

# An Earlier Wild Botanic Garden

by Gary Bebeau

## SECTION I

Imagine her surprise when Eloise Butler saw an article in The Boston Transcript in 1908 that described a “wild garden” in New Brunswick, Canada that maintained more than 500 species of flowering plants and had been established years earlier. (1) Until this time she believed her garden in Glenwood Park was original to the idea. So - what to do about it? You go there and check it out! She was already in the Boston area that Summer staying with her sister Cora Pease in Malden MA, so off they went, sourcing several plant specimens for the Minneapolis Garden in Nova Scotia while on the journey. (2)

The New Brunswick garden belonged to George Upham Hay (1843-1913). He was a leading member of the Natural History Society of New Brunswick (NHSNB), which was founded in 1880. He founded the herbarium in the group’s museum and for the rest of his life he chaired its’ committee on botany. (3)

In 1899 he announced the existence of the wild garden in papers sent to the NHSNB and to the Royal Society of Canada (RSC). This was 10 years after he bought the property. To the NHSNB he noted that the garden would aim to “[show] as far as the conditions would warrant, the peculiarities and extent of the flora of New Brunswick”. (4) This is similar to the wording in the petition establishing the Minneapolis Garden: “The aims of this garden would be to show plants as living things and their adaptations to their environment, to display in miniature the rich and varied flora of Minnesota.” (5)

Hay’s garden was of two acres and located on his private summer estate at Ingleside, near Westfield NB. It was a private garden dedicated to study, not open to the public for general viewing of plants.

To the RSC he described it as an “experiment in which year-to-year variation in flowering times and other phenomena would be examined in relation to variation in climate.” He stated that it “presented the botanist the opportunity of studying problems analogous to those which a city presents to the sociologist - that is, the interactions of living organisms inhabiting the same locality, adapting themselves to different conditions, maintaining their ground against rival or yielding to unfavorable conditions.” (6)

## SECTION II

On his trips to remote parts of the province he would collect plants for transplant to his garden. He also made a study of fungi of New Brunswick - many were mushrooms growing in or near his garden. This was the same type of procedure undertaken by Eloise Butler for her wild botanic garden. Eloise wrote of her visit that the garden was “of vivid interest” but her wild garden was “superior” as it was larger, open to the public, and did not get flooded out periodically by a small brook. (7)



George U. Hay, making field notes in a field book, seated by a campfire on the South Tobique Lakes region of north-western New Brunswick - July 1900. Photo by Mauran I. Furbish

Below: Gathering of women from the Ladies Auxiliary of the Natural History Society of New Brunswick at the summer property of George U. Hay at Ingleside, the location of his Wild Garden circa 1890. Hay is at the back of the group on the verandah.



Dr. Hay's wild garden became a venue for outings by the NHSNB and students from Victoria High School where he was principal. Beginning in 1899 he provided annual notes to the Bulletin of the NHSNB about what native plants were amenable to cultivation and on the seasonal changes in his garden. After 10 years he published a summary of the earliest, latest and average flowering dates for 24 species that he had followed in the same locations each year. (8)

The seasonal bloom summary was just the type of record that was maintained at Glenwood Park. Years later Gardener Ken Avery would publish his list of earliest, latest and average flowering dates - for 25 species.

Hay had his trouble with plants just like Eloise did. He decided to attempt to "secure a modus vivendi" there between native and non-native species "by assigning the weeds to a space in one corner," but he noted the weeds showed "a perversity characteristic of their tribe . . . spurned such treatment and refused to grow." (9)

Some years later Eloise wrote:

"Mistress Mary, so contrary How does your garden grow? Like Mistress, like garden is the reply. In quirks, in whimsies, and in sheer contrariness a wild garden surpasses Mistress Mary. This is true especially of the introduced species." (10)

Dr. Hay made no provision for the long-term maintenance of his garden and after his death in 1913 it fell into disuse and there is now no trace of it. (11) The similarities in purpose and thought in the establishment of these two “wild gardens” is remarkable. The public garden in Minneapolis, curated by Eloise Butler, had an advantage: There was the hope of continuance when the founding person left the scene, as it was part of a larger city park system and had public support.

### SECTION III

Eloise Butler wrote in some detail about her visit to Saint John when she published a paper in the “Bulletin of the Minnesota Academy of Science” Volume 5, No. 1. 1911. Here is her text.

A wild botanic garden similar to ours in design and scope was established some years ago in St. John, New Brunswick by Dr. George U. Hay, the editor of “The Educational Review” and the writer of Canadian history. At this time Dr. Hay was teaching botany in the high school of St. John, and the immediate purpose of the garden was for the instruction of his pupils. We had supposed that the scheme of our garden was purely original until hearing of this place. My interest was so greatly aroused that I went expressly to New Brunswick to see it.

Dr. Hay’s garden comprises about two acres, ideally situated on the St. John River, about twelve miles above the city of St. John, and is reached by the Canadian Pacific railway. It was his aim to bring together as much as possible of the flora of New Brunswick. He told me how the idea came to him. “I observed,” said he, “when standing on this very spot, that without taking a step, but by merely stretching out my hand, I could touch eight different species of trees; and the thought occurred to me: ‘Since nature has done so much for this place, why cannot I help on the work by doing a little more?’ ” Dr. Hay’s garden is without a swamp, so that some of the plants that happily flourish in ours, lead in his a precarious existence. The essential features of a swamp are, however, somewhat supplied by a broad, winding brook, and his grounds are diversified by hill, valley and meadow. Most of all I coveted his possession of large boulders, which he had completely draped with the rock fern, *Polypodium vulgare*. How truly Dr. Hay had copied nature in this respect, I did not realize, until shortly afterwards, I found at Taylor’s Falls the very “moral” of those boulders in shape and size, and covered as his was with polypody.



Mountain Cranberry  
(Lingonberry) *Vaccinium vitis-idaea*. Photo by Paul Marcum,  
Wisconsin Flora.

Dr. Hay has succeeded in establishing in his garden specimens of all the trees, all the shrubs, and the most notable of the herbs of his province. Northern Minnesota and New Brunswick have many plants in common as the mountain cranberry, *Vaccinium vitis-idaea*, and the Huron wild tansy, *Tanacetum huronense* [*Tanacetum bipinnatum* ssp. *huronense*] but I was surprised when he pointed out as a rarity a lonely specimen of a box-elder tree, and again that the hackberry was wanting.



Goldie's Wood Fern.  
*Dryopteris goldiana*

His ferns were of great interest, there being splendid examples of massing of the ostrich, royal and lady ferns. Rare and tiny rock ferns peeped out from artfully constructed rockeries, which I supposed were natural, until informed to the contrary. There I saw the shield fern, named for the botanist, Goldie, which Goldie himself never saw growing, but which Dr. Hay had the great pleasure of showing to Goldie’s son, when he visited the garden. My attention was also directed to a small specimen of the much be-written bake-apple, *Rubus chamaemorus*, [Cloudberry] on which a solitary, salmon-colored berry was maturing. During the growing season, many visitors from far and near present themselves in this trained wilderness for instruction and inspiration. [End of Butler text.]

In 1921 Eloise was interviewed for an article in Minneapolis Tribune and she referenced her visit to New Brunswick. Her memory was not quite perfect as she remembered the garden being three acres and the visit about 30 years ago, when it had only been 13 years.

Notes:

1. *The Wild Gardener*, Martha Hellander, 1992, North Star Press.
2. *Garden Log*, Eloise Butler, 1908. Butler was still teaching in the Minneapolis Public Schools and returned to the east coast for one or two months each Summer until 1911.
3. *History of Saint John*, City of Saint John, New Brunswick
4. *The Creative City of Saint John*, by Christi Verduyn. Chapter 2 "The Ingleside Wild Garden of George Upham Hay" by Stephen R. Clayden. Formac Publishing Company Ltd, Halifax, 2018.
5. Petition of citizens to the Board of Park Commissioners, 1907
6. see note 4
7. see note 1. Page 74. Also, Hellander's research established that the garden in Minneapolis was the oldest public wildflower garden in the United States.
8. Stephen R. Clayden, "HAY, GEORGE UPHAM," in Dictionary of Canadian Biography, vol. 14, University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003
9. see note 4
10. Eloise Butler, "A Collection of Garden Experiences", Letter to the Gray Memorial Botanical Chapter of the Agassiz Association, 1916
11. see note 4

Photos are provided courtesy Stephen R. Clayden and Formac Publishing Company and appear in *The Creative City of Saint John*.

The plants, as listed in Butler's Garden Log, sourced from Nova Scotia were:

From Cambridge: Christmas Fern (*Polystichum acrostichoides*); Mountain Wood Sorrel (*Oxalis acetosella*); Lesser Purple Fringed Orchid (*Habenaria psycodes*).

From Evangeline Beach: Oak Fern (*Phegopteris dryopteris*) and Longbeech Fern (*Phegopteris polypodioides*).

Background on names:

The Garden in Minneapolis was originally named the "Wild Botanic Garden." But then within a few years it was renamed the "Native Plant Reserve." Eloise once explained that the original name proved to be confusing to the public. In 1929 the Garden was renamed the "Eloise Butler Wild Flower Garden." Between 1969 and 1972 there was some variation but it all worked out to the current name "Eloise Butler Wildflower Garden and Bird Sanctuary." Glenwood Park was the original name of the enclosing park grounds. These grounds were renamed "Theodore Wirth Park" in 1938 after Wirth's retirement in 1935.

© 2021 Friends of the Wildflower Garden. [www.friendsofeloisebutler.org](http://www.friendsofeloisebutler.org). Gary Bebeau is a member of the Friends of the Wildflower Garden.