

Ernest Wilson and the Willowwood Connection

The New York Hortus Club - Five Hundred-Twentieth Meeting

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a comparative timeline

- ca. 1790, original house at Willowwood (WW) is constructed, and the land, situated in a valley in the Hacklebarney Hills, straddling two geological provinces and two present-day counties, is cleared for cultivation and pasture. The property is later settled by a family named Kennedy who call the property Paradise Farm.
- ca. 1823, WW, pudding stone cottage (still in use) is constructed.
- ca. 1850, WW, *Aeschulus hippocastanum* is planted by owners.
- 1876, Ernest Henry Wilson (EHW) is born February 15, Gloucestershire, England.
- ca. 1890, EHW is employed by the nurseries of Mssrs. Hewitt, Solihull, Warwickshire, England.
- ca. 1890, WW, new owner adds Colonial Revival improvements to main house.
- 1892, EHW is employed by The Birmingham Botanical Gardens (studies botany at the Birmingham technical school in the evenings and wins the Queen's Prize for botany).
- 1897, EHW is employed at The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, wins the Hooker Prize of the Mutual Improvement Society for an essay on the *Coniferae*.
- 1897, EHW attends The Royal College of Science, South Kensington (to become a teacher of botany).
- 1898, EHW abandons schooling, instead trains with George Harrow at the Coombe Wood Nursery of James Veitch & Sons for the position of Collector of Plants.
- ca. 1899, WW, Robert Hamilton Tubbs and Henry Welles Tubbs leave their family home in Kingston, PA (near Wilkes-Barre) for employment in Manhattan, Robert in banking and Henry in publishing.
- 1899, EHW visits China, via the Arnold Arboretum (five-day visit with Charles Sprague Sargent), collects, *Davidia involucrata*, for Veitch.
- 1902, EHW returns to England, marries Helen Ganderton.
- 1903, EHW visits China, travels the Ming River to the Tibetan border, collects *Meconopsis integrifolia* for Veitch.
- 1905, March, EHW returns to England as a botanical assistant at the Imperial Institute in London, receives the Veitch Memorial Medal from the Royal Horticultural Society.
- 1905, December, EHW moves to America, is employed by the Arnold as Plant Collector.

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ca. 1906, The Tubbs brothers, longing for a return to country life, begin investigative excursions from New York City in order to find a location suitable for continuing their pursuits in horticulture, and yet close enough for a comfortable commute into the city.

1907, January, EHW visits China (western Hupeh), collects wild *Pinus bungeana* for the Arnold.

1908, Robert and Henry Tubbs purchase the Paradise Farm property (about 140 acres) for \$10,000 and rename it Willowwood Farm because of the strong impression created by five huge weeping willows along the stream near the house. The land is in pasture or crop except for these willows and the wooded (oak and chestnut) western hill.

1909, summer, EHW returns to England for holiday.

ca. 1909, WW, the Tubbs brothers' parents, Carrie Ladd Welles and Benjamin Tubbs, sell their Wyoming Valley property in Kingston, PA, and with their daughter Claire, move permanently to Willowwood. The main house is renovated and enlarged and subsequently, a smokehouse and greenhouse are constructed. Early plantings of fruit and nut trees begin in the cleared land. Shrubs are brought from Kingston and *Pinus strobus*, *Tsuga canadensis* and *Liquidambar styraciflua* are collected in the mountains near Noxon, PA, and planted in newly cleared areas behind the house.

1909, September, EHW returns to employment at the Arnold Arboretum.

1910, WW, *Taxodium distichum*, arrives from New Orleans and is planted. Robert Tubbs scours the markets of lower Manhattan for plant treasures to collect.

1910, EHW visits China (western Hupeh), collects *Lilium regale* for the Arnold, finds a variety of *Citrus ichangensis* (Wilson Lemon) in a village while recuperating from a broken leg. Poor healing results in a severe limp, and later prevents Wilson from serving in World War I, to his dismay and chagrin.

1911, EHW returns to the Arnold Arboretum, as special assistant to C.S. Sargent.

1911, WW, a freight car of plants from long-time friends the Benjamin Dorrance family (owners of the Dorrance Nursery near Kingston, PA) arrives. These plants: lilacs, honeysuckles, spiraeas, forsythias, mockoranges, roses, arborvitae, peonies and hostas are planted (some still thrive) and the gardens begin to take shape.

1912, EHW receives the Victoria Medal of Honour from the R.H.S.

1912, WW, Martha Brookes (Brown) Hutcheston, a graduate of landscape architecture from MIT, and her husband William Anderson Hutcheson, purchase the property next door, naming it Merchiston Farm. "Discussions" about garden design and plant exchanges with the Tubbs begin in earnest. A near disastrous family road trip to the south Jersey pine barrens results in plantings of *Ilex opaca*, *Magnolia virginiana* and *Clethra alnifolia* (all still thriving).

1913, EHW publishes Plantae Wilsonianae.

1914, EHW visits Japan, with his wife Helen and daughter Muriel Primrose (so named because *Primula wilsoni* first bloomed in cultivation on the day she was born), collects *Rhododendron obtusum* var. *japonicum* for the Arnold.

1914, EHW, A Naturalist in Western China is published.

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1915, EHW returns to the Arnold Arboretum.

1915, WW, *Chamaecyparis pisifera*, *Cedrus atlantica* f. *glauca* and wild-collected *Viburnum prunifolium* and *Juniperus virginiana* are planted established. Pan's Garden and the Cypress Pool begin to take form.

1916, EHW publishes The Conifers and Taxads of Japan.

1917, EHW visits Japan, Korea and Formosa with wife and daughter, collects *Forsythia ovata* for the Arnold.

1919, EHW returns to the Arnold Arboretum, as Assistant Director.

1920, July, EHW begins tour of botanic gardens and nurseries in Australia, New Zealand, India, Tasmania, and central and South Africa to further the influence of the Arnold.

ca.1920, WW, 30,000 seedling of *Pinus resinosa* are planted creating the Pine Hillside.

1922, August, EHW returns to the Arnold Arboretum, as Assistant Airector, becomes very active in the Massachusetts Horticultural Society, edits and proofs Horticulture magazine, is elected president of the Kew Guild.

ca. 1922, WW, plantings, including *Picea glauca* f. *conica*, continue.

1923, WW, next-door neighbor Martha Brookes Hutcheson publishes Spirit of the Garden which is the embodiment of her views on garden design.

1923-7, EHW publishes (see list).

1927, March, EHW made Keeper of the Arnold Arboretum immediately following the untimely death of C.S. Sargent (thereafter, the title of Director is retired).

ca. 1928, WW, first communications between Robert Tubbs and EHW.

1928-9, EHW publishes (see list), begins sending plants (*Acer griseum*, *Davidia involucrata* var. *vilmoriana* et. al.) to Willowood following correspondence and visits with Robert Tubbs.

1930, October 15, EHW dies at age 54, with wife Helen, automobile accident, Worcester, MA.

1930, WW, Lord and Burnham conservatory added to main house. Plantings continue.

1938, WW, entire property is offered to Rutgers University for a public arboretum. Fund-raising begins.

ca. 1939, WW, Dr. Benjamin Blackburn, author and Professor of Botany at Drew and Rutgers Universities, and for a decade a friend of the Tubbs', takes up residence at Willowood to assist in the arboretum's development.

1942, WW, Robert Tubbs dies. War efforts tap funding sources and the offer to Rutgers is rescinded. Property begins to deteriorate as previously maintained areas begin to revert to scrub. Blackburn in Japan as part of occupational army, obtains Japanese statuary and accouterment for later garden use, tours botanic and public gardens throughout the country, establishing relationships and making friends.

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- 1946, WW, efforts to gain control on the encroaching wilderness begin. Lost and forgotten specimens (the *Davidia*) are rediscovered in the area now known as Treasure Trove.
- 1950, WW, three *Metasequoia glyptostroboides*, from seed from the first Arnold Arboretum expeditions are planted. All remain alive. The largest, now over 100', is the New Jersey Champion. Willowwood Arboretum established under private auspices.
- 1958, WW, Henry Tubbs dies. Blackburn remains, having been joined by Russell W. Myers (future and first Secretary-Director of the Morris County Park Commission and then Director of the New Jersey Department of Parks and Recreation). These two oversee the development of the arboretum under the jurisdiction of The Wildlife Preserve.
- 1967, WW, Rutgers University takes possession of the property, which is assigned to the College of Agriculture and Environmental Science.
- 1980, WW, under terms outlined in Henry Tubbs' will, the property is transferred to the Morris County Park Commission under the direction of The Horticultural Division (now Department of Park Maintenance).
- 1987, WW, Dr. Benjamin Blackburn dies.
- 1990, WW, Russell W. Myers dies.
- Present, WW, the property, along with the adjacent Hutcheson farm (now Bamboo Brook) remains under Morris County Park Commission jurisdiction. Computer mapping of the property is complete and identification of over 98% of the plants has been verified. The computerized plant records database (the charge of a graduate student from the Department of Plant Ecology at Rutgers) indicate over 3,700 taxa of woody and herbaceous plants (both native and exotic) living on the property. These plants include about 60% of the New Jersey Champion Trees (exotic) as determined by Dr. John Kuser of Rutgers in a 1992 survey. The collections of *Quercus*, *Magnolia*, *Acer*, *Prunus*, and of course *Salix*, are especially noteworthy, and investigations into inclusion in the North American Plant Collections Consortium are underway.

Despite all that has happened, the beguiling charm of Willowwood prevails. The scale is extraordinarily personal and the feel of an unpretentious country estate remains. Visitation is extremely low, by design, because the property offers little to general park patrons. Active recreation is actively discouraged because of the invaluable character of the collections and because of the sensitive nature of the site. Nevertheless, Willowwood is still a haven for students, professionals and like-minded amateurs who revel in its horticultural resources. Indeed, the full scientific potential of the site is largely untapped.

The arboretum's relationship with the Arnold Arboretum continues (as it has for over sixty years) with Dr. Kim Tripp's field research of the genus *Alnus*. The Willowwood Foundation and Tubbs Trust, two private, not for profit organizations, assist the county in raising funds for specific projects such as a new, state-of-the-art propagation unit (scheduled for completion in mid-1997).

Willowwood continues to be the destination of and proving ground for plants collected by modern-day plant hunters. The expeditions of Paul Meyer, of the Morris Arboretum of the University of Pennsylvania, are partially grant-funded through the Willowwood Foundation and his collections find homes in the Hacklebarney Hills, just as Ernest Henry Wilson's did over half a century before.