



## **Helen Ellwanger, Preservationist**

By Jean Czerkas

Hidden behind a high gray stone wall that separates it from the noise and traffic of busy Mount Hope Avenue is the Ellwanger Garden. It is owned and maintained as an historic landscape by the Landmark Society of Western New York and was once part of the grounds of the George Ellwanger residence. He and his partner Patrick Barry were co-owners of the Mount Hope Botanical and Pomological Garden and important figures in the history of horticulture in America. The success of the Ellwanger and Barry enterprise, once hailed as the world's largest nursery, led to Rochester's reputation as the "Flower City" in the mid to late 19th century.

Helen Ellwanger and her sister Margaret, granddaughters of George Ellwanger, were the daughters of Edward and Leah Cresswell Ellwanger. The girls were born in the house next door to their grandparents' home on Mount Hope Avenue. The house had previously been the home of their uncle Henry Brooks Ellwanger, who lived there until his death at age 32 in 1883.

The girls' father Edward, the youngest of George and Cornelia Brooks Ellwanger's four sons, died in 1897 at age 38 after a prolonged illness. Following the death of George Ellwanger in 1906, Helen, Margaret, and their mother moved into his house at 625 Mount Hope Avenue.

Helen Ellwanger was educated at Miss Hake's school located near the corner of Scio Street and East Avenue. Public transportation was used to take young Helen to school each day. One horse-drawn streetcar took her part of the way, and she transferred to another to complete her trip. After graduating from Miss Hake's school, she attended Miss Hill's school in Philadelphia.

Helen had great respect and affection for her grandfather and as a child visited him every day after lunch. Each morning he took a buggy ride around the nursery properties, and she recalled accompanying him on one of the rides to a vineyard where rare European grapes were grown. The vineyard is now the campus of Colgate Rochester Divinity School.

Miss Ellwanger devoted much of her adult life to community activities. She was a member of the Rochester Garden Club and served as secretary of the "Leaves Twig" of Rochester General Hospital. As a life member of the Board of Managers of the University of Rochester's Memorial Art Gallery, she took an active role in gallery fundraising and other activities. She became a member of the board's Art Committee and contributed a number of art works to the





gallery. Among the most outstanding of her gifts were two paintings: "Florentine Still Life" by Giorgio de Chirico and "Basket of Fruit," a still life by Rubens Peale.

Passionate in her belief in the importance of the preservation of Rochester landmarks, Miss Ellwanger founded the Landmark Society of Western New York in 1937 in order to save the deteriorated Greek Revival Campbell-Whittlesey House at 123 South Fitzhugh Street. She purchased the house before it could be demolished and presented it to the fledgling Landmark Society to be used as a house museum. Her hands-on involvement in the restoration included climbing scaffolding to determine what the house was like originally and ensuring it was accurately restored to its former grandeur.

Very concerned about the destruction and neglect of Rochester's historic buildings, she felt strongly that every effort should be made to preserve and maintain the city's architectural treasures. Before the downtown Security Trust temple, designed by local architect Claude Bragdon, was torn down in the early 1980s to make way for the Riverside Convention Center, she voiced her indignation by making many phone calls of protest in an attempt to save the important landmark.

Miss Ellwanger was influential in arranging for the donation of the Ellwanger and Barry library of horticultural books, primarily from the 19th century, to the University of Rochester's Rush Rhees Library in 1943. She continued to make donations to the Ellwanger and Barry archives over the years and was a frequent visitor to the library to view exhibits and talk with the staff.

Miss Ellwanger cared for her sister Margaret, who during a long illness was confined to a wheelchair in the final years of her life and died on September 21, 1958. Helen continued to live in the family homestead maintaining the garden that was first planted by her grandfather in 1867.

Her search for perfection in her garden was never ending. When a plant captured her fancy, she wrote to nurseries, in this country and abroad, until she found a source for the plant so that she could include it in her garden. Often, special permission from the U.S. Department of Agriculture was required to import the plants or seeds she was seeking.

When concerned about the proper care of a particular variety of plant, she often sought the advice of nationally-known experts. She saved and treasured the many notes she received from visitors to her garden. One note described the writer's visit as a step into paradise.





Helen Ellwanger died on May 2, 1982 at age 96 leaving her home and garden to the Landmark Society she founded. Portions of her almost two-million-dollar estate went to various non-profit organizations, including the University of Rochester for the Memorial Art Gallery and the Landmark Society for the preservation of the garden.

Because of her generosity and commitment to preservation and the Rochester community, Helen Cresswell Ellwanger's legacy lives on.

(The author wishes to thank the staff of the Landmark Society, the Rochester Historical Society, and the University of Rochester Rush Rhees and Memorial Art Gallery libraries for their assistance in the preparation of this article.)

(IMAGE: Helen Ellwanger - granddaughter of the world famous nurseryman, George Ellwanger - was the founder of the Landmark Society of Western New York. Photograph courtesy of the Landmark Society and copied by Frank A. Gillespie.)

*(IMAGE: Helen Ellwanger (1886-1982) was the last member of the George Ellwanger family to be buried in the family plot in Section V. The Ellwanger monument was sculpted by the famous Italian artist Nicola Cantalamessa-Papotti and shows Saint John with pen poised to write the book of Revelation. Photograph by Frank A. Gillespie.*

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