

Dr. Arthur Seaver Wheeler (1864-1937)
Renaissance Man of Science and Art
Founder of The Highlands Museum Herbarium



Photo of Wheeler circa 1889 probably from University of Pennsylvania Yearbook.

Arthur Seaver Wheeler was born in New Orleans on May 11, 1864. He graduated from Tulane University in 1883 with a Bachelor of Science and in 1885 a Masters Degree. He taught mathematics there for several years and then received his DVM (Doctorate in Veterinary Medicine) from the University of Pennsylvania in 1891. On June 5, 1889, Dr. Wheeler married

Anna Grant Norton. The couple had no children. Anna was from New Orleans like Arthur and they may met while Arthur was attending Tulane University or through family connections.

By 1897 Wheeler and his wife Anna were residing in Asheville, North Carolina where he worked first as sanitation inspector of houses on the Biltmore Estate when typhoid broke out. In 1900 he was a Veterinary Surgeon in Asheville and in 1905, he became the Manager of the Agriculture Department at Biltmore which included the Biltmore Dairy. By 1924 he was Superintendent of the Biltmore Estates Farm but resigned in 1926.

In "Who's Who and Why in Asheville" on November 4, 1928, The Asheville Times credited Wheeler as the father of dairying in western North Carolina. "Dr. Wheeler built up from a very modest beginning a great dairy, The Biltmore Dairy . . . by undertaking his own system of tenantry whereby trusty employees of the Biltmore Estate were set up as dairy farmers with cows and equipment paid for monthly from the milk vouchers. So successful there were 12 dairies with about 500 cows with an additional 600 cows from outlying farmers."

Correspondence by both Arthur and Anna exist at Biltmore today. Arthur's was from 1902-1909 concerning miscellaneous subjects such as veterinarian work, pecan trees, a pass for fishing and camping, wages, crows destroying the corn, and leases. Anne Wheeler's correspondence between 1904 and 1907 relates to weaving and spinning done by Anna with Mrs. O'Kelley and Mrs. Orr, possibly referring to a relationship with Biltmore Industries.*

Arthur and Anna had other interests in Asheville as well. Arthur was President of the Mozart Society beginning in 1916 for 12 years. He also sang under many famous organists at All Soul's Episcopal Church in Biltmore, was a charter member of the Asheville Rotary Club and Director of the Asheville Chamber of Commerce. Arthur's obituary revealed "he was intimately associated with business and musical life of Asheville laboring long to make Asheville's programs of the world's best music through the Asheville Museum Festival Association. Himself possessing a fine voice."

The Wheelers ran with the best of the Biltmore society enjoying a vibrant social life including a "delightful Halloween" party noted in The Asheville Times (Nov. 3, 1914) held at their home, Antler Hall, now The Biltmore Inn on the Biltmore Estate. (Newspaper Story describing a Spook affair.)

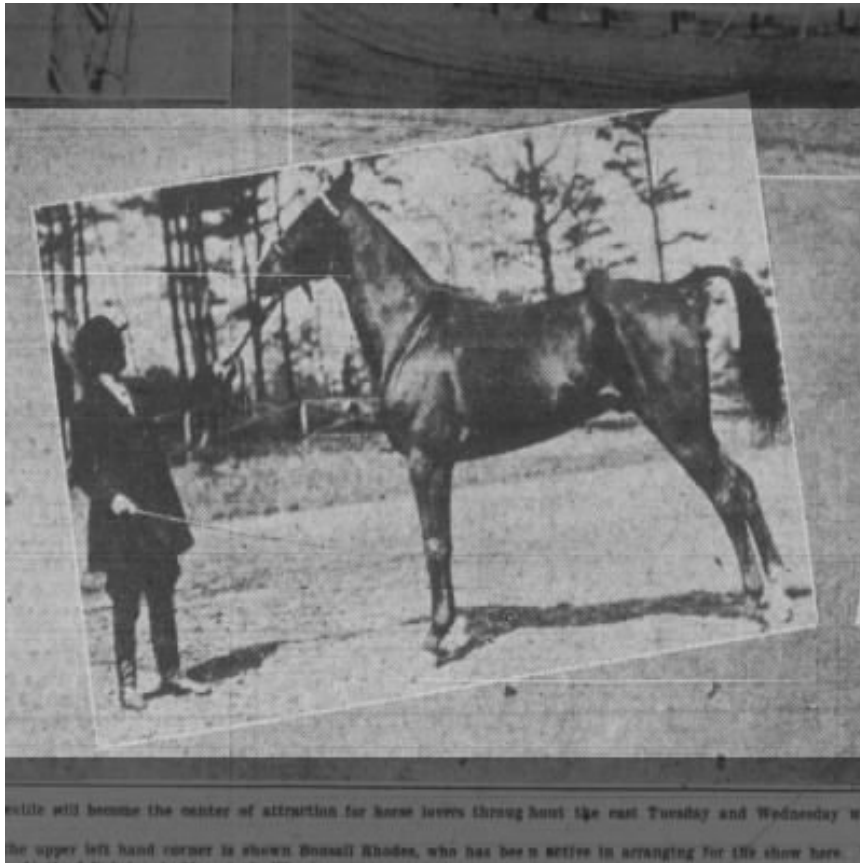
Anna Grant Wheeler (1868-1962)

Anne Wheeler's correspondence at Biltmore between 1904 and 1907 refer to weaving and spinning done by Anna with Mrs. O'Kelley and Mrs. Orr. as shared by The Biltmore Company, Museum Service Department, Archives Division. Anna was the daughter of George Norton, a Kentucky horse owner who encouraged her gift in controlling spirited horses by sending her to the French Calary School in Saumur, France. Anna became a famous horsewoman teaching riding from 1916 until 2 years before her death in Asheville, Orlando, Winter Park and Augusta and Savannah, Georgia.

By 1920 Anna and Arthur developed the Biltmore Forest Bridle and Saddle Club - a riding school near Asheville advertising lessons by appointment. One of Anna's first pupils was Cornelia Vanderbilt. Anna was also an original incorporator of the Biltmore Forest Horse Show Association in 1927 along with Burnham S. Colburn of Asheville and S. P. Ravenel of Highlands - both also associated with the Highlands Museum and Laboratory. The 1930 Census lists Arthur occupation as Manager of a Riding School. Two years before Arthur died in 1937, the couple located to Orlando, Florida for health reasons. After Arthur's death, Anna maintained a winter residence in Florida continuing to run Horse Shows but spending summers in Asheville teaching riding at Asheville's Camp Sequoyah and Rockbrook Camp. By 1946 the Asheville

Citizen Times reported that Anna was also Director of the Equitation Department at Rollins College. Anna lived a long life, dying in the Asheville in 1962 age, 93 and was buried in New Orleans next to Arthur.

Photo of Anna Grant Wheeler, The Asheville Times April 19, 1927.



Wheeler and Thomas Grant Harbison (1863-1936) at Biltmore

Thomas Grant Harbison worked at Biltmore from 1896 to 1926 as the Plant Collector for the Biltmore Nursery. Harbison and Wheeler undoubtedly collected flora for the Biltmore Herbarium and Wheeler for his personal herbarium in 1899. They must have been fast friends being of about the same age and stage in life.

Harbison had strong connections to Highlands establishing the Highlands Academy in 1887 as well as being one of the principals in founding the Highlands Biological Station. His career led him to many places- he traveled abroad and extensively throughout the Southeast collecting data for Dr. Charles Sargent, Director of the Arnold Arboretum at Harvard University. Of the hundred plus new species of perennial herbs he discovered, a favorite today is the large red *Trillium vaseyi*. During the summers in the 1930s, Harbison worked as a nature instructor at Camp Sequoyah for Boys in Weaverville, NC.** Most likely he knew Anna Wheeler teaching riding there at the same time.

(Photo of *Trillium*)

For Harbison, Highlands always remained his family mainstay. In 1896 he married Jessie Cobb (1868-1954) with whom he had four children, Dorothea (1899-1976), Gertrude (1903-1980), Margaret (1905-1999) and Thomas Cobb (1909-1959).

But the Herbarium Collection at Biltmore collected by Harbison had numerous setbacks including a fire in 1901 which destroyed parts of the library as well as 90 percent of the herbarium. With the untimely death of George Vanderbilt, Edith Vanderbilt started trimming the arboretum budget due to substantial debt. Then on July 16, 1916, Asheville experienced a devastating flood (not unlike Helene in 2024) which destroyed the Biltmore Nursery operation, the botanical library and more of the herbarium. The remaining Herbarium collection, some 25,000 specimens that was saved, now resides at the Smithsonian. Charles Walcott, Secretary of the National Museum/Smithsonian wrote, "No one realizes more fully than I what the destruction of the greater part of this notable collection has meant to the science of botany. We shall be extremely glad to receive what remains and give them the care and protection they deserve in the National Herbarium."

From 1933 until his death, Harbison was curator of the Herbarium at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Wheeler and the Highlands Museum and Laboratory

Wheeler's connection to Highlands was undoubtedly through Thomas Harbison. On June 30, 1930, Wheeler gave his herbarium collection of 149 mounted specimens collected from the Biltmore Estate to The Highlands Museum. The Accession Slip notes "collected by Dr. A. S. Wheeler, 1899", accepted by E. E. Reinke. On the back is revealed "Specimens 101-244 have been checked against Small's Manual and in all instances the name has been changed accordingly." The Highlands Museum Accession Book notes "Herbarium record 1-57 has been checked over with the aid of Mr. Harbison and transferred to a card catalog."

(Photo of Accession Slip and Back) (Photo of Small's Book)
(Photo of Accession Book and Photo of Cards.)

Reinke wrote to Wheeler on August 5, 1930, "You will be glad to know that the Wheeler Herbarium has been thoroughly cataloged and card indexed in the Highlands Museum. It is an extremely important part of our Museum and we shall always be grateful to you for your generosity. I hope you and Mrs. Wheeler will come to Highlands soon and see the activities of the Highlands Museum." Wheeler's gift of his herbarium specimens to the Highlands Museum, was customary in a sort of exchange program whereby botanists shared and exchanged specimens with one another and institutions.

(Copy of Letter)

Ninety-two of specimens listed on the Herbarium cards as collected by Arthur S. Wheeler have been found in our Herbarium. Examples of Wheeler's Identification label and collection can be seen below.

The entire holdings of the Highlands Biological Station Herbarium can be found in on the website of SERNEC, the South East Regional Network of Expertise and Collections consortium at sernecportal.org.***

Arthur and Anna were invited by Clark Foreman on July 28, 1931 to the dedication of the Samuel T. Weyman Laboratory the following August 29th. Arthur did attend signing the guest book next to Thomas Harbison. Harbison is in the Masa photograph of the dedication, but we are unsure if Wheeler is pictured.

(Copy of Letter and Photo of Wheeler and Harbison signature.)

*My thanks for Jill Hawkins and Scott Shumate, Biltmore Estate Archaeologist and Historian, of the Biltmore Company, Museum Service Department, Archives Division, for providing information about the Wheelers at Biltmore as well as other sources such as deeds and newspaper articles on Wheeler.

**See Randolph P. Shaffner's Heart of the Blue Ridge Highlands, North Carolina pages 214 - 219.

***Also Dr. Kathy Mathews, Professor of Arts and Sciences at Western Carolina University, and HBS volunteers Leslie Costa and Suzanne McDowell for help with reconciling Wheeler's specimens in the HBS Herbarium. And of course Sarah Vickery for taking a very complicated story and genealogical puzzle and making it entertaining to read and easy to understand.

The Highlands Museum Herbarium, now at the Highlands Biological Station

First donations to the The Highlands Museum Herbarium as listed in the accession book were collected in July and August of 1928 with gifts from Mary Chapin (Mrs. J. Jay) Smith (7), Clark Foreman (1), Helen G. McCormack (22), Albertina Staub (1), and Edith Eskrigge (1). The flora were collected in Mrs. Smith's garden, but others were found on the "road to Satulah", "Eskrigge place", "grounds of museum", or "roadside".

Of particular interest is a Showy Orcus, collected by Mary Chapin Smith and a note that says: "This plant was found by Berzilla Smith in a cove near Shortoff Mountain over 30 years ago, and has been cultivated in Highlands area ever since."

In the Museum Log book by it was noted on July 16, 1928 that Miss B. Durgin gave a plant press.

(Photo)

In 1930 additions to the Herbarium were contributed by Stanley A. C. Cain (1902-1995) collected from the Smokeys. Dr. Cain was a professor at Butler University in Indianapolis, Indiana. He also attended the opening of the Weyman Laboratory in 1930 - his signature is below.

(Photo of signature)

Later important contributors include Albert E. Radford, Dan Pittillo, Jim Horton, and Bill Wykle.

