

WILDFLOWER WOODS
(Gene Stratton-Porter State Historic Site)
1205 Pleasant Point
Rome City
Noble County
Indiana

HALS IN-8
HALS IN-8

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

WILDFLOWER WOODS (Gene Stratton-Porter State Historic Site)

HALS NO. IN-8

Location: 1205 Pleasant Point, Rome City, Orange Township, Noble County, Indiana

41.285266, -85.205331 (Cabin roof, Google Earth, Simple Cylindrical Projection, WGS84)

Significance: Gene Stratton-Porter (1863-1924) was a novelist and nature writer who promoted landscape conservation through her fiction and nature-themed books. She was one of the bestselling authors of the early twentieth century, and when literary success made her a national celebrity, Stratton-Porter purchased a forested property on the banks of Sylvan Lake near Rome City, Indiana. She named this private retreat Wildflower Woods and built a large two-story house that included spaces for writing, a darkroom for photography, and a sunroom for gardening. She personally managed the construction of an expansive formal garden, and the transplanting of more than 10,000 plants, harvested from the surrounding countryside.

The property was designated a State Historic Site in 1945 and was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1974 (NRIS No. 74000015).

Description: Wildflower Woods is located on the south shore of Sylvan Lake, in Noble County, Indiana. The 120-acre site gently slopes from south to north towards the lake. The site can be divided into two distinct landscapes: a historic landscape representing the time when Gene Stratton-Porter resided at the cabin, and a landscape for managing the property as a historic site.

The historic landscape includes the cabin, formal garden, toolshed, orchard, woodland garden, spring, views to the lake, and circulation patterns. The garden features a central arbor and a smaller seating arbor. Several structures the author built no longer exist, including a boathouse, icehouse, carriage house, fence gates, and arbor structures.

The site management landscape is located south of the cabin and includes a parking lot, picnic shelter, and signage related to historic site operations. A small visitor center was constructed at the location of the author's carriage house. The gravesites of the author and her daughter Jeanette are located on the property.

Gene Stratton-Porter's Wildflower Woods demonstrates a high level of historic integrity. The landscape (made up of the lake, woodland, buildings, structures,

and garden) maintains its original location, design, setting, built materials, and workmanship. In the transition from a private residence to a public museum, the landscape has retained the qualities of a secluded retreat. Its integrity is slightly challenged by non-historic structures introduced to the site, historic structures removed from the site, and the presence of invasive species. For instance, a small memorial fountain and gazebo have been added to the formal garden, and the author's carriage house, boathouse, icehouse, and several small garden structures no longer exist. The site's management is currently working on removing non-historic structures, restoring lost structures, and controlling several invasive plants species.

History: Gene Stratton-Porter's life story, from a common Hoosier upbringing to her tragic death, is consistently presented in a variety of biographies (Long, 1990; Marrow, 1995 and 2010; Brooks, 1980). She was born Geneva Grace Stratton in 1863 near the small town of Lagro, Wabash County, Indiana, as the youngest of twelve children. Her parents were farmers, and her father a part-time preacher. Due to her mother's battle with typhoid, the future author was mostly raised by her father. With unlimited access to the outdoors, she learned to appreciate plants and animals. When she was eleven, the family moved to Wabash, Indiana, where she attended public school.

The author's early connection to Rome City and the Sylvan Lake region began in the early 1880s when she attended the annual Chautauqua held on the lake's Big Island. During the 1884 Chautauqua, Charles Darwin Porter, a drugstore owner from Decatur, Indiana, distantly admired the future author. That fall, he introduced himself by letter, a romance ensued, and they were married in 1886. Their only child, Jeannette, was born in 1887. The family settled in the small town of Geneva in 1888 to be close to Porter's drugstore. His financial success eventually allowed the family to build a two-story house in Geneva that is now a state historic site known as Limberlost South (Marrow, *Ben-Hur* 91).

The cabin's proximity to the nearby Limberlost Swamp enticed the author to explore the marshlands. She purchased a camera and pursued a hobby of photographing wetland flowers, birds, and insects. She would mail the photographs, with accompanying text, to nature-themed magazines for publication. According to biographer Barbara Olenyik Marrow, an editor encouraged her to expand a manuscript to book size, and she published *The Song of the Cardinal* in 1903 (*Ben-Hur* 93). The book was the first of a series of novels set in Hoosier swamps and woodlands, with fictional characters based on real people surrounding the author (Porter-Meehan, *Lady* 35). The novel *Freckles* brought national success in 1904, followed by *A Girl of the Limberlost* in 1909 and *The Harvester* in 1911.

Over her twenty-year writing career, Stratton-Porter authored 25 fiction, poetry, and nature books that combined sold more than 8 million copies. *Freckles* alone

has sold more than 1.5 million copies. *The Harvester* was the fifth bestselling book of 1911 and number one in 1912 (Brooks 178). Eight of her books have also been made into movies.

Stratton-Porter's melodramatic novels, which she described as "nature studies sugar coated with fiction," took place in natural settings she described in minute detail (ctd. in Green 151). These books showcased her detailed knowledge of moths, birds, and vegetation, plus her photographic and artistic skills. Her stories introduced millions of readers to the transformational qualities of natural landscapes, and she relished the opportunity to use stories and characters to connect readers with nature.

Stratton-Porter's books brought her wealth and notoriety. As a celebrity constantly interrupted by an endearing public, she sought privacy by returning to Rome City in 1912 and establishing a home on Sylvan Lake. Unlike other landscapes defined by natural glacial pothole lakes, Sylvan Lake had been constructed during the 1830s by damming a branch of the Elkhart River, and was intended to be a feeder lake for a canal linking Fort Wayne, Indiana, to Lake Michigan (Griswold 342). The canal was never constructed, but train service to the lake made it a regional summer vacation destination widely known for its permanent Chautauqua facilities, where Gene and Charles met and later honeymooned.

In 1912, Stratton-Porter purchased a small cottage on Sylvan Lake's northern shore and spent a summer searching for potential home locations. She settled on a 150-acre site with 40 acres of woodland on the southern shore of the lake. Within the woods, just feet from shore, she built a house with a veneer of cedar logs to project the impression of a rustic cabin. The immense structure provided the author space to live, write, and entertain. It contained a darkroom for her photography, a small conservatory for her plants, and a modern kitchen. The front of the house faced onto the lake and was wrapped by a substantial stone porch. Behind the house, the author constructed a large formal garden that encompassed a linear pergola. Also within the property, she built stone entry gates, a carriage house, a garden workshop, a boathouse, an icehouse, and an orchard.

On the south side of the cabin, a large formal garden contained a long central arbor flanked by stone-lined planting beds. It is unclear if Stratton-Porter created a set planting design for the garden, or if she changed the scheme annually. However, photos indicate that the plant material was primarily tall and leggy, not manicured. Photos also indicate that the beds were subdivided into smaller units when the Boy Scouts owned the property in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

Stratton-Porter reflected, in great detail, on the creation of the woodland garden

in a 1924 *Good Housekeeping* article titled “Tales You Won’t Believe: The Lost White Wild Strawberries” (ctd. in Plum 153-159, 168). The author hired a crew of men led by Frank Wallace, an Indianapolis forester who later became the Indiana State Entomologist, to remove unwanted underbrush, perform surgery on damaged trees, and fill hollow trees with concrete to improve their structure.

Stratton-Porter collected plants from the surrounding countryside, transported them to her new home in a specially outfitted Auburn touring car, and then transplanted them within the property’s woodlands (Morrow 124). Her design vision for the woodlands was a series of planting beds, about an acre in size, of understory trees, shrubs, and flowering plants arranged by flower and fruit color. Lorene Wallace, the author’s secretary, observed that the only “semblance of formal planting was the segregation of colors into separate beds” (20). A section of woodland “parallel to the west line of the property, beginning at the garage, [and] running down the hill to the darkest part of swamp on the lake shore” was planted in red because it already possessed a variety of red flowering and fruiting plants. These included wild strawberries, bittersweet, lilies, monarda, and cardinal flower. An adjacent bed was planted in white, because it contained the best soil for lilies of the valley, dogwood, violets, and asters. Additional planting beds of pink, blue, and mauve were established with a final yellow color theme surrounding the new cabin. Unfortunately, the design did not survive the harsh winter of 1914 (Plum 157).

The author seasonally resided at the Wildflower Woods until 1922, when she moved to California for health reasons, and to manage the production of her stories into films. She died in 1924 when a streetcar struck her automobile. Her daughter Jeanette sold the Rome City property to the Boy Scouts of America, and they used it as a disembarking spot for a camp on Big Island in Sylvan Lake, but the group defaulted on their loan. The Lumberlost Conservation Association purchased 20 acres of the historic property in 1945, and then transferred it to the State of Indiana the following year (Plum 161). The author and her daughter Jeanette were interred at the site in 1999. The site now contains 125 acres and is open to visitors from April to December.

Sources: Bonta, Marcia Myers. *Women in the Field: America’s Pioneering Women Naturalists*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1991. Print

Brooks, Paul. *Speaking for Nature: How Literary Naturalists from Henry Thoreau to Rachel Carson Have Shaped America*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980. Print.

Green, Amy S. “Two Women Naturalists and the Search for Autonomy: Anna Botsford Comstock and the Producer Ethic; Gene Stratton-Porter and the Gospel of Wealth.” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 29.1-2 (2001): 145-154. Print.

Griswold, Bert J. *The Pictorial History of Fort Wayne, Indiana: A Review of Two Centuries of Occupation of the Region about the Head of the Maumee River*. Chicago: Robert O. Law Company, 1917. Print.

Kramer, Mary Eleanor. "Woman of Achievement—Gene Stratton-Porter." *The Normal Instructor* 22 (May 1913): 19.

Long, Judith Reick. *Gene Stratton-Porter: Novelist and Naturalist*. Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1990. Print.

Marrow, Barbara Olenyik. *From Ben-Hur to Sister Carrie: Remembering the Lives and Works of Five Indiana Authors*. Indianapolis: Guild Press of Indiana, 1995. Print.

Marrow, Barbara Olenyik. *Nature's Storyteller: The Life of Gene Stratton-Porter*. Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society Press, 2010. Print.

Owen, M. F. *History of Orange Township*. North Manchester, IN: The Heckman Bindery, 1975. Print.

Plum, Sydney Landon. *Coming Through the Swamp: The Nature Writings of Gene Stratton Porter*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1996. Print.

Porter-Meehan, Jeannette. *The Lady of the Limberlost: The Life and Letters of Gene Stratton-Porter*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1928. Print.

Porter-Meehan, Jeannette. *Life and Letters of Gene Stratton-Porter*. Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1972. Print.

Stratton-Porter, Gene. *Freckles*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1904. Print.

Stratton-Porter, Gene. *A Girl of the Limberlost*. New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1909. Print.

Stratton-Porter, Gene. *The Harvester*. New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1913. Print.

Stratton-Porter, Gene. *Let Us Highly Resolve*. New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1927. Print.

Wallace, Frank N. "Gene Stratton-Porter and Her Study of Native Plants." *Gene Stratton-Porter Remembered...: Reprints of Selected Articles*. Ed. David G. MacLean. Decatur, IN: Americana Books, 1990, 19-24. Print.

Wallace, Lorene M. "The Landscaping of the Limberlost Cabin." *Gene Stratton-Porter Remembered...: Reprints of Selected Articles*. Ed. David G. MacLean. Decatur, IN: Americana Books, 1990, 5-17. Print.

Historian: Ball State University Students: Brian Grover, Ben Doane, David McCarel, and Shane Slater.

Faculty mentors: Christopher Baas, Malcolm Cairns, and Geri Strecker.

Historian contact:
Christopher Baas, Assistant Professor
Department of Landscape Architecture
College of Architecture and Planning
Ball State University
Muncie, IN 47306
765.285.1984

Site contact:
Dave Fox, Natural History Section Manager &
Gene Stratton-Porter SHS Property Manager
Gene Stratton-Porter State Historic Site
1205 Pleasant Point
Rome City, IN 46748
260.854.9102

July, 2013

2013 HALS Challenge Entry: *Documenting the Cultural Landscapes of Women*



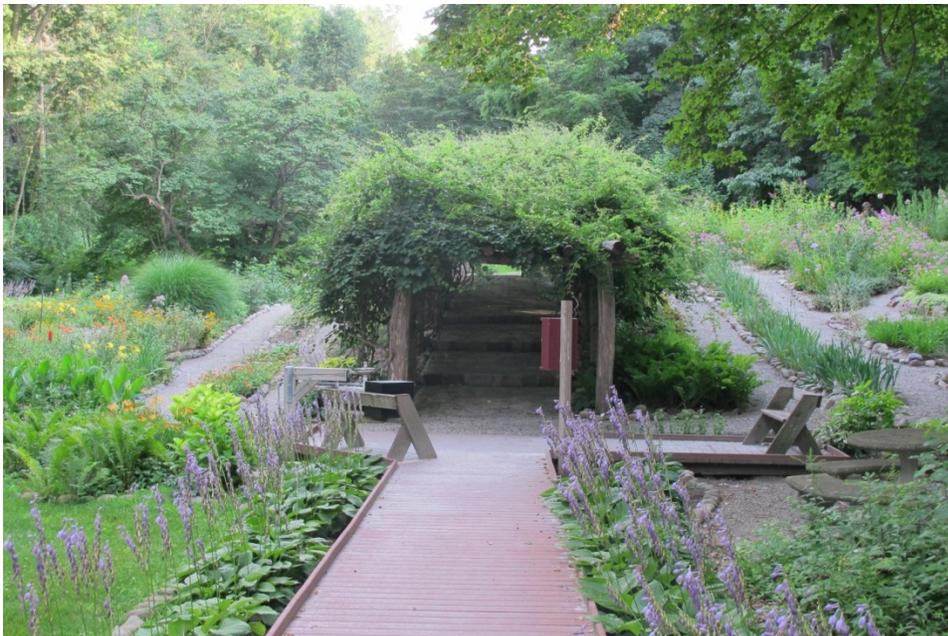
Stone entry gates with owl statues (Malcolm Cairns, July 2013).



North façade of cabin showing front and side porches. A sleeping porch is located above (Malcolm Cairns, July 2013).



View (looking north) of Big Island from the cabin's front porch. Following the author's death, the Boy Scouts used Wildflower Woods as a disembarking spot for a camp located on the island (Malcolm Cairns, July 2013).



View of formal garden looking south from cabin's back door (Malcolm Cairns, July 2013).



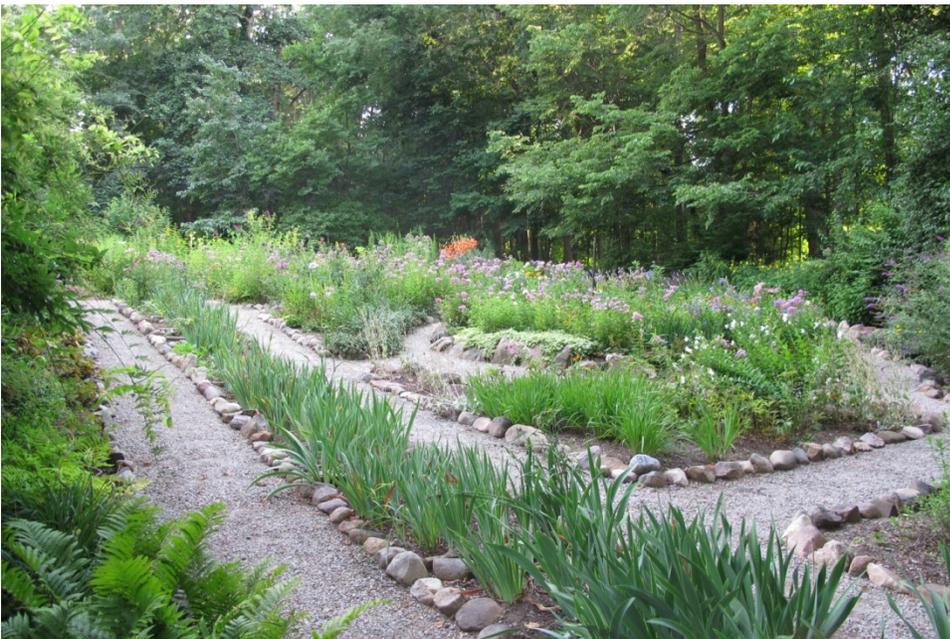
View of the formal garden's central arbor looking south (Malcolm Cairns, July 2013).



Detail of the formal garden's central arbor (Malcolm Cairns, July 2013).



View of east half of formal garden looking south (Malcolm Cairns, July 2013).



View of west half of formal garden looking south (Malcolm Cairns, July 2013).



View of rear of cabin from formal garden looking north (Malcolm Cairns, July 2013).



View of woodland (Malcolm Cairns, July 2013).



Accessible trail into Wildflower Woods from visitor parking lot (Malcolm Cairns, July 2013).



Gene Stratton-Porter (1863-1924) and Jeannette Porter Meehan (1887-1977) gravesite. The mother and daughter were moved to the site in 1999 (Malcolm Cairns, July 2013).



Stone spring outlet with Big Island in the background (Malcolm Cairns, July 2013).



View of north façade of visitor center (Malcolm Cairns, July 2013).



View of north façade of garden shed (Malcolm Cairns, July 2013).



View of cabin from Sylvan Lake (Malcolm Cairns, July 2013).