couples. In 1978 the first rainbow flag designed by Gilbert Baker was flown in a pride parade. In 1971 Bishop sent Alice Methfessel an image of a rainbow behind Sugarloaf Mountain in Rio, flying her own postcard version.

- 10 **Postcard to Grace Bulmer Bowers. Photograph of Copacabana Beach, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. October 18th, 1962.**
- 11 **Postcard to James Merrill. Saint Day Card in Greek ("Many Happy Returns on Your Name Day"). May 11th, 1973.**
- 12 **Postcard to Lota de Macedo Soares. Painting by James Collinson, *The Empty Purse* (1856/7). June 26th, 1964.**
- 13 **Postcard to Alice Methfessel. Photograph of Sugarloaf Mountain, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. May 21st, 1971.**

Museum without Walls: Postcard Curation

The diverse kinds of visual art, statues, monuments, architectural structures, and folk crafts depicted on the picture postcards chosen and sent by Bishop alters our understanding of the art and artists she admired. In curating and circulating her own postcard “gallery” Bishop was not guided by established distinctions of taste and value: instead she chose art that touched her in some way, putting into practice the ideal of small, intimate artworks that can be “passed” from “hand to hand,” which she described memorably in “Poem.” Through picture postcards Bishop extended and transformed the museum’s reach, integrating art into everyday life and humble environments.

Elizabeth Bishop's Postcards

- 14 Postcard to Loren MacIver. Painting by John Marin, *Vicinity, Cape Split, Maine* (1937). September 28th, 1978.
- 15 Postcard to Loren MacIver. Invitation to exhibition of paintings and drawings of Kit Barker. December 1950.
- 16 Postcard to Lloyd Frankenberg and Loren MacIver. Painting by Camille Corot, *The Artist's Studio* (1860). 1957.
- 17 Postcard to Alice Methfessel. Painting by Francesco del Cossa, *Allegory of Autumn* (1455). April 1971.

The Camera's Eye: Postcards, Photography, Film

Bishop's postcards reveal her avid interest in photography and film. Her postcards depict snapshots by photographers including Bernice Abbott and film stills of Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and Greta Garbo, and often mention films she had seen. Bishop took up what she called the "bourgeois sport" of photography, and she intentionally reshot postcard "views," deeming her images superior. Bishop's Muybridge motion-study postcards reflect her understanding of the postcard as a literal form of "moving image," while their text conveys the influence of the postcard on her compact, verbal-visual, "work away from home" poetics.

Elizabeth Bishop's Postcards

- 18 Postcard to Frani Blough Muser. Photograph of Pointe du Raz, France. September 5th, 1935.
- 19 Postcard to James Merrill. Photograph Eadweard Muybridge, *Goat Walking* (1887). January 23rd, 1979.
- 20 Postcard to James Merrill. Photograph by Eadweard Muybridge, *Camel Galloping* (1887). November 20th, 1978.
- 21 Postcard to Lloyd Frankenberg. Sculpture by Aleijandinho, *Amos* (1800-1805). June 24th, [1961?].
- 22 Facsimile image of color slide by Elizabeth Bishop. Sculpture by Aleijandinho, *Ezekiel* (1800-1805). Circa late 1950s/early 1960s.

Animal Tears

Bishop's poetry has been a rich source of material for critics who have written about the relationship between the human and the animal. The animal postcards in particular articulate emotions like grief with astonishing frequency and vulnerability, including a 1966 postcard of a baby seal sent to her Brazilian friend, Rosalina Leão. Bishop treated some animal postcards as talismans, including a postcard of Albrecht Dürer's *Little Owl* which she praised for its "soothing" qualities.

- 23 Postcard to Frani Blough Muser. Drawing of a pelican, with light verse. Circa late-1930s.
- 24 Postcard to Loren MacIver. Photograph of a stag. July 8–9th, 1977.
- 25 Postcard to [Grace Bulmer Bowers]. Painting by Albrecht Dürer, *Das Käuzchen/The Little Owl* (1506). January 22nd, 1975.
- 26 Postcard to Rosalina Leão. Photograph of a baby "pup" seal, Point Defiance Park Aquarium, Tacoma, Washington. Circa 1966.

Planes, Trains and Automobiles

Questions of travel were at the center of Bishop's life and writing long before she wrote a poem partly answering them, questions not just about why people move from one place to another, but why goods, mail, and even ideas are transported too. Postcards offered a unique opportunity to pose these questions as she was literally traveling. Almost every means and mode of transport is represented in the archive's collection of postcards. The exhibition showcases a representative sample, from her travels to Europe on a Nazi boat to the funicular train that travelers use to ascend Sugarloaf Mountain in Rio de Janeiro.

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- 27 Postcard to Frani Blough Muser. Painting of Königstein. August 24th, 1935.
 - 28 Postcard to Dorothee Bowie. Clipper card for The Witchcraft (circa 1857). April 23rd, 1978.
 - 29 Postcard to Loren MacIver. Photograph of Grand Union Hotel, Saratoga Springs. July 26th, 1949.
 - 30 Postcard to UT and Joe Summers. Photograph of the road from Rio de Janeiro to Petrópolis, Brazil. Circa 1957.
 - 31 Postcard to Loren MacIver. Photograph of Funicular to Sugarloaf Mountain, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (with Elizabeth Bishop's handwritten caption "Never!"). July 15th, 1956.

Postcard Histories

Bishop reflected regularly and wittily on postcard conventions and her own postcard practices. This [section] includes evidence of her postcard collecting, including postcards from her own family. An image of Great Village from the perspective of the Bishop house doubles as a Christmas card from Bishop's uncle, Arthur "Art" Bulmer, to his sister, Maude Bulmer Shepherdson. In 1972 Bishop recycled a card titled "To my dear Aunt" that had originally been sent from Windsor, Ontario, to accompany a short letter to *ber* "dear" aunt, Grace Bulmer Bowers, the dedicatee of "The Moose."

- 32 **Postcard from Arthur Bulmer to Maude Bulmer Shepherdson. Photograph of Great Village, Nova Scotia. Early 20th century.**
- 33 **Recycled postcard with image titled "To my dear Aunt" enclosed in a letter to Grace Bulmer Bowers. Original postcard sent from Ontario, Canada in 1914. Re-sent by Elizabeth Bishop on May 4th, 1972.**
- 34 **Postcard to UT and Joe Summers. Panoramic photograph of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. February 15th, 1963.**

The Sea and Its Shore

In addition to frequently living near the ocean, Bishop did her best to share these sea views with her family and friends via postcards. Her messages on the other side of the seashore view often reference completely different places entirely however, almost as if the shoreline was a place for reflecting on past or future journeys, very rarely present-day impressions. Littoral zones fascinated Bishop throughout her career, signifying any kind of edgeland that couldn't be accurately represented on a map.

- 35 Postcard to Lloyd Frankenberg and Loren MacIver. Photograph of Copacabana Beach, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. 1962.**
- 36 Postcard to Magú Costa Ribeiro. Driftwood sculpture of Napoleon, Emeryville Mudflats, California. March 10th, 1968.**
- 37 Postcard to David Staines. Photograph of Tidal Bore, Truro, Nova Scotia. Circa 1970s.**
- 38 Postcard to Loren MacIver. Photograph of "Lobster Buoys." July 10th, 1978.**

The Art of the Postcard: Home-made and Hand-Crafted Cards

Bishop's interest in the picture postcard extended to creating her own postcards and modifying postcards she purchased. She often wrote witty captions directly on the picture. On the message side, she made careful choices involving postage stamp, whether to type or write the message, and how to space and punctuate it. Bishop also made her own postcards: examples include a 1936 photocard depicting Bishop and Louise Crane as boxers, and collage postcards she created by pasting product labels onto card stock. Her decoration of envelopes, creation of illustrated stationery, and use of hand-crafted postcards to mark a special occasion, reflected the convergence of handicraft and mass media that shaped the history of the picture postcard.

- 39 **Postcard to Lloyd Frankenberg. Photograph of downtown Cos Cob, Connecticut. May 28th, 1949.**
- 40 **Postcard to Frani Blough Muser. Photograph of Blarney Castle, Ireland. June 1937.**
- 41 **Postcard to Lloyd Frankenberg. Photograph of Washington Monument, Public Gardens, Boston. Christmas 1971.**

- 42 Postcard (blank) enclosed in letter to Frani Blough Muser. Elizabeth Bishop and Louise Crane as Boxers. February 14th, 1936.
- 43 Postcard (blank) enclosed in letter to Polly Hanson. Fabric and Glitter Bird with Cherries, "Mil Felicidades." July 27th, 1953.
- 44 Picture-Card of Apple Tree by Elizabeth Bishop to Loren MacIver. October 1950.
- 45 Collage postcard created by Elizabeth Bishop to Rosalina Leão. Lithographed Cigar Box Label by Louise E. Neuman & Co. "Our Aristocratic Friend." Christmas 1957.
- 46 Postcard to Loren MacIver. Collage by Joseph Cornell, *T Lucretti* (1955). April 14th, 1977.
- 47 Postcard to James Merrill. Collage by Robert Motherwell, *Gaulois Collage* (1977). April 25th, 1978.
- 48 Facsimile image of collage construction by Elizabeth Bishop, *Anjinhos*, n.d.
- 49 Change of Address postcard with handwritten note by Elizabeth Bishop. To Pearl Kazin Bell. ca. July 11th, 1955.
- 50 Envelope with Lizard Seal by Elizabeth Bishop. To Alice Methfessel. March 24th, 1971.

Poems: Lost and Found

Postcards, like letters, often contain information about the setting or sources for poems we cannot find elsewhere. Several postcards provide evidence of poems that are now lost or unfinished. Many of the postcards read like prose poems. Nearly all contain images or phrases that we might normally expect in a poem. "You'll excuse my poetics," Bishop half-apologized to her friend Frani Blough Muser in a postcard, as if aware her mind was already thinking about more than one genre simultaneously.

- 51 Postcard to Loren MacIver. Photograph of Harvard Yard, Cambridge. Circa 1972.**
- 52 Postcard to [Grace Bulmer Bowers]. Photograph of Boston baked beans. November 9th, 1974.**
- 53 Postcard to Frani Blough Muser. Photograph of New York City crowd (Easter Sunday 1898). Summer 1976.**
- 54 Postcard to Loren MacIver. Photograph of "Lilac Path." May 28th, 1978.**

Postcard Aesthetics

This [section] demonstrates the postcard's influence on Bishop's use of unconventional perspectives, obscured views, and juxtapositions of subject and scale in her poems, watercolors, and photographs. Many postcards Bishop mailed feature unusual perspectives, sightlines obstructed by trees, and night-time views. In her 1950 poem "View of the Capitol from the Library of Congress," Bishop used an offset vantage point interrupted by trees to challenge dominant perspectives and established hierarchies of power. In her photographic slides and small watercolors, Bishop foregrounded downed or tangled wires, and views obscured by vegetation. Like the Key West painter Gregorio Valdes, [whom] she knew and admired, Bishop was inspired by postcard aesthetics.

Elizabeth Bishop's Postcards

- 55 Postcard to Mrs. Lloyd Frankenberg. United States Capitol and the Cherry Blossoms, Washington DC. April 2nd, 1950.
- 56 Facsimile image of draft poem by Elizabeth Bishop, "View of the Capitol from the Library of Congress" (1950).
- 57 Facsimile image of painting by Elizabeth Bishop, *County Courthouse* (circa late 1930s/early 1940s).
- 58 Facsimile image of color slide by Elizabeth Bishop, View of Ouro Preto obscured by cacti (late 1950s/early 1960s).
- 59 Facsimile image of color slide by Elizabeth Bishop, View of Ouro Preto street obscured by wires (late 1950s/early 1960s).

Bishop's Favorite Postcards

Bishop was an avid collector as well as sender of picture postcards, saving cards she liked, keeping track of new postcard series in the places she lived, and browsing through junk shops for antique postcards. She had favorite postcards which she mailed numerous times, including a Florida Key Lime pie recipe card, a postcard of Boston baked beans, and a postcard map of North Haven, Maine. In addition to the animal cards and sea and shore cards in the exhibit, Bishop loved what she called "local p-cards," including postcards depicting churches, and writers' and artists' homes.

- 60 Postcard to Lloyd Frankenberg. Photograph of Florida Key Lime Pie recipe. March 10th, 1975.
- 61 Postcard enclosed with a letter to Dorothee Bowie. Photograph of Nossa Senhora do Ó, Sabará, Minas Gerais, Brazil. August 6th, 1970.
- 62 Postcard to Margaret Miller. Painting by Paul Klee, *A Young Lady's Adventure* (1922). September 19th, 1950.
- 63 Postcard to Frani Blough Muser enclosed in Letter. Photograph of Spanish Steps, Rome. November 21st, 1937.

Key West

Bishop first visited Key West around New Year's Eve 1936. She immediately fell in love with the place, and lived in a variety of homes during the late 1930s and 40s, including an "eyebrow house" she purchased with Louise Crane at 624 White Street. Bishop loved kitsch postcards in which Florida's native animals spoke, or better still, were turned into a poem. She criticized touristic postcards depicting Florida as an American Eden, often choosing cards that showed real sites and workers, such as the photocard depicting the Key West Sponge Warehouse. Other postcards offered material for her art, as in the collection of shells, or the card depicting a poinciana in bloom, possibly the inspiration for her similar watercolor "Tombstones for Sale."

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- 64 Postcard to Lloyd Frankenberg. Photograph of "Sunrise on the Florida Coast." March 2nd, 1945.
 - 65 Postcard to Lloyd Frankenberg and Loren MacIver. Photograph of "Open Air Municipal Aquarium, Key West, Fla." December 21st, 1948.
 - 66 Postcard to Helen Muchnic. Photograph of "Sponge Warehouse, Key West, Fla." December 31st, 1948.
 - 67 Postcard to Florence Bishop. Photograph of "Street Scene with Poinciana in Bloom, Key West, Florida." September 7th, 1957.
 - 68 Postcard to Rosalina Azevedo Leão. Photograph of "Shells of Florida and the Gulf of Mexico." September 7th, 1957.
 - 69 Postcard to Grace Bulmer Bowers. Photograph of "Pelicans in Tropical Florida." December 28th, 1974.
 - 70 Postcard to Mary Meigs. Photograph of "Sea-Oats and Sand Dunes, Florida." January 17th, 1975.
 - 71 Postcard to Loren MacIver. Photograph of "A Florida Gator Salute." December 24th, 1975.

Appendix

Places Elizabeth Bishop Sent Postcards from

Brazil*

AMAZONAS
Alto Rio Negro
Indigenous
Territory
Manaus
BAHIA
CEARÁ
MARANHÃO
MATO GROSSO
Xingu National Park
MINAS GERAIS
Belo Horizonte
Congonhas
Diamantina
Mariana
Ouro Preto
Sabará
PARÁ
Belém
PARANÁ
Foz do Iguacu
RIO DE JANEIRO
Cabo Frio
Guanabara Bay
Petrópolis
Rio de Janeiro
Teresópolis
SÃO PAULO

Canada†

NEWFOUNDLAND
St John's
NOVA SCOTIA
Great Village
Halifax
Truro
Wolfville

Caribbean, Central America, South America‡

ARUBA
BERMUDA
ECUADOR
Galápagos Islands
HAITI
MEXICO
Guerrero
Mexico City
Teotihuacán
Yucatan
PERU
CUSCO
Lima
Machu Picchu
Nazca

Europe & North Africa‡

BELGIUM
Antwerp
FRANCE
Bouches-du-Rhône
Finistère
Mantes-la-Jolie
Paris
FINLAND
Helsinki
Lapland
GREECE
Delphi
Mykonos
Rhodes
HOLLAND
Amsterdam
Rotterdam
IRELAND
Cork
ITALY
Florence
Ravenna
Rome
Siena
Venice
MOROCCO
NORWAY
Bodø
Lofoten
Narvik
Trondheim

PORTUGAL	Washington DC	Poughkeepsie
Algarve	FLORIDA	Saratoga Springs
Óbidos	Fort Myers	OKLAHOMA
Tomar	Key West	Norman
SPAIN	GEORGIA	Oklahoma City
Malaga	Savannah	PENNSYLVANIA
Mallorca	ILLINOIS	Philadelphia
Sevilla	Chicago	Pittsburgh
SWEDEN	LOUISIANA	SOUTH CAROLINA
Stockholm	New Orleans	Charleston
SWITZERLAND	MAINE	VERMONT
Zurich	North Haven	VIRGINIA
UK	Rockport	Great Falls
Chichester	Thomaston	WASHINGTON
Gibraltar	Vinalhaven	Deception Pass
Midhurst	Wiscasset	Mt. Rainier
London	MARYLAND	North Cascades
Oxford	Baltimore	National Park
USSR (now Russia):	Havre De Grace	Olga
Leningrad (now Saint	Ocean City	Olympic National
Petersburg)	MASSACHUSETTS	Park
USA*	Boston	Pacific Ocean
ARIZONA	Brookline	Beaches
Grand Canyon	Buzzards Bay	San Juan Islands
CALIFORNIA	Cambridge	Seattle
Bowling Ball Beach	Concord	Tacoma
California Western	Cuttyhunk	
Railroad	Lexington	
Emeryville	New Bedford	
San Francisco	Northampton	
COLORADO	Rockport	
Pikes Peak	Salem	*States indicated in
CONNECTICUT	Sudbury	small caps
Cos Cob	MISSOURI	† Provinces indicated
Stonington	Ozark Mountains	in small caps
DISTRICT OF	NEW YORK	‡ Countries indicated
COLUMBIA	Long Island	in small caps
	New York City	

Support

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Key West Literary Seminar's mission is to promote the understanding of important literary works and their authors, support new American voices, and preserve Key West's literary heritage while providing resources for readers and writers around the world.

From our headquarters at the historic Elizabeth Bishop House & Garden, we produce literary programs and special events including the annual Seminar, which draws readers to explore a unique literary theme each January. Our Writers' Workshop Program, also in January, provides writers at all stages of development with opportunities to explore their craft in a focused environment. As part of our commitment to a vibrant literary culture, we present three Emerging Writer Awards each year and provide dozens of scholarships to teachers, librarians, and students. Our Audio Archives project makes unique resources available to readers worldwide, while our Literary Walking Tour offers visitors a guided stroll through literary Key West. In 2025, we complete the restoration of the Bishop House and begin welcoming the public to this historic site.

An island of less than five square miles, Key West has one of the most intriguing literary heritages of any place in America. We are proud to carry on the life of letters in this island city.

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