

The Groesbeck Estate and Its Cultural Significance

Associations with the Krippendorfs

Introduction

Acquisition of adjacent property has been the hallmark of the history of the land at Cincinnati Nature Center's Rowe Woods since its founding in 1965. Recent purchase of 235 acres of the former Groesbeck estate, also known as Wildwood, has been the largest addition to date. This property has a significant and rich cultural history which adds to and compliments the familiar legacy of Carl and Mary Krippendorf.

The Seely and Groesbeck Families

Grace Seely (1878-1957) was the daughter of a prominent Cincinnati physician, Dr. William Wallace. In a time when young girls were expected to play indoors, Grace developed a love of nature and the outdoors that never left her. In 1905, she married Glendening (sp?) Burnet Groesbeck (1876-?), a son of Telford Groesbeck and a grandson of William S. Groesbeck, US Congressman and Senator, and successful defense counsel for President Andrew Johnson in his impeachment trial in 1868. Grace and Glendening lived in the Groesbeck home on Elmhurst Place in the early years of their marriage.

Land near Perintown and Neighboring the Krippendorfs

In 1914 the Groesbecks purchased the first 11 acres of what would become a rural estate of over 300 acres off Salt Run Road near Perintown. It is very likely that an existing friendship with the Krippendorfs led the Groesbecks to this area.

The Influence of Gertrude Jekyll

The Arts and Crafts Movement rose in late-19th century England in an effort to revive traditional hand/eye/heart creative techniques lost in an industrialized society. The creativity of London-born Gertrude Jekyll (1843-1932) spanned many arts, crafts and most importantly, garden design. Influenced by William Morris and William Robinson and in collaboration with architect Edwin Lutyens, she designed more than 300 gardens and authored thirteen books. As an artist, she applied the basic principals of art to her landscape designs and used water, topography, and pathways to create movement and views. She skillfully blended the hard lines of a house with the softness of a garden that transitioned from more to less formal as distance from the house increased.

Jekyll developed a large and devoted international following, and Grace Groesbeck was the first of only three clients in the United States for whom she designed garden plans. Although specific Jekyll plans drawn for the Groesbecks in 1914 and 1915 were not implemented, the beautiful garden that Grace later created had a strong Jekyll influence – a series of formal gardens and borders, with stone edging and a circle of stone columns that still exist, all within a natural wooded setting. In 1995, a symposium on Gertrude Jekyll and the Groesbeck gardens was held at the Cincinnati Historical Society. After a visit to the property, one of the presenters, Richard Bisgrove, noted British author of *The Gardens of Gertrude Jekyll*, described the garden as being "close in spirit to Miss Jekyll's own garden at Munstead, of national importance, and remaining in vestigial form".

Likewise, the gardens of Carl and Mary Krippendorf also had definite Jekyll characteristics with a blend of horticulture and nature. Early in his life, Carl is said to have been influenced by the William Robinson book, *The English Flower Garden*, published in 1895. Three books by Jekyll and two others by Robinson are in an inventory of his library taken in 1951.

A Country Home off Salt Run Road

Using plans drawn by Burroughs and Deekin in 1917, an impressive stone house was constructed by the Groesbecks about 1920. Walter Langsam, noted local architectural historian, recently visited the site. He observed that “the house is an excellent representation of a rural English Revival limestone country house with Arts and Crafts influences.” He also commented on similarities to the Munstead Wood home of Gertrude Jekyll in Surrey, England. Experts have advised that consideration should be given to nomination of the Groesbeck house and grounds to the National Register of Historic Places. The same advice was given for the complex of Krippendorf buildings.

Architect Burroughs is best known as a designer of fine traditional residences in an arts and crafts mode. An obituary calls him “a pioneer of English architecture in the Ohio Valley.” Other examples of his work are the homes of B.H. Kroger and Mrs. George Eustis.

Founding of the Garden Club of Cincinnati

Grace Groesbeck and Mary Krippendorf were founding members of this Club in March, 1914. Grace was the first secretary. The Club affiliated with the Garden Club of America in 1915. In a memorial for Grace in 1958, members Natalie P. Bosworth (Mrs. Charles W.) and Helen W. Eustis (Mrs. George D.) wrote of her generosity and modesty, exquisite delphiniums, wooded hillsides filled with daffodils, love of birds, and the fact that she was “one of the first few dirt gardeners”. Gardens of the Groesbecks, Krippendorfs, and the Aulls (in Dayton, Ohio) were on a tour for the National Meeting of the Garden Club of America in Cincinnati in 1928.

Carl Krippendorf received the prestigious Buckley Medal of Merit for Horticultural Achievement from the Garden Club of America in 1949.

In Conclusion

The Groesbecks and Krippendorfs acquired large parcels of adjoining land and preserved them in a near-natural state through the first half of the 20th century. Cincinnati Nature Center and The Presbytery of Cincinnati continued their stewardship through to the present. With the exception of the loss of plantings in tended garden areas, these properties that emphasize a relationship between humans and nature have changed very little. This is remarkable in a time when survival of historic property is a struggle. These lands today form a significant portion of Cincinnati Nature Center at Rowe Woods. A generous and sustained tradition of support has made this longevity possible. For the benefit of those who follow, these family legacies remain as reminders that the tradition of generosity must continue.