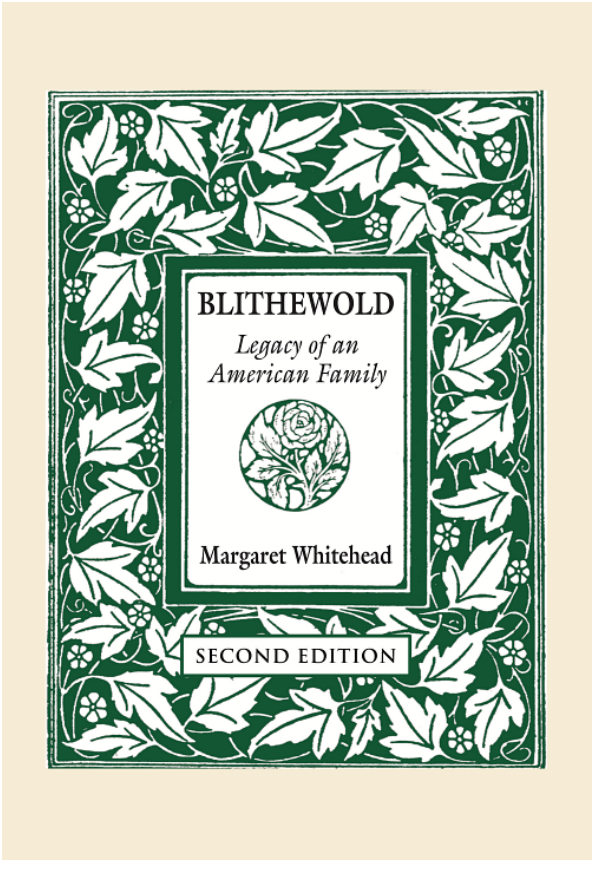

Spanning 1810–2026, this richly documented family history explores the lives, travels, and passions of the people behind Blithewold, Rhode Island's treasured estate and gardens. The second edition includes newly donated archival material.

Blithewold: Legacy of an American Family - Second Edition

By Margaret Whitehead

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BLITHEWOLD

Legacy of an American Family



Margaret Whitehead

SECOND EDITION

The charm of Blithewold is its simplicity — and there are very few places like it. It will be hard, over the years, to keep it that way, the temptation being to add, add, add, exploit, exploit until it is one more tourist trap like so many others. Blithewold has it over so many other places because it was planned with taste and elegance instead of ostentation. Perhaps that is why, in this glittering old world, so many people love it so much.

Alice DeWolf Pardee

They were all part of such a gracious, peaceful, unhurried life…and in spite of personal difficulties they seemed as if they knew how to cope with the difficulties and put them in their place and make living calm and good in spite of everything.

Gertrude Keller Johnston, letter to Marjorie Lyon, 1946

A place consists of everything that has happened there; it is a reservoir of memories, and understanding those memories is not a trap but a liberation, a menu of possibilities. The richer the knowledge, the wider the options. Multiplicity is all. The only enemy is narrow, singular definition. And Sissinghurst, perhaps like any place that people have loved, is layered with these multiplicities. Even now, anyone who lives or works here soon develops an intense relationship to it, none of them quite the same, none quite distinct, none of them quite secure. … It is a place drenched both in belonging and in the longing to belong.

Adam Nicolson, *Sissinghurst – An Unfinished History*

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CHAPTER IX

A NEW BLITHEWOLD



Blithewold II, 1908

A BEAUTIFUL NEW HOME

The new Blithewold, which was ready for occupancy in the early summer of 1908, used some of the architectural elements from the original Blithewold that had been stored in the barn after the fire. Unlike Blithewold I, which had been built specifically as a summer residence, Blithewold II was designed to be used year-round, having electricity throughout and coal-fired central heating, thus taking advantage of modern technology. Bessie and Will McKee now opened up Blithewold regularly during the winter — for Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter — and they would often drive down from Boston just for the day. Bessie continued her work in the gardens and helped design new garden spaces. Walter Kilham designed the garage complex that was built south of the mansion near Ferry Road. Two

cottages, one at each end of the garage, were built there as staff housing for families.



The Entrance Hall, looking north, 1910

The center hall and staircase of the house were designed in the Colonial Revival style. As you stand in the center hallway you are surrounded by elaborate ceilings, fluted columns, dentil moldings, volutes, and three different patterns of balusters on the staircase. Large French doors open from the west side of the hall onto a Mercer-tiled loggia that in turn leads to a stone terrace overlooking the Great Lawn and Narragansett Bay. The long hallway runs the length of the house from south to north. (It was along this hallway that, many years later, Marjorie's dog, an Irish terrier named Ballyhaise Bitters,[1] would be sent to announce that it was time to be seated for dinner. The maids in the kitchen would tuck a note under his collar and send him running to the Living Room, where Marjorie would retrieve the note and announce *"Dinner is served."*)

Bessie chose English Oak for the paneling in the Dining Room. A plate rail above the paneling displays her collection of Delft and other rare pieces

[1] Marjorie bred Irish terriers.

of china. Set in the wall over the fireplace is an interesting oil painting that shows a young woman with her suitor (the Italian Giorgione school).[1] The room is large enough to accommodate the dining table (with its many extension leaves) that was saved from the first house, along with its 18 chairs, matching vitrines, and side tables.



The Dining Room, 1910

Dinners were very formal, grand affairs. The ladies were required to wear long dresses, and dinner jackets were de rigueur for the men. Bessie kept a Dinner Party Record Book in which she detailed the menu, the wines served, the floral decorations, and the choice of china, as well as a diagram of where the named guests were seated at the table. This room was the site of hundreds of family celebrations, including wedding feasts, engagement parties, Christmas celebrations, and birthday parties.

An interesting tradition evolved at Blithewold in which guests and family wrote poems to commemorate special occasions, with the poems being read aloud at the dinner table. Often, it was the guests' daytime activities — on

[1] This painting has been cleaned and conserved by an art restorer.

the Bay, on the golf course, or in the gardens — that were recounted in poetry or limerick form, with witty references to all the company present. Hundreds of these personalized tributes are preserved in the Blithewold Archives, some printed out and beautifully illustrated, others scribbled hurriedly in pencil on scraps of paper. In May, 1922, Marjorie wrote a toast to Bessie and Will to be read at their 21st anniversary dinner:

Mother's and Father's Anniversary

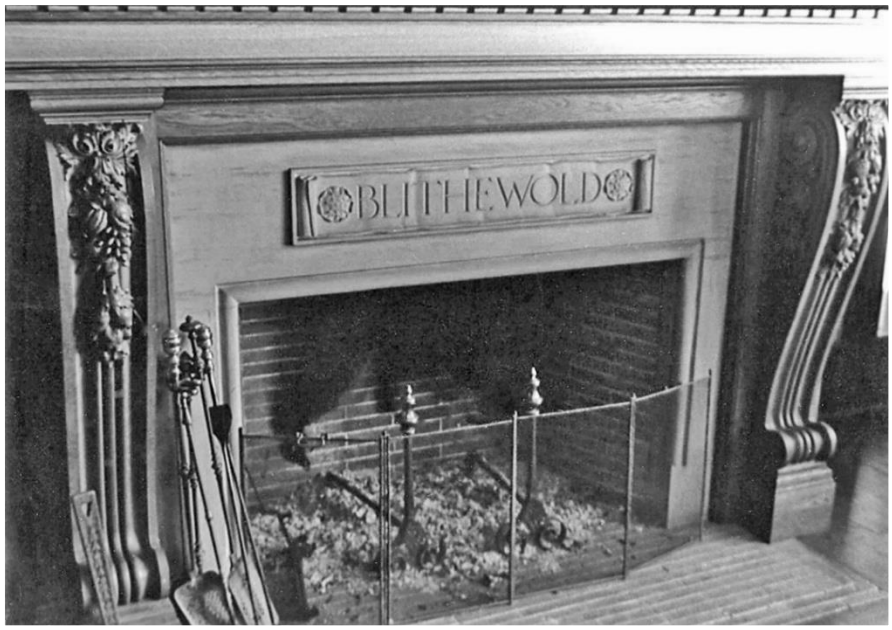
Although we did desert you to golf and tennis play
We've hurried back at sunset, to wish you well this day!
May future years all bring you Good Luck and joy and health;
A life chocked full of blessings, and just enough of wealth.
The past was mostly sunny — perhaps a shower or two,
But the future forecast reading says "All the sky's bright blue."
So here's to best of parent and host and hostess gay!
We've come to help you celebrate on this your wedding day.[1]



The Breakfast Porch, 1910

[1] Poem by Marjorie Lyon, May 1922. Blithewold Archives.

Breakfast and luncheon were often served on the Breakfast Porch on warm summer days. When Marjorie married George Lyon on June 1, 1914, the wedding party dined in this room. In spring and summer, the large windows were replaced with screens, making it a delightful garden-like space. It was kept filled with potted plants from the greenhouse — camellias, Boston ferns, rubber plants, and palms. Ivy climbed around the Italian white marble fountain in the niche on the east wall. A handle in the Butler's Pantry activated the niche fountain. The beautiful floor tiles were hand-made in Sicily. The green-stained oak table is a draw-leaf style and opens up to fill the entire room, and above the table is a patinated bronze and glass grape-form chandelier.



The Blithewold Stone in the Billiard Room of Blithewold II, ca. 1910

Pool was one of the billiard games that peaked in popularity between the 1890s and the 1920s, and the Billiard Room at Blithewold was a center of activity for the Van Wickle/McKee family. The pool table, made of rosewood and oak with ivory insets, was built around 1900. The lamps over the table are bronze with green glass. The Blithewold stone over the fireplace is the one that was saved from Blithewold I, where it had been set into the fireplace in the original Living Room.

Pool was taken very seriously at Blithewold — Schuyler Pardee, Marjorie's cousin, remembers that when he was a young boy kind Uncle Will McKee would allow him to watch the competitions amongst the men, as long as he didn't get in the way. The major players were Will McKee, George Lyon, and Quincy Shaw, but Marjorie herself had the reputation of being able to beat any of them.

This was Marjorie's favorite room at Blithewold, with its stunning views of the Great Lawn and Narragansett Bay, and of magnificent sunsets over the water. The vaulted plaster ceiling's elaborate design repeats on the carved oak mantelpiece. A photograph of William McKee's favorite yacht, *Chanticleer,* sits proudly over the fireplace.



The Living Room, 1910

In the evenings, everyone would retire to the Living Room where comfort and hospitality were of paramount importance. In this room, more than in any other, Bessie's eclectic taste in furniture is evident, ranging from a seventeenth-century Dutch cabinet (where games were kept) to a "modern" 1910 Chickering piano. The guests might play parlor games or card games, or listen to music on the Victrola or the music box. Glass-fronted bookcases

still hold leather-bound collections, and above them are watercolors by Louis K. Harlow and William Trost Richards. The beautiful classic mantelpiece is said to be from Gloucester House in London, once the residence of the Duke of Cambridge, a cousin of Queen Victoria. On warm evenings, guests could go out onto the West Porch to watch the sunsets, or onto the North Porch to view the gardens and the Bosquet.

SUMMER FUN



Augustine, Estelle Clements, and Marjorie at Blithewold, 1908

Entertaining resumed in earnest in 1908 as friends and family gathered at the new mansion. Children of all ages ran wild, giddy with the freedom afforded them at Blithewold where their parents were too occupied with each other to pay any attention to them.[1] Pardee cousins still remember exciting and daring (not to mention dangerous) activities, like climbing the west façade of the mansion from the terrace to the roof, using the gargoyles as handholds; playing with the starting-cannon and fireworks; and canoeing out to the passing Prudence Island ferry boat and "hanging on"

[1] Conversation with Schuyler Pardee, Frank Pardee's grandson, summer 1995.

for a ride.[1] Family legend has it that one day Frank Pardee, Jr. pulled his kayak up next to the ferry, climbed up over the rail of the ferry from his kayak, and went to greet the Captain on the deck. Meantime, panic ensued onboard when the Captain looked over the rail and saw the empty kayak bobbing on the waves; he assumed at first that its young occupant had come to grief.[2]

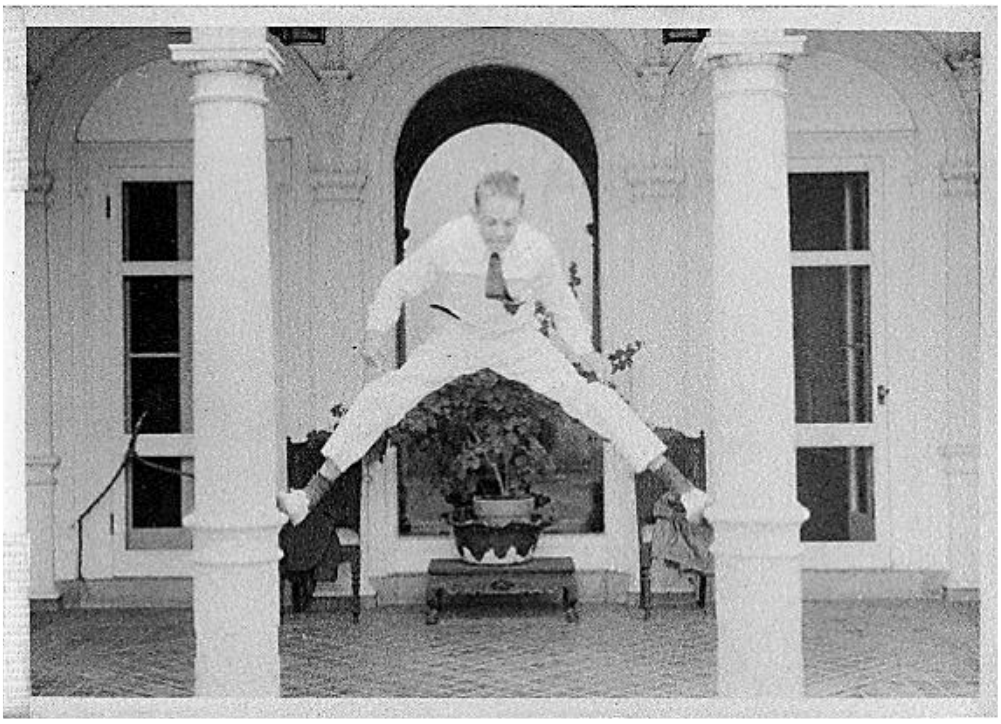


Frank Pardee Jr. "riding the Prudence Island Ferry"[3]

Another popular challenge was to stand between the center columns on the terrace, and with one jump (and no hands) brace oneself with one's feet against the columns. This took a steady nerve and fine balance and was more difficult than it appears! It was Schuyler Pardee's favorite trick.

---

[1] Conversation with Schuyler Pardee, Frank Pardee's grandson, summer 1995.
[2] Conversation with Nancy Pardee Abercrombie, Frank Pardee's daughter.
[3] Magnification of this photograph reveals a figure in the water behind Frank. This may be Augustine. It was known that the two of them enjoyed performing this "dare" together. An enlargement also shows a woman in a hat leaning over the side of the boat to see what was happening.



Schuyler Pardee "jumping the columns" at Blithewold

"THE HELP"

Blithewold and other large mansions of the era were built on the assumption that there would always be a plentiful supply of servants to run the estate. Bessie Van Wickle McKee could not have maintained her large residences without the physical labor, competence, and loyal dedication of several generations of household staff. Bessie was considered a generous and benevolent employer, both considerate and fair. She always referred to her staff respectfully as "the Help" rather than "the Servants." Some of Bessie's employees arrived and departed in quick succession, while others stayed with the family their entire working lives.



Blithewold Staff, 1908

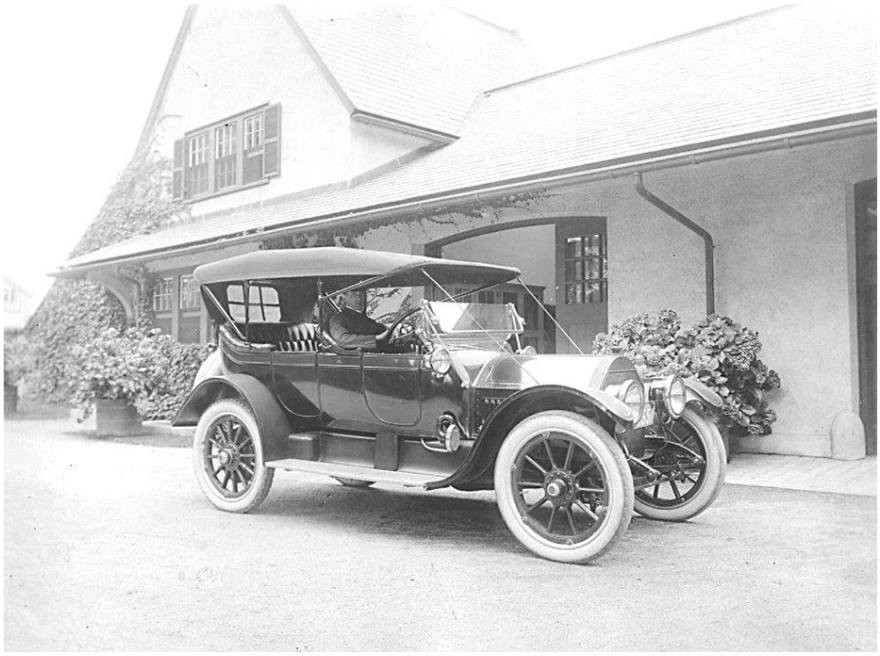
The south wing of the mansion was devoted to the staff, both for work and for living. Besides the kitchens and laundry rooms, the south wing housed a staff dining room, a sitting room, a screened porch, seven bedrooms, and four bathrooms. Three cottages on the estate housed working couples and their children; a small cabin by the dock was home to the captain of the yacht *Marjorie.* Among the most loyal and long-time employees were head gardener John Best, English butler Frank Dallison, chauffeur and estate manager Arthur Rae, lady's maid Katrina Gluck, and cook Tilly McDonnell.

John Best, born in Ireland in 1862, was head gardener from 1898 until his retirement in 1928. John lived with his family, his wife and children Jack and Margaret, in the brown-shingled cottage near the greenhouse known as the North Cottage. John DeWolf designed the Blithewold landscape, but it was John Best who made it a reality. He maintained it for many years, always taking great pride in his work.

Frank Dallison was one of Blithewold's most colorful characters. Born in Leeds, England, in 1870, he began his employment as butler to the McKees in 1907, and he remained in their employ until the mid-1930s. Bessie wrote in December 1907 of him, *"Dallison is fine — better than Ellis in catering, and I like him personally much better. The household is running very smoothly."*[1] He was described as "lofty" and "dignified,"[2] desirable attributes for a proper English butler. His reputation was somewhat tarnished, however, by accusations of drunkenness and infidelity. An undated letter addressed to Mr. McKee reported *"goings on in your house while you are away…"*[3]

Arthur Rae, who was hired as head coachman in 1906, lived first at the Gardner House and later in the south cottage of the garage complex with his wife Ingrid and their children Arthur and Eleanor. As means of transport changed and the McKees replaced their carriages with automobiles, Arthur Rae adapted easily, taking on the role of chauffeur. He was a dedicated, responsible, and adaptable employee, always at the family's disposal. He met trains and ferries and kept track of the voluminous pieces of guests' baggage. He drove the family to social engagements and transported household staff back and forth between the family's homes in Boston and Bristol. He also delivered produce from Blithewold's gardens to the family's townhouse on Commonwealth Avenue, and he was always responsible for the maintenance and fine appearance of Blithewold's many vehicles. (He even cleaned the cars of Blithewold guests and made sure they were filled up with oil and gasoline.) Arthur Rae drove and cared for a succession of large and expensive cars, from the Simplex and Locomobile to a Packard and Cadillac. When he died in 1953, Marjorie Lyon installed a plaque in the Rose Garden commemorating his 47 years of faithful service.

[1] Letter from Bessie to Estelle Clements, December 8, 1907.
[2] From an interview with Eleanor Rae Gladding, October 12, 2007.
[3] The letter is in the Blithewold Archives.



Arthur Rae in the Locomobile, outside the garage in 1913

Katrina Gluck was Bessie's personal maid for almost fifty years. She was with Bessie in Hazleton long before the first Blithewold was built, and she was still with the family as late as the mid-1930s — probably only leaving when Bessie died in 1936. It was Katrina who first noticed the smoke coming from the roof that heralded the total destruction of Blithewold I in 1906.

Tilly McDonnell, Blithewold's legendary cook, ruled the kitchen for more than forty years, often assisted by Mary Dwyer and Peggy Devine. Marjorie Shaw Jeffries, Bessie's granddaughter, recalls that *"Tilly fussed over whatever children happened to be visiting…she was always a very special person for me as she loved children and made us her friends. She would escort me through the kitchen and find little goodies along the way."*[1]

[1]From *Memory Vignettes of Blithewold* by Marjorie Shaw Jeffries. Blithewold Archives.



Marjorie's loyal household staff, still at Blithewold
Tilly, Mary, Mary, and Peggy, ca. 1970

GEORGE ARMSTRONG LYON

While Marjorie was in Florence in 1908, she received a letter from an acquaintance, George Lyon, forwarded from Boston. George was then living on a ranch in Cody, Wyoming, for a year and was not aware that Marjorie was in Europe. He wanted to know if she would meet him when he returned to Boston even though they had been out of touch for quite some time. He wrote from Big Horn:

> *Dear Marjorie, It has been a long time since I have written to you — so long in fact, that it is rather hard to know how to explain writing now — a man who lets his friends alone so long shouldn't be allowed to make up to them whenever he happens to feel like it.*

Marjorie did allow him to make it up to her, though, and they embarked on a long, sometimes intense, correspondence. George's initial letter from Wyoming shows how far apart their lives had grown. He had gone west for adventure, and he described breathtaking views of the Rockies from the

back door of his cabin and the smell of the crisp, crystal-clear air. At the same time, he seemed to mock the kind of life he imagined Marjorie was leading:

> *I suppose you're busy with the usual Eastern winter sports, playing bridge, and going to parties and dinners and dances — meeting the same people and hearing the same trivial gossip. I did it until I got sick to death of it all…perhaps you've varied the monotony by getting engaged or married. Or perhaps you don't think it's as much of a bore as I do.*[1]

Marjorie may have felt somewhat chastened by his comments, but in her reply, she told him about all her social activities. She had by then become part of a wealthy, carefree, socially prominent group in Boston, just the crowd George seemed to be disparaging. But, she had also been to Europe three times and was now a much more mature and socially comfortable young woman than the one George Lyon remembered.

Thus began a years-long courtship fraught with teasing and flirting, with George quite clearly falling desperately in love with Marjorie. Marjorie first encouraged and then rejected George, over and over, for the next six years. During that time, she was being seriously pursued by at least two other young men, Roger Swain and Mac Sturgis, both from Boston.[2]

George Armstrong Lyon was born in 1878 in Erie, Pennsylvania, son of a Rear Admiral and grandson of an Episcopal Bishop. He went to Lawrenceville School in New Jersey, where he showed promise as a first-class tennis player. After graduating from Yale University in 1900, he went to Germany to study at the universities of Göttingen and Heidelberg. He eventually returned to America to study law at Harvard University. His natural ability in sports led to his nickname "Tiger Lyon," or simply "Tige," which nickname stuck with him for the rest of his life. He also held the distinction of having been tennis captain at both Yale and Harvard. It was probably while he was at law school at Harvard that he met Marjorie. They were certainly acquainted in 1904, but only as members of a large social group; and he was invited to weekends at Blithewold along with other friends from Boston. He joined the law firm of Lazear & Orr in Pittsburgh,

[1] George Lyon to Marjorie, April 19, 1908.
[2] As evidenced in letters to Marjorie and to Bessie.

Pennsylvania, a company owned by a relative, but he traveled to New York and Boston on business and always had plenty of old friends to meet up with wherever he went. He later abandoned his law career and spent the rest of his working years with Scudder, Stevens & Clark in Boston as a financial consultant. But George was never entirely comfortable in either of his chosen professions. He much preferred his forays into the wilds of America and Canada, hunting and fishing.

After his Wyoming adventure, during which he had reestablished contact with Marjorie, George settled down to working on making a success of his law career in Pittsburgh. He attempted to arrange a move to Hartford, Connecticut, which would have placed him nearer to Marjorie in Bristol and Boston. He was constantly frustrated in his efforts to establish a stronger relationship with her by the considerable geographical distance between them. By the time he had planned to be in Boston or New York at the same time that Marjorie was there, she would already have made other plans. She had scores of close friends and cousins and went from one house-party to another, interspersing visits with extended trips to New York to see friends and go shopping, and to enjoy the theater, the opera, and dinner parties. She had many suitors, and several offers of marriage, but she appeared to enjoy her exhilarating single life far too much to be tied down.[1]

As Marjorie flitted, free of care, between Hazleton and Boston and between New York and Maine, Cape Cod, Silver Springs, Lake Placid, and Buffalo, George always seemed to be in the wrong place. In February 1910, for example, Marjorie was in New York for a few days and wired George that she would like to see him, but they missed each other again. The following week, when he *was* in New York, she had to be in Boston for her school friend Priscilla Harding's wedding to Englishman Jim Sherrard. *"I was getting Priscilla married up here in Boston, and couldn't possibly be away. It's always like this when you really want to see people. I'm getting discouraged."*[2] The week after that, Marjorie was in New York again to have gowns fitted and to visit her friend Louise Smith, but by then George was back in Pittsburgh.

---

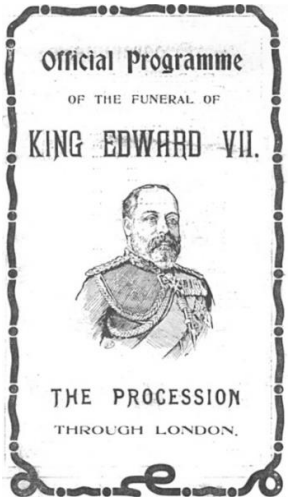
[1] As evidenced in letters from Marjorie to George in 1909.
[2] Marjorie to George, February 13, 1910.

EUROPE, 1910 AND 1911

In the spring of 1910, Marjorie went back to Europe, this time traveling with Bessie and William McKee and her sister Augustine, stopping off in Madeira, and traveling from there to Naples in southern Italy where they met up with their chauffeur, Henry Adam Kroh. Kroh had sailed to Europe the week before, taking the McKees' car, a Simplex, with him. He met them in Naples, and they traveled comfortably through Italy and France, after which they went on to London. They stayed at the Ritz there and attended Edward VII's funeral on May 20. Augustine later wrote to Estelle Clements:

> *The procession didn't begin until 9.30, so we had lots of time to watch the soldiers forming along the sidewalks, and the crowd, and eat our sandwiches, so we wouldn't be "munching when the King came" — it was a splendid sight, the soldiers marched so well that it made you dizzy to look hard at their legs, the gun-carriage with the crown, orb, and scepter, and following behind the King's horse with the boots turned the wrong way, and the little white dog led by the highlander was most pathetic, and while we were crying over the doggy we looked up, and saw that <u>five</u> Kings had passed by without our getting a good look at them. Then we were all mixed up with the princes, although we had learned them most beautifully. We would have given anything to have had them wear cards on their backs, saying 'Emperor of…We recovered in time to know the different queens and princes and Mr. Roosevelt.*[1]

[1] Augustine to Estelle Clements from the Ritz Hotel, London, May 23, 1910.

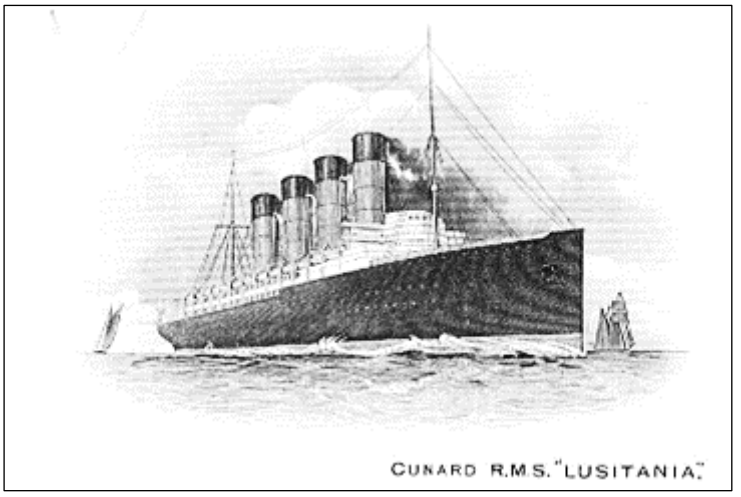




Augustine's program and ticket for King Edward's funeral procession, 1910

When the family returned to Boston at the end of May, Marjorie stayed in London. Priscilla Harding Sherrard and her husband Jim, who were now living in England, had invited Marjorie to visit them. Marjorie helped Priscilla move into a new apartment and "set up housekeeping." Jim, who was in the British Army, was *"down at Pinbright shooting with his men for two days —but he appears in London quite frequently never the less."*[1] Jim and Priscilla tried to introduce Marjorie to eligible young men, but Marjorie had other plans, going off to Paris to stay with the Nayral family. Since she planned to be back in Bristol in time for the July Fourth celebrations (sailing on the S.S. *Lusitania)* she wrote to George Lyon and asked if he might meet her in New York, at the same time scolding him for not writing to her for three months.

[1] Marjorie to Bessie, June 3, 1910.



Marjorie traveled home on the Lusitania*, 1910*[1]

George was invited to a large house party at Blithewold for July Fourth, 1910, but he had to get back to his job in Pittsburgh and could not stay long. (The house party, which included Irma Nayral, Irma's brother Pierre, and Marjorie's cousins Schuyler, Frank, Gladys, and Katharine Pardee, continued well into the summer.) George had been hopeful that the relationship might now begin to pick up momentum, but shortly after the visit Marjorie wrote him a letter of apology. Apparently, she had been rather dismissive of him while he was at Blithewold and had not replied to his letters after he returned to Pittsburgh. She wrote:

> *Really, I <u>am</u> penitent. And the excuse is the same old one of the strenuous life. Twelve people with us all the time — nineteen for last Sunday, twenty-one for this, and even more for next.*

She went on to describe some of the ongoing frivolities at Blithewold:

> *We have one continuous "rough-house" from morning till night. The only reason I have a spare half hour now is because I have forcibly ejected, from my room, Gladys and Irma. They have gone off with my Italian peasant costume and are dressing Irma up in it to have her picture taken on the terrace. I hear shrieks of laughter from upstairs!*

[1] Postcard in the Blithewold Archives.

And she could not resist adding, "an awfully attractive boy from your town was here with Schuyler."[1]

George felt excluded and miserable, and he wrote to Marjorie to tell her so. Marjorie defended herself:

> *Your letter has just come, and I can read enough between the lines to see that you are a bit offended with your little Bristol friend and don't care much whether you see her again or not. I am sorry. Only I can't help remembering that there have been times when you have hurt me too. So do let's call it square and be friends.*[2]



Irma Nayral on the terrace in Marjorie's Italian costume, August 1910

In August Marjorie was in York Harbor, Maine, staying with Louise Smith, while George was at the Meadow Club in Long Island, taking part in the tennis championships. In September, Marjorie went to the Adirondacks, as she did at the end of every summer, to spend time with many of her Pardee relatives gathered at her Uncle Calvin and Aunt Mary Pardee's country home.

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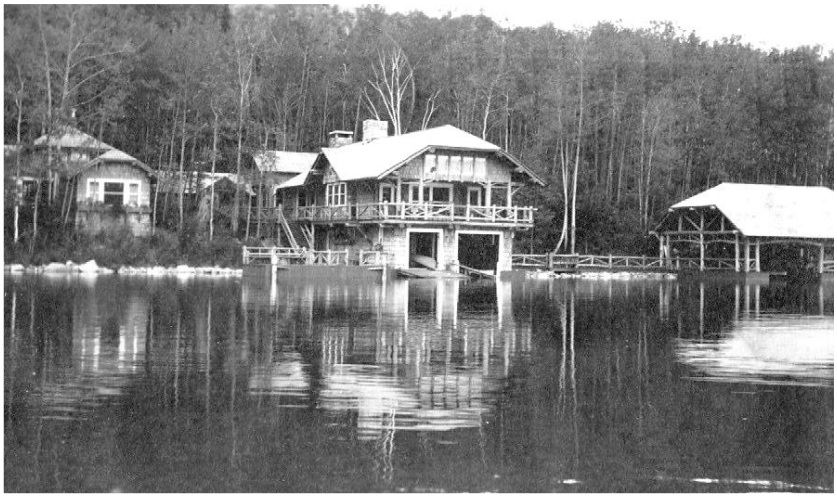
[1] Marjorie to George, August 5, 1910.
[2] Marjorie to George, August 10, 1910.



The boathouse at Calvin Pardee's summer camp near Lake Placid, New York, ca. 1910

George Lyon accepted an invitation to join the family there for a few days, and he took this time to finally profess his love for Marjorie. Marjorie, on the other hand, was not confident that she could reciprocate his devotion. After he left, George wrote,

> *Dearest Marjorie, That much at least is certain. I have thought of you and wanted to see you ever since we said good-bye on Monday night. How I wish I could have stayed, and yet it seemed to me as if you were <u>not</u> sorry to have me go.*

He went on to tell her that he had again requested a transfer from Pittsburgh to Hartford. It would mean that he would have to travel more, but he would be a step closer to Marjorie. He ended his letter:

> *Oh, my dear, how much I long for you, and yet what right have I to think about you — Even if you cared it means such a long, long wait — and life is going by so fast. But <u>if</u> you care, or <u>when</u> you care, nothing else will matter.*[1]

Marjorie replied that she was:

> *…awfully far from sure of anything. You will just have to be patient — that was a dear letter you wrote me, and you know how*

[1] George Lyon to Marjorie, September 10, 1910.

> *much I wish I could answer it as it should be answered. But I can't pretend — it isn't fair to either of us.*[1]

George finally moved to Hartford and took up residence at the Hartford Golf Club, but once again their schedules clashed. He had to turn down several invitations to Blithewold because of tennis commitments, and Marjorie was still entertaining Irma, taking her on trips to New York City for the opera; to Hazleton to stay with the Pardees; and to Morristown, New Jersey, to stay with the Cauldwells,[2] where Marjorie enjoyed visiting "*the haunts of childhood.*" She offered George a few dates when she would be in New York, and added "*If you are to be there any of those times, let me know and perhaps we can connect…I'm sorry I'm such a hard person to understand."*[3] She teased George with descriptions of a hectic social life: *"Irma and I are being feted continually and we are quite spoiled. We have three invitations for tomorrow."*[4] But she does end her letter with a word of encouragement: *"Don't forget you have promised to come to Bristol for Christmas!"* And in her next letter, *"Don't forget Christmas at Blithewold — if you can possibly make it. We are to have a Christmas tree two stories high!"*[5]

As Christmas 1910 drew closer, Marjorie's social schedule became even more crowded, including a party for 60 people in Boston. She wrote to George:

> *A strenuous life this! But I wanted you to know <u>right away</u> how much we want you at Bristol. It will be decidedly nice to see you. We will have some good times and I'll promise not to be quite worn out before then, even if I have to swear off some parties!*[6]

And the following week, she wrote:

> *Cecile Gifford is visiting me now and we are going to two dances, the opera, the theatre, a few dinners, two weddings, a picnic and*

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[1] Marjorie to George, September 11, 1910.
[2] Tom and Carrie Cauldwell were old friends of Augustus and Bessie.
[3] Marjorie to George, October 14, 1910.
[4] Marjorie to George, October 28, 1910.
[5] Marjorie to George, December 1, 1910. This is the first reference to the 18- to 20-foot-tall Christmas tree that became a Blithewold family tradition.
[6] Marjorie to George, December 12, 1910.

an "oratorio" all in one week! Think we will survive? Goodbye till the Christmas party.[1]

George did go to Blithewold for Christmas, and the "two-story" tree in the entrance hall that Marjorie had promised became a Blithewold tradition. Marjorie and George apparently had time for several heart-to-heart talks during this visit. For the first time they confided their true feelings about many things to each other. Marjorie was beginning to feel that her life was superficial, and she was tiring of the constant rounds of parties. Shortly after the Christmas holidays she wrote to George:

We have been perfectly frank with each other so far. It's the only way to be real friends. And I want you for my friend more than you perhaps realize. Even if we don't both ever fall in love with each other at the same time, we can have pleasure just being together and interested in the same things and let it go at that. I'm going to take your advice and find something to do in the world. I don't seem to be as happy as I ought to be; and trying hard to amuse oneself is pretty poor sport. No more of it in the future.

But she still didn't know if she really loved George, certainly not in the way that he loved her, and she was confused by her close romantic relationship with Mac Sturgis. She appeared to love George from a distance, missing him when he was away but difficult and distant with him when he was with her. She wrote:

As I said before, I am woefully afraid I have no heart and will never fall in love with anyone. Sometimes I love you so it almost hurts, and at other times I don't seem to care at all. So I'm going to give up, and just let's be friends. Be good and dear to me, and don't say "how contradictory" when I tell you that I'm loving you pretty hard tonight and miss you dreadfully![2]

George reluctantly agreed to try to be just friends, replying:

I am so sorry you're so unhappy but you mustn't be and I'm sure you won't be if you once get into something that will take your

[1] Marjorie to George, December 18, 1910.
[2] Marjorie to George Lyon, December 27, 1910.

> *attention and time and make you feel that you're contributing to the world with necessary work in some way. I'm sure you would be more contented — and with your love for children and your knack in getting along with them, it should be the easiest thing to get started.*[1]

In January 1911, before she had a chance to resolve any of these serious relationship issues, Marjorie left Boston to visit her Van Wickle cousins Anna and May and their brother George Van Wickle[2] in Puerto Rico. Anna and Howard Castle and May and Arthur Hunsden lived on a grapefruit farm about forty miles west of San Juan. It was a restful time for Marjorie — two months of the simple life where the most she did was sit on the porch reading Kipling, play with May's baby, Rosemary, and ride countless miles about the country on *"the dearest, tiniest horses you ever saw."* She slept ten hours every night and felt herself relaxing.

When Marjorie landed in New York in March, George went into the city to have lunch with her. Eight days later she was back in New York. She stayed with her cousin Dorothy Pardee Clark and Dorothy's husband Ben, and wrote to George saying she would like to see him. But just as George was beginning to think that they could move forward in their relationship, he suffered another blow. Marjorie told him that she was leaving for England on April 3 to stay with Priscilla and Jim Sherrard for six weeks. Their first baby, Mary Priscilla, was to be christened and Marjorie had been asked to be her godmother.

The Sherrards had bought a 138-acre farm with a large house, Gaddesby Hall, in Derbyshire. There were fish ponds, shrubberies, and a tennis lawn; walled gardens; rambling stables; and a farmyard with pigs, cows, and chickens. The old brick walls were covered with flowering pear and cherry trees. Marjorie greatly enjoyed the down-to-earth country life, but more than anything, she loved the horses. This was hunting country, and Marjorie found that:

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[1] George Lyon to Marjorie, January 9, 1911.

[2] George Van Wickle, Jr. was Marjorie's cousin. He traveled extensively in China before marrying Eugenie Verges (born in Puerto Rico). The couple moved to Boston, along with Eugenie's mother, and had a son, Verges Van Wickle. George, Eugenie, and Verges moved to Seattle in the 1920s.

> *...a person's whole character, manners and morals are judged by whether he goes well to hounds! The racing, too, is quite part of daily life. We have been to three race meets since I've been here. Jim's horse won a steeplechase a while ago. I adore the very sight and smell of a racecourse and know I should be an inveterate "backer" [of horses] if I lived here.*[1]

Marjorie went riding with Jim Sherrard every morning and even helped him paint the new pig sties. The weather was wonderful — unseasonably warm and sunny.[2] They played tennis every weekend, and Marjorie told Bessie, "I find I play quite as well, if not better than, most English girls."[3]



Gaddesby Hall, Derbyshire, England, 1911

By June 1911 Marjorie was back in Bristol for the summer, encouraging George to be there for July Fourth. She wrote:

> *Last night we came home on the midnight train and are so glad to see Bristol again. It certainly is quite one of the nicest places I ever*

[1] Marjorie to George, April 1911.
[2] All of England was preparing that summer for King George V's upcoming coronation. Author Juliet Nicolson notes how the beautiful and unusually warm weather added to the general excitement. (Juliet Nicolson. *The Perfect Summer*. Grove Press, 2006, p. 2.)
[3] Marjorie to Bessie, May 15, 1911.

> *see on my travels! What I really am writing for is to ask you up here for over the 'fourth' of July. We want you a lot. Louise will be here and some other people you know probably, and we are going to have a regular old-time Bristol celebration. I think it's going to be a specially nice reunion this July 4th, and Bristol is planning to be very gay. A dance and a 'bathing lunch party' are to be given all in one day! Gladys and Katharine have arrived at the Gardiner [sic] House.*

George did go to Bristol for the holiday and everyone enjoyed themselves, as evidenced by letters between George and Marjorie later that month. In August, George played tennis in the Southampton Tournament and did well; Marjorie, meantime, was in York Harbor, Maine, with Louise once again. She invited George to join them there for Labor Day Sunday, but he needed to be in Philadelphia with his ailing father.

Marjorie must have had time to think about her relationship with George while she was in York Harbor. On August 22 she wrote, somewhat mysteriously, "*George, if you care for me any more than you did at Christmas, please say so, for there would be something I would want to tell you. If we are still just very good friends, it doesn't matter."*[1] George surely must have had his hopes raised at that. In September he joined Marjorie and her friends (including Mac Sturgis and Roger Swain) at the Lake Placid camp where Marjorie celebrated her twenty-eighth birthday. But after George returned home he received a letter from Marjorie that ended simply (and maybe dismissively), *"Don't forget that I'm always glad to see you. Goodbye and good luck, from Marjorie."*[2]

Summer 1911 had been a glorious, extended season at Blithewold for the McKees and their guests. The mansion and the Gardner guesthouse were full to capacity — as soon as one set of guests left, others came to take their places. By the end of October, however, William McKee wanted to return to their city life. Bessie, on the other hand, hated to leave her lovely gardens. Back on September 1, Bessie had asked John DeWolf to come to Blithewold to discuss her ideas for a sunken garden just beyond the North Porch. DeWolf began work immediately, and Bessie very much enjoyed

[1] Marjorie to George, August 22, 1911.
[2] Marjorie to George, September 18, 1911.

watching his progress. On October 29, as Blithewold was being packed up and closed down for the winter, Bessie wrote to her sister Alice:

> *We are leaving Bristol tomorrow and my heart is broken over leaving this dear place, but Will is very tired of club life*[1] *and is longing to have the town house open. We are making a new garden at the north end of the house and I am especially sad to leave before the work is finished — it will have the effect of a sunken garden, and we have built a stone wall about it. And in the face of the wall next to the house will be a fountain and stone steps curving down on either side of the fountain. The wall is nearly done, and the steps, but the wash and basin are not in place. We are delighted with the effect so far and think it will be lovely next summer.*[2]



From left: Marjorie, Bessie, and Augustine observing the construction of the Sunken Garden,[3] *1911*

[1] William McKee stayed at the Algonquin Club on Commonwealth Avenue during the workweek over the summer, since they closed up their townhouse while they were at Blithewold.
[2] Bessie to her sister Alice Pardee Earle, October 29, 1911.
[3] Now known as the North Garden.

Bessie was very happy to have at last found a place for the "North Star" — a set of stones arranged in the shape of a star that had been saved from the north tower of the first house. It had been stored in the barn until they could find the perfect north-facing spot for it. Now it was to be set into the retaining wall of the Sunken Garden:

> *We have also put in the wall the north star that was in the north tower of the old Blithewold, we could not get it into the new home so that it would look towards the north. I am very glad to have it at last placed.*[1]

Other stones meaningful to the family were set into the same wall.

> *I have a small stone in the wall from your rocky coast — it is one Augustine fished up when she was climbing over the rocks, also two from Cape Cod — some quartz crystal from Coleraine, two stones from the White Mountains, and a number from other places we have been. It is rather fun, I think.*[2]



The completed Sunken Garden, 1912, showing the "North Star" set into the lower right part of the retaining wall

[1] Bessie to her sister Alice Pardee Earle, October 29, 1911.
[2] Ibid.

A COMPLICATED COURTSHIP

While Marjorie seemed to be no nearer to finding her true role in life, her good friend Louise Smith took a job teaching at a settlement house in New York City. Marjorie wrote: *"Her family have not been heard from. I'm afraid they'll not like it. But I do hope she'll make a success of it and feel of use. It's a nice feeling to accomplish something."* And later, somewhat cynically, *"She surely is getting on well down there in the slums."* But Marjorie was impressed with Louise's dedication to a cause and envied her sense of purpose.

After several unsuccessful attempts by George and Marjorie to synchronize their schedules in the fall of 1911, George finally accepted an invitation to stay with the McKees in Boston at the end of November for Thanksgiving. He and Marjorie had an enjoyable time at the Harvard–Yale game, but something went wrong over the weekend. Tempers frayed and George left in a huff. Marjorie wrote afterward:

> *You've only been gone a half hour — and I miss you desperately. I'm sorry I let you see how hurt I was…and I was foolish to show you I cared. And the only thing that matters is that you've gone. It's disconcerting — for I can't think of anything else. And yet when we are together, we are both so shy or something, that often after you've been here I feel much less acquainted than I did before. Don't you feel that way too? We are not getting what we should out of our friendship and I can't see why. For I do want your sympathy and love so much, and I think you want mine. We are on the wrong track somehow. Let's think up a new scheme before Christmas.*[1]

Christmas 1911 came and went, and Marjorie and George were still apart — George was sick with tonsillitis, but Marjorie didn't find out about it until after the holidays. She decided to spend the winter in Boston for the first time in three years. A rather insensitive letter to George on January 27, 1912, describes her many activities:

> *Tomorrow I go out to Dedham — lunch at one house, coasting or skating all afternoon, then dinner and a birthday party at another*

[1] Marjorie to George, November 27, 1911.

> *house. There have been more dances lately, and I'm still keen on them. Two snowshoe over-Sunday parties are planned and several small dances and theater parties.*

But she did redeem herself by inviting him to go to the White Mountains with the family in February.

In September of 1912 Marjorie made her annual pilgrimage to Lake Placid. Visiting her there were several would-be suitors — George Clarke, Mac Sturgis, Nat Ayer, and George Lyon. George Lyon seems to have won the day, and his letters now became unambiguous love letters. He begged Marjorie to marry him, and she told him that she would give him her decision by Christmas. George wrote, *"I know you are coming to me in the end, and Christmas is going to be the great holiday of my life — and yours too."*[1]

Unfortunately for Marjorie, he began writing letters of undying love every day, overwhelming her. She began to panic. And her confusion was compounded by unidentified family pressures. She received an offer of marriage from Mac Sturgis, a man deemed an eminently suitable match for Marjorie by her family. A point in his favor, to the McKees, was that his family belonged to the same social circles in Boston as they did. Although Marjorie loved *being with* Mac, she was not sure that she *loved* him. At the end of September George wrote to Marjorie:

> *I am so sorry you've had so much on your hands. It sounds as if an avalanche had run you down and I think family troubles are the very hardest to cope with. You mustn't think about hurting me by being frank. At first I was sick with fear of losing you but…your job is to listen to your heart and brain and know what they say, and not think of the consequences to anyone else.*

Perhaps the family disapproved of George, or doubted that he was the right husband for Marjorie. We do not know for certain where the "family troubles" lay.

In October, Marjorie decided to go away. She needed to get her thoughts in order. She wrote to her mother, *"I do hate to leave you — you see it isn't*

[1] George to Marjorie, September 22, 1912.

you that I'm running away from."[1] She made plans to visit her Aunt Isabell Hidden (William McKee's sister) in Greenwood, Virginia, and she asked George not to write to her while she was there. He said he *had* to write to her but that he would tear up the letters instead of mailing them. When Marjorie returned home in December, George went to Boston to see her, again earnestly proclaiming his love. They spent an uneventful Christmas together, after which Marjorie went to Hazleton with the rest of her family to spend New Year's. But her confusion and George's overwhelming persistence had worn her down and she felt totally incapable of coming to any decision.[2]

In May of 1913, in desperation and close to a breakdown, Marjorie went to stay with Priscilla and Jim Sherrard in England, possibly to talk over her dilemma with her dearest friend. She resolved that she would *not* return to Boston until she had made a decision. While she was away, Mac Sturgis traveled from Boston to Blithewold to speak to Bessie, presumably to plead his case. For Marjorie, the distance from all the people pressuring her (and maybe being in the tranquil, bucolic English countryside with the serene and imperturbable Priscilla) helped her make her life-altering decision. She wrote to her mother from Derby:

> *I wish you were here today, for I have written to Mac that I can't ever marry him — and I'm feeling heart sore for the dear boy — and for myself, for I know I am giving up something very wonderful when I refuse his love. But mother dear, I am doing right — hard though it is. For though I have lost the fight I realize that winning would have been impossible, feeling as I do…I should only have been bluffing myself, and I'm glad I see clearly enough now to realize that I couldn't ever love him. I love his ideas, his sense of humor, his unselfishness, but not him. So I have written saying "good-bye," and I know I've done right. Do you understand? It wouldn't be square to him to pretend — and I couldn't — George is somehow between us, for try as hard as I could to put him out of my head, I just can't succeed. Maybe I wasn't meant to!! Good-bye, Mother dear — help dear old Mac if*

[1] Marjorie to Bessie, October 5, 1912.
[2] As evidenced in Marjorie's letters to George and Bessie, in the spring of 1913.

> *you can. If only I could have helped all this! You can tell anyone you like that I am coming home!*[1]

AN ENGAGEMENT AND A MARRIAGE

Marjorie and George became engaged on August 22, 1913. George was ecstatic:

> *I have just finished answering five new letters from your relatives and friends, in all of which they tell me how fine you are and what a lucky dog I am. As if I didn't know already that I had won the dearest girl in the world! Why don't you come up to Boston Sat. am, and we'll go out to the Country Club…have lunch together and back to Bristol if you want me (and it is wise).*[2]

At the end of the letter, George also mentions his happiness with Marjorie's new photographic portrait. Although from this letter it appears that George was aware of the McKees' disappointment. Bessie and Will soon put all this behind them and welcomed George into the family.



Marjorie ca. 1913

[1] Marjorie to Bessie, May 23, 1913.
[2] George to Marjorie, September 18, 1913.

The decision now made, Bessie and William McKee began to make plans for Marjorie's wedding on June 1 the following year in Bristol. Blithewold was *the* perfect place for a summer wedding. Bessie stepped up work on the gardens to provide a flawless setting for the event. John DeWolf spent the summer working on the Water Garden and the Rock Garden, but by October 1913 he was suffering from heart problems. He died in November at Love Rocks, his sister's home on Walley Street in Bristol.

In November George was ill again with tonsillitis, for which he underwent a tonsillectomy. He went to Atlantic City to recuperate, and by Christmas he was well enough to join the McKees and Estelle Clements at Blithewold.[1] In February Admiral George Lyon, George's father, fell seriously ill, and George went to Philadelphia to be with him. The Admiral died in March and was buried in Erie, Pennsylvania, at the church where George's grandfather had been pastor for forty-eight years.

Because of his father's illness George had missed the annual winter holiday at Peckett's ski resort in New Hampshire. Marjorie went with the rest of the family and invited Mac Sturgis to join the group, as he had done in years past. He declined her invitation, writing, *"You say 'let's begin being real friends again.' I don't believe we ever stopped being real friends but I feel sure we are two friends that had better not meet — not for a long time anyway. Sometime it may be possible, but it isn't now."*[2]

Marjorie and George quickly fell into a pattern of comfortable familiarity, with lots of good-natured teasing as they planned their wedding, their honeymoon (in Panama, where they hoped they wouldn't be recognized as a "honeymoon couple"), and their future home. George's letters lost the urgency and panic they had shown only a few months previously. In fact, Marjorie now accused George of being too staid, to which he responded, *"I love you very much although you think me such a serious-minded cuss, and I wish you were here."*[3]

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[1] The 18 small junipers that decorated the dining room that Christmas were later planted in the Water Garden at Blithewold. From Estelle Clements' diary, December 27, 1913.
[2] Mac Sturgis to Marjorie, February 2, 1914.
[3] George to Marjorie, April 1, 1914.

Wedding preparations intensified. Shreve's in Boston sent invitations to Pardee, Van Wickle, McKee, and Lyon relatives, and to Marjorie and George's many friends. Bessie and Marjorie bought wedding clothes, and Marjorie gathered her trousseau. George gave his best man, his brother Dr. Vincent Lyon, and his ushers gold cufflinks as gifts. Marjorie's bridesmaids were Kathryn and Gladys Pardee, Irma Nayral, Gertrude Vaughan, Louise Smith, and Doris Earle[1]. Augustine was her maid of honor. Marjorie gave her attendants the pearl necklaces they wore.

The guests began arriving at Blithewold five days before the wedding, and the house and guesthouse soon filled up. Other guests stayed in private homes or at the Hotel Belvedere in the center of Bristol. (Irma Nayral, who traveled from France and was the first to arrive, entertained family and guests in the evenings with her lovely operatic voice.) Will McKee was put in charge of arranging all the gifts in the Billiard Room and talking to the society reporters who were covering the wedding. Meanwhile, extra chefs helped with the catering for the large number of guests. On the evening before the wedding they helped serve dinner to 60 guests aboard Will's yacht *Chanticleer*.

On the afternoon of the wedding, the steamer *Sagamore* picked up a large party of guests from Boston who had arrived at the Bristol Ferry by special train, and delivered them to Blithewold's wharf.

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According to Estelle Clements' diary, the day was clear and fine. Three hundred guests gathered in the Enclosed Garden, surrounded by trees, shrubs, and flowers. The *Providence Journal* described the scene:

> *The summerhouse had been transformed into a floral altar with lattice screen in the background, covered with climbing vines and flowers. 16 members of the boys' choir of the Church of the Emmanuel, Boston, marched along the path from the house singing "The Voice that Breathed O'er Eden" to the*

[1] Marjorie's close friend Priscilla attended the wedding, but she was not a bridesmaid since she herself was already married.

accompaniment of a pipe organ concealed behind the shrubbery near the floral bower. Then came the bird-like notes of a concealed soprano soloist, Mlle. De Nayral Puybusque, one of the bridesmaids, who sang the prayer "Angelicus." Soon after 4 o'clock the organ pealed out the wedding march from Lohengrin and the procession came down the flower-bordered winding path from the house into the garden. Twelve ushers led, followed by six bridesmaids and maid of honor. The ceremony was performed by Rt. Rev. Boyd Vincent, Episcopal Bishop of Southern Ohio, an uncle of the bridegroom. The scene was very impressive and beautiful, the large party of guests standing on the lawn behind a semi-circular band of white ribbon, while, in the floral bower, the young couple repeated their marriage vows.[1]



The Summerhouse, decorated for Marjorie's wedding, June 1, 1914

[1] *Providence Journal*, June 2, 1914.



Marjorie and George Lyon on their wedding day at Blithewold; Augustine is Maid of Honor

The newspaper reported that the couple left aboard Mr. McKee's yacht *Chanticleer* later in the afternoon. In fact, this was a trick played on the guests. After the wedding dinner everyone watched a young couple taking a launch out to the *Chanticleer* and waving to everyone on shore. The guests, who naturally thought it was Marjorie and George leaving for their honeymoon, all waved enthusiastically. Only Bessie and Will McKee and Estelle Clements knew that Marjorie and George were at that moment driving down Ferry Road in Marjorie's Fiat to meet their Cadillac at a predestined spot, which would then take them to Mansfield, Massachusetts, to spend the night. They had made the perfect getaway!

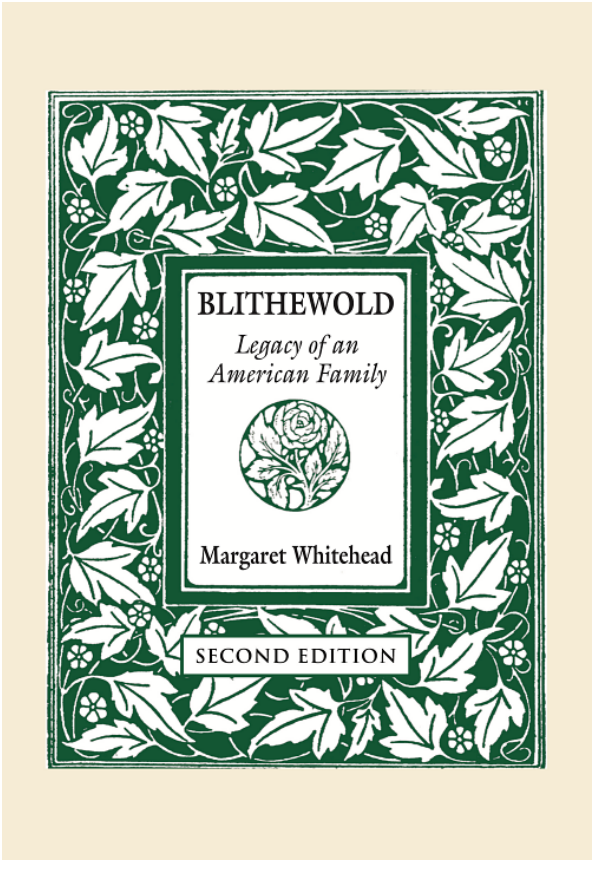
A guest wrote to Marjorie afterward:

> *How beautifully you fooled us on Monday evening!! Of course we all supposed the people we saw in the launch on the way to the yacht were "Marjorie and George." The festivities continued unabated for some hours after you left, dancing on the porch and in the living room.*[1]

Marjorie and George now began their first of many extended trips together. In New York, where they had driven after the night in Mansfield, they stayed for a few days at the Vanderbilt Hotel on Park Avenue before sailing on the S.S. *Tenadores*, by way of Kingston, Jamaica, and the Bahamas to Panama.

They arrived back in New York on June 18: *"We got back yesterday. It was such a good time. From the first day till the last, all fair weather and happiness."*[2] In New York they continued their honeymoon, enjoying the last Yale–Princeton game of the season and attending the gala opening of the new roof garden at the Biltmore Hotel. They prolonged their vacation further by spending a week at the Hotel Nassau in Long Beach, Long Island, *"for some more sun and bathing,"* before returning to Boston to begin their new life together.

[1] Helen Ridell to Marjorie, June 4, 1914.
[2] Marjorie to Bessie, June 19, 1914.



Spanning 1810–2026, this richly documented family history explores the lives, travels, and passions of the people behind Blithewold, Rhode Island's treasured estate and gardens. The second edition includes newly donated archival material.

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