

Collection #
M 1498
OM 0763

**MERRITT FAMILY
COLLECTION, 1849-1975**

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COLLECTION INFORMATION

VOLUME OF COLLECTION: 1 half-sized manuscript box, 1 folder photographs, 1 folder graphics, 1 oversized item

COLLECTION DATES: 1849-1975

PROVENANCE: Peter M. Waser, 2021

RESTRICTIONS: None

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ALTERNATE FORMATS:

RELATED HOLDINGS: Proceedings of the Indiana Sanitary Convention, 1864 (pamphlet), E 631.7 .I6 P7 1864

ACCESSION NUMBER: 2021.0069

NOTES:

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

George Merritt was born 22 November 1824, on a farm in Saratoga, New York. Both of his parents and generations before them belonged to the Society of Friends (Quakers). In 1836 the family moved via canal to Michigan, where they worked to transform the wooded wilderness to a working farm. Merritt eventually left on his own to go to Ohio, where he learned the business of wool manufacturing. By 1851 he had his own business in Xenia, Ohio. While in Xenia, Merritt met Paulina T. McClung.

Paulina was born to an affluent family in Rock Bridge, Virginia on 8 August 1831. Around 1835, the family left their mansion in the mountains, which had been used as a makeshift fort during the Indian wars, and relocated to the free state of Ohio. They established a farm in Greene County, and the family grew to include ten children. In 1852, Paulina and George Merritt were married.

In 1856, the two moved to Indianapolis, where George entered into a partnership with William Coughlen and established the Merritt & Coughlen Wool Manufacturing Company on W. Washington Street along the White River. In the early years they produced cards of wool for housewives to spin. By the time of the Civil War, the firm obtained the contract to furnish uniforms for Gen. Lew Wallace's regiment of zouaves. The firm would grow to become one of the prominent industrial businesses in the city. By 1893, they had earned a display at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

George and Paulina had three children: Jeannette Grace Merritt (1853-1884), Worth Merritt (1861-1906), and Ernest Merritt (1865-1948). In the early 1880s, Coughlen retired, Worth Merritt took over for his father, and the company continued as George Merritt & Co. until 1897.

Paulina Merritt dedicated her life and her inheritance to bettering the lives of the less fortunate. She was instrumental in the establishment of a home for children orphaned by the Civil War, advocated for reforming insane asylums, gave speeches and wrote letters in support of women's suffrage, and donated land to the Colored Women's Mutual Society for establishment of the Alpha Home.

George Merritt's Quaker ancestry prohibited his taking up arms during the Civil War, but he found a way to serve the Union cause by joining the Indiana Sanitary Commission, a forerunner to the Red Cross. He saw firsthand the toll the war took, and along with his wife, helped establish a home for orphaned children. The war had also taken a toll on the trees in Military Park in Indianapolis, and Merritt took on the responsibility of reviving the park. Long before kindergartens, he also established a public playground in the park, complete with a teacher on duty. He would serve on the Indianapolis Board of Park Commissioners from 1899 to 1906. He also served on the Indianapolis School Board, and took a special interest in School #4, near his home and Military Park. The school would later be named for him.

Ernest Merritt received an engineering degree from Cornell University in 1886. He did graduate work at Cornell and the University of Berlin. He was dean of the Graduate School at Cornell from 1909 to 1914, and named the head of the physics department there in 1918.

In 1873, the family took a trip to the West in hopes of improving the health of daughter Jeannette. The trip seems to have been memorable for all concerned. In 1886, George and Paulina would move to the San Diego area. George died in a sanitarium there in 1912. Paulina would remain in California, living with her sister Hester and then taking on domestic help. She died in 1921. Both are buried in Crown Hill Cemetery in Indianapolis.

Source:

Materials in the collection.

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

The collection consists of family material collected by the donor, mostly concerning his great-grandparents, George and Paulina Merritt, and their youngest child, Ernest Merritt.

It begins with Civil War documents related to George Merritt's service in the Indiana State Sanitary Commission, including a letter of introduction from Governor O. P. Morton to General William Tecumseh Sherman. Also included are letters from George to Paulina during his service in the early part of the Atlanta Campaign. In one case, Merritt helped a mortally wounded soldier pen a letter to his wife, of which a copy is included (Resaca, 29 May 1864). Back in Chattanooga that night, Merritt described the experience in a letter to Paulina, also included. Further letters describe troop movements, battles, and the pattern of retreat and re-entrenchment throughout the campaign. Lastly, a letter describing the qualities of Eliza "Mother" George (9 May 1865), a nurse from Fort Wayne who served alongside Merritt during the war.

The collection also includes pamphlets produced by Ernest Merritt during his boyhood in the 1870s. The pamphlets, titled "The Mountain Echo," and "Sea Breeze," include stories, drawings, and current events from his perspective as an 8-11 year-old. The earlier editions are hand-drawn, but several from 1875 and 1876 were printed on Ernest's own Kelsey Excelsior printing presses. Also included are several graphite, ink, and watercolor drawings done by Ernest in the 1870s, which are stored in Graphics.

Paulina McClung Merritt's writings from 1849-1850 consist of essays reflecting her upbringing and personal principles, one of which is titled "The Intemperance of Novel Reading." Another, written around 1882, appears to be notes for a talk given to the pupils of the Girls Classical School and relates her memories of her grandmother in Virginia. Also included are transcriptions of selected essays and speeches regarding women's suffrage which are held at Purdue University in West Lafayette.

Several folders contain George Merritt and Hester McClung's writings about their trips to Colorado and California in the 1870s to circa 1890. These were published in newspapers and subsequently xeroxed for inclusion in the collection.

Next, the collection includes George Merritt obituaries and other biographical sketches, as well as collected material related to George Merritt's various business and philanthropic activities in Indianapolis. Notes from Merritt's speech from the 1903 national convention of the American Society of Municipal Improvements gives an overview of Indianapolis parks up to that point and suggestions for their betterment. Also included are materials related to Indianapolis Public Schools and Merritt's wool manufacturing business.

The last folder of manuscript material consists of a historical sketch on the Alpha Home in Indianapolis, written by Paulina McClung Merritt and Ernest Merritt, and a copy of the First Annual Report of the Alpha Home for Aged Colored Women from 1902.

Finally, visual material consists of one folder of family photographs and portraits of George Merritt, and an oversized memorial for Capt. Arnold Sutermeister, Ernest's father-in-law, which gives an overview of his Civil War actions in the 11th Indiana Independent Battery.

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