

Biographical Note

William Hooker Gillette was born on July 24, 1853 in Hartford near Nook Farm. He was the sixth and last child of Francis Gillette, a former United States Senator from Connecticut, abolitionist and reformer. His mother, Elizabeth Daggett Hooker was a direct descendant of Thomas Hooker. His oldest brother, Ashbell Frank ("Frank A.") died in San Francisco in 1859 and another older brother, Robert, died in 1865 during the Union assault on Fort Fisher, North Carolina while he was serving aboard the U.S.S. Gettysburg as paymaster. A third brother, Edward Hooker Gillette, went to Iowa in 1863, served a term in Congress and became prominent in Iowa's Greenback and Populist parties. In 1864 his sister Eliza ("Lilly") married George Warner, brother of Charles Dudley Warner of Nook Farm, editor of the Hartford Courant.

William Gillette graduated from Hartford High School and early on he developed a fascination for the theater. In 1875, he ran away from home and for the next few years was a member of various theatrical companies in New Orleans, the Midwest and Boston. Samuel Clemens, a neighbor at Nook Farm, gave Gillette money to advance his career and helped him secure a job at the Globe Theater in Boston. Successes soon followed and Gillette also embarked on a career as a playwright. On June 1, 1881 one of his own plays, The Professor, opened at the Madison Square Theater in New York City. Gillette played the lead. The Professor ran for 151 performances and was a huge success.

One year later, Gillette married Helen Nickles (Nichols) of Detroit in Windsor, Ontario. In 1885, the couple traveled to San Francisco with the tour of The Professor, but on September 1, 1888 on a railroad trip back to Hartford, Helen died in Cos Cob of a ruptured appendix. Gillette deeply mourned his wife's death and remained unmarried the rest of his life.

For the next five years he was ill and inactive in the theater, spending time with his sister Lilly's family. In the fall and winter of 1890, he traveled to the Saluda Mountains and stayed at Tryon, both in North Carolina and in 1891 traveled to Georgia and Florida. Later that year on a trip to Windsor, Ontario, illness forced him to enter a sanatorium at Danville, New York for a short stay. In Spring 1892 he built a cabin about a mile from Tryon, North Carolina and named it, "Thousand Pines." In 1892, his mother died and the failure of his play, Ninety Days, was a difficult financial setback.

Gillette soon recovered from these troubles, returning to the stage in the 1890's. In 1899 he first played the title role in his play, Sherlock Holmes. The role made him wealthy and famous throughout the world. Between 1899 and 1930 he gave 1,300 performances of Holmes putting his own imprint on the persona. In 1903 twelve companies around the world were performing the play at one time. Gillette's play grossed \$1.5 million at the box office, and in 1903 he received a weekly royalty of \$5,000.00.

Gillette also pursued other interests. In 1896 he began purchasing watercolors from the artist, Amelia Watson of East Windsor Hill, Connecticut. In 1898 he purchased a 140 foot long steamboat equipped with a fireplace and built-in bookshelves and named it the "Aunt Polly," after a black woman he had met in North Carolina.

Gillette hired as a valet and dresser, Yukitaka Osaki, a member of a prominent Japanese family. Osaki remained a respected and close friend even after his days of employment ended. In 1910 Gillette went into his first "retirement" but broke it in 1914. Between 1915 and 1919 he built his famous residence, "Seventh Sister," near Hadlyme, Connecticut overlooking the Connecticut River. The structure was a reproduction of a Rhenish medieval castle with twenty-four rooms and forty-seven large doors. Gillette designed many parts of the structure and built a three-mile narrow gauge railroad to transport stone up the hill. After his death the estate sold the residence to the State of Connecticut and it is known today as Gillette Castle State Park.

Tragedy struck Gillette during this period. "Lilly" died in 1915 and George Warner in 1919 at "Thousand Pines." Charles Frohman, a close business associate, died when the Lusitania was sunk and Gillette served as a pall-bearer at his funeral.

After the loss of the Warners, Gillette paid more attention to his niece, Margaret Warner, who was in ill health. When he traveled to Europe in early 1928, he visited his niece, but shortly thereafter she entered a sanatorium in Switzerland for treatment of tuberculosis. She died in 1931 of the disease and Gillette had her buried in Farmington. His letters to Amelia Watson from 1928 to 1931 give details of her long struggle with the disease.

Gillette received honors in the 1930's, mostly for his earlier work. In 1931 the National Institute of Arts and Letters awarded Gillette its gold medal for his work as a dramatic author. The Institute gave out the honor only once a decade, and previous recipients were Augustus Thomas (1913) and Eugene O'Neill (1922).

He came out of retirement for a second farewell tour at the age of eighty-two in the Three Wise Fools, and his last performance on the stage took place appropriately in Hartford on February 27, 1936, thus ending one of the longest careers on the American stage, sixty-three years.

On April 29, 1937 he died of a pulmonary hemorrhage and was buried beside his wife at Riverside Cemetery in Farmington. The Lake Compounce Amusement Park of Southington, Connecticut purchased the miniature railroad from "Seventh Sister." His luxury yacht was not as lucky for it burned in 1932. Gillette later wrote that he had not insured it.

William Gillette was one of the most distinguished and innovative actors of his day. He was one of the first American-born actors to speak and not declaim his lines. He was a pioneer of the concept of underacting and brought a natural style to his parts. He invented the theatrical device that produced sound effects of a horse's hoofbeats, made popular the "fade-out" before the final curtain, and used the quiet act-ending.

He wrote twenty full-length plays and starred in nine of them, mostly melodramas or farces. His roles called on him to be "a calm center of a whirlpool of either exciting or amusing

complications."* He was known as a gentleman in his relationships and did not use objectionable language in his plays.

He remains an enigma for he rarely gave interviews and destroyed most of his correspondence before he died. He was criticized as being too aloof but friends knew him as "a boy at heart." He ate health foods and did not drink or smoke. In addition to his miniature railroad, he liked to ride a motorcycle. His total earnings from the theater were more than three million dollars, and although we shall never know the extent of his generosity, evidence suggests that he made anonymous donations to friends. He loved the outdoors, cats, and children.

Bibliography

In addition to the above-cited Dictionary of American Biography sketch, see the following:

Biography Vertical File, History and Genealogy Unit, Connecticut State Library.

Cook, Doris E., "Preface," in The Curtain Is Up on the William Gillette Exhibit, Nook Farm Visitor's Center, October 16, 1970 - January 31, 1971 [Exhibit Catalogue Published by the Stowe-Day Foundation] (Hartford, 1970), 3 - 5 and

Sherlock Holmes and Much More [Publication of the Connecticut Historical Society] (Hartford, 1970).

"Gillette, William," The National Encyclopedia of Biography, (New York, 1940), Vol. XXVIII, 362-363.

"Gillette, William," Who Was Who in the Theater: 1912-1976 (Detroit, 1976), Vol. II, 937-938.

"Gillette, William," in Walter Browne and E. DeRoy Koch, ed's., Who's Who on the Stage 1908 (New York, 1908), 191-192.

Perkins, Henry A., "William Gillette The Man," Connecticut Woodlands [Publication of the Connecticut Forest and Park Association], Vol. X, No. 1 (February, 1945), 3-6.

"Saving the Gillette Castle," Connecticut Woodlands, Vol. VIII, No. 3 (October, 1943), 33-37.

Van Why, Joseph S. Nook Farm. Edited by Earl A. French [Publication of the Stowe-Day Foundation] (Hartford, 1975), 26-33.

*William Van Lennep, "Gillette, William Hooker," in Robert Livingston Schuyler and Edward T. James, ed.'s, Dictionary of American Biography, vol. XXII, 235-37.

Provenance Note

RG69:109 consists of eight smaller collections which researchers once accessed through the Manuscripts and Archives Catalogue. There also are two scrapbooks from the larger library of William Gillette on loan to the Stowe-Day Foundation Library from the Connecticut State Library. The precise origin of all of these collections is unknown. Some came from Arthur Winslow of Hartford in the 1950's by way of donation or purchase, one by way of purchase from Goodspeed's Book shop in 1961, and one was found in books of the Gillette Library when it was being transferred from "Seventh Sister." The largest amount, 36 letters and several photographs, came from the estate of Edith Watson, sister of Amelia Watson, of East Windsor in 1944.

In March 1992, the State Archivist reprocessed the collections combining them into one manuscript group. Security and greater ease of access were factors in making this decision. All photographs were transferred to PG500. Letters were arranged chronologically by date of letter when that date could be determined. Prints of photographs in the custody of the Stowe-Day Library were obtained and one of the "Aunt Polly" was added to this manuscript collection.

Scope and Content Note

The bulk of the manuscript group consists of letters from Gillette to Amelia Watson, the watercolor artist (see PG930). In 1896 he began purchasing her sketchbooks, thus beginning correspondence lasting into the early 1930's. The letters to Watson directly pertain to her artwork and the purchase thereof, the illness and death of niece Margaret Warner, the sale of the cabin "Thousand Pines," and the transfer of his niece's property out of the cabin prior to her death. Other letters include one to the actor Eben Plympton (25 July 1884) regarding the possibility of hiring him for the next theatrical season; one to Edward ("Eddie") Beecher Hooker (1855-1927), a homeopathic physician, requesting that he look in a trunk in "the old house" in Hartford for Gillette's own copy of music for the play, Held by the Enemy, which was being revived; and one to a "Mr. Dresser" regarding Gillette's preferences for a place to live in his first so-called "retirement."

The manuscript manuscript group also includes an agreement signed between Gillette and the Lamb's Club of New York City to perform in the Lamb's All Star Gambol in the last week of May, 1909 and two scrapbooks of original photographs, newspaper and magazine clippings and miscellaneous memorabilia pertaining to Gillette's love of cats and little children (ca. 1895-1936).

List of Records

Correspondence, 1884-1935, ND. 6 folders. Box 1.

Agreement with the Lamb's Club, 1901 1 folder. Box 1.

Photographs. 2 B&W Pos. 8 x 10. 1 folder. Box 1.

Scrapbooks, ca. 1895-1936. 2 volumes. Box 2.

Contain photographs, newspaper clippings and magazine articles of cats and children.

Related Records

- PG200: Connecticut State Government, Institutions, and Parks -
"Gillette Castle State Park"
- PG500: "Gillette, William," "Morley, Margaret," "Plympton, Eben,"
"The George Warner Family-George, Margaret, Lilly,"
"Watson, Amelia".
- PG930: [Amelia] Watson Watercolor Sketchbooks

Folder Listing, Box 1

["WG" refers to William Gillette. "AW" to Amelia Watson.]

Folder 1 Correspondence 1884-1900 [13 items]

- 25 July 1894, Hoffman House, Broadway, Madison Square, New
York City. WG to Eben Plympton re procuring
actor for upcoming theatrical season.
- _____, 1892, Hotel Del Coronado, Coronado Beach,
California. WG to Aunt Louisa thanking her for
news about "the fire."
- 3 January 1896, Plaza Hotel, New York City. WG to AW.
Requests she send a bill for purchase of
"picture book" and comments on sketch books.
- 3 July 1896, Hartford. WG to AW commenting on the Florida
sketchbook and other sketchbooks.
- [15 March 1897], Boston. WG to AW. Comments favorably on
Florida sketchbook. He will join her next
spring.
- 2 August 1898, Hartford. WG to Amelia Watson commenting on
sketchbook and appropriate price. Offers
Watson and Margaret Morley use of cabin. He
intends to build a smaller cabin with a big
fireplace... for friends."
- [21 January 1899], Hartford. WG to AW. Agrees to pay \$100 for a
sketchbook. Requests pages "with Nova Scotia
or other sketches."
- [25 January 1899], Hartford. WG to AW. Mentions an unknown
social gathering at which she and he were
present. Estimates that any one of her books
would have sold for \$200. Comments on sketches.
- 17 July [1899?], Plaza Hotel, New York City. WG to AW. He is
glad to hear about new sketchbook and discusses
his travel plans.
- [July 1899?], Plaza Hotel, New York City. WG to AW. Writes
for her address so he can send \$55 for the
pictures.

[18 July 1899], Plaza Hotel, New York City. WG to AW. Has enclosed a post office order for \$55 for the pictures. Requests ideas for the cabin. Hopes she can oversee its construction and "laying of the cornerlog." Suggests she can hasten cabin by praying for the failure of "Sherlock Holmes. I do it myself at times."

27 September 1899. Waverly, Massachusetts. Margaret Warner to WG. Discusses her health and future hospitalization. She is coming home in two months and wants to go to New York City to see her Uncle's play.

25 January 1900, Plaza Hotel, New York City. WG to AW. Requests ideas about "your cabin" and its construction.

[24 February 1900], Garrick Theater, New York City. WG to AW. Requests that she mail the Thousand Pines photos to the Statler Hotel in Detroit by March 4th or 6th. His tour will stop in Detroit, March 6-11th. Gives instructions re packaging and mailing the photographs. Handwritten on letterhead of the Queens Hotel Toronto, Ltd.

Folder 2 Correspondence, 1909-1915 [6 items]

25 March 1909, Boston. WG to AW. Mentions possibility that he could come to East Windsor at end of April to see new pictures.

[1910?], The Plaza, New York City. WG to Edward Beecher Hooker. Requests that he go to "old house" to look for copy of music WG made of original music for Held By the Enemy. Provides directions (map not with letter) and mailing instructions.

21 April [1910?], The Plaza, New York City. WG to "Mr. Dresser." Discusses preferences for a summer place.

8 December 1910, The Plaza, New York City. WG to "Mr. Dresser." Thanks him for the book and invitation to Thompson.

8 March 1912, "1001 Pines", North Carolina. WG to AW. Requests instructions for "presenting the picture" and provides his travel plans through June.

9 December 1915 Boston. WG to Ruth _____? Thanks her for the dinner and "instructs" her to convey appreciation for box of cigars to her father. "(If 'instruct' jars on you a little in these times of feminine uplift, kindly change to 'beg' or 'exhort')".

Folder 3 Correspondence, 1921-1927 [10 items]

- 7 December 1921, The Plaza, New York City. WG to AW. Mentions enclosed photographs possibly of her house in North Carolina. He remembers his offer to build her a cabin but cannot do it now. "Why didn't you let me do it then?"
- 22 January 1922, The Plaza, New York City. WG to AW. Discusses books and sketches. Request she make a "special volume" of sketches from other books and provides list of subjects and number of sketches per book, writing that lists of desired sketches are in the books.
- 10 February 1922, Parker House, Boston. WG to AW. Refers to Watson's letter dated 28 January. Requests that she send volume of photographs of the cabin and views from it and provides mailing instructions. He has not settled permanently and is traveling to large cities.
- 8 March 1922, Hotel Statler, Detroit. WG to AW. Admires book of photographs and estimates it is worth \$10.00. "I envy you going to the gulf coast-if you go. I once went down that way from Tallahassee-Wish I could again. [I'll want] you to tell me about it when I see you. Tell me places where not rotten with tourists...just coasts-sky-water-storms-...you know. No Golf Jazz-and cheap rotters."
- 19 September 1922, Hadlyme, Connecticut. WG to AW. Gives instructions re safest postal delivery to use. Hopes to go to the Gulf Coast in December.
- 29 September 1922, Hadlyme. WG to AW. He is returning book and pictures in separate packages via parcel post. Provides list of watercolors he wants to purchase and amount he will pay for each one.
- 9 May 1923, The Bellevue-Stratford, Philadelphia. WG to AW. Watercolors arrived. He is making ready a properly lit room for exhibiting her paintings. Suggests that something must be done with vacant Thousand Pines. He is trying to get placed on the real estate market.
- 23 December, 1927 Seventh Sister, Hadlyme. WG to AW. Enjoyed Watson's visit to Seventh Sister. Discusses Thousand Pines in North Carolina and requests that Watson look into its status. Provides travel plans.

- 27 December 1927, The Plaza, New York City. WG to AW. Wishes her a Merry Christmas. Discusses how he will display a picture and provides a sketched plan. Discusses travel plans.
- 30 December 1927, Seventh Sister, Hadlyme. WG to AW. Discusses travel plans. Will see niece Margaret Warner around April 1st. Discusses disposition of Thousand Pines and intention to get "the Things" out of there.

Folder 4 Correspondence, 11 January-14 June 1928 [9 items]

[The following correspondence to Amelia Watson covers the same subjects: disposition of Thousand Pines; assistance in getting Margaret Warner's property out and sent to her; packing and mailing instructions. In a letter dated 22 January 1928, Gillette writes: "What a lot of writing and finesse-and talk-and trouble for us all (you included) about ten cents worth of stuff! [Plated silverware belonging to Margaret Warner] As they used to say before strong language came into vogue, 'Can you beat it?'" When the china barrel and box arrived, Gillette wrote [14 June 1928] that he had not opened the barrel, for if it was in pieces; what could he do about?]

- 11 January 1928, The Plaza, New York City.
- 22 January 1928, Seventh Sister, Hadlyme.
- 25 January 1928, [Same].
- 2 and 3 May 1928, [Same].
- 10 May 1928, [Same].
- 15 May 1928, [Same].
- 20 May 1928, [Same].
- 8 June 1928, [Same].
- 14 June 1928, [Same].

Folder 5 Correspondence 27 July 1928-1935 [8 items]

- 27 July 1928, Seventh Sister, Hadlyme. WG to AW. Discusses Margaret's health. Requests that Watson write her at the sanatorium in Switzerland and provides address. She is recovering from a "bad knee" and has "only a touch of ...inactive tuberculosis." She has no cough. He intends to open the box sent from Thousand Pines soon. Discusses her watercolors. Margaret would agree that Watson should keep sketchbooks of the Pines.

- 28 November 1928, Seventh Sister, Hadlyme. WG to AW. He has received the watercolors. Comments on San Antonio, Texas. Discusses Margaret's recovery from "a very slight touch of tuberculosis." She got it from an attack of the terrible kind of 'grippe' in Paris. The disease is "all over (in lung)" and she must stay in the sanatorium for the winter.
- 20 September 1929, Seventh Sister, Hadlyme. WG to AW. Regrets that Watson will not be returning to North Carolina. Lois Wilcox's business will not allow her to travel to Switzerland to stay with Margaret, whose health is improving.
- 17 March 1931, Seventh Sister, Hadlyme. WG to AW. Discusses Margaret's illness and circumstances surrounding her death on February 23rd. - Writes that her brother Frank died five days before in California. Margaret was ill from tuberculosis for three years and could not get out of bed during that whole time.
- 25 November 1934, Seventh Sister, Hadlyme. WG to Mrs. Arthur Shipman declining invitation to speak.
- 24 March 1935, Seventh Sister, Hadlyme. [Same].
- 30 September _____ Newport Harbor, Stormbound. WG to Lilly [sister Eliza Warner]. Discusses weather on trip to Cottage City, Massachusetts. Missed seeing Amelia Watson. "What a raft of ridiculous stuff in that Ladies Home Journal article - the only thing he got right was the date of my birth."
- No date [Plaza Hotel, New York City?]. WG to Mr. Lyon, giving instructions for meetings and asking for time of rehearsal on Thursday.

Folder 6 [1 item]

- 30 March 1909 Agreement between WG and The Lamb's Club to perform in the Lamb's All Star Gambol in last week of May 1909.

Folder 7 Photographs [2 items]

The "Aunt Polly," 1902+"Thousand Pines" Cabin, Tryon, N.C., 1904. [Both are 8X10 B&W Pos. Copyprints of original photographs in custody of the Stowe-Day Foundation. Purchased in May 1992.]