



HELEN ELIZABETH ELLIS

1889–1978

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THE NEW WOMEN: *New Bedford Women Artists 1880-1950*  
*featuring the work of Helen Elizabeth Ellis*

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*Helen at work*

**T**eacher, wood carver, curator, and museum trustee, Helen Elizabeth Ellis devoted her varied talents to enriching the lives of others.

Born in Northboro, Massachusetts, February 23, 1889, Helen Elizabeth Ellis, known as Betsy to her friends, was the youngest of nine children of Helen Huntington Peirce and William Rogers Ellis.

Her father, a Harvard graduate and son of a Unitarian minister, chose in marriage the daughter of Benjamin Peirce, esteemed Harvard professor of Astronomy and Mathematics. After graduation, William Ellis tried his hand at a number of occupations, first in business, later less successfully in real estate and as a traveling salesman. The family moved often; the children were sent from the city to live with family members during times of epidemics. In a family which valued education, private schooling at the best institutions was provided the surviving children (3 died in infancy), paid for



by a well-to-do aunt and uncle. Summers were spent in the healthy atmosphere of Cape Cod, first in rented homes and later at "The Dunes," in Barnstable, purchased in 1890 with funds inherited from a Peirce cousin.

William Ellis died in 1903 at the age of 57 of complications from a long-standing respiratory condition. Helen's mother survived her husband by 20 years, moving every few years, boarding mostly with her daughter Gertrude, summering often with Helen in Westport. She died in Cambridge in 1923, at the age of 78 years.

In 1901, with father's health deteriorating, the Ellis family scattered. Twelve year old Helen was sent to live with her oldest sister Sally (Sarah Mills Ellis Cobb) and her husband Richard at 16 Quincy Street in Boston. While living with her sister, Helen attended Miss Ingalls' School and then public schools in Cambridge. By her own admission, she was neither an especially good nor happy student, but it was at Miss Ingalls' she was introduced to working with wood. In 1904, she was sent to Milton Academy outside Boston where she was a special boarding student for three years, years in which Richard Cobb was headmaster. While at Milton, she enjoyed art courses and excelled at athletics.

Miss Ellis' school year immediately after Milton Academy was spent in Boston at the North Bennet Street Industrial School and the Child Walker School of Design pursuing art training and preparing to teach the system of manual training known as Sloyd. Developed in Sweden in the 1870's as part of the anti-industrialization movement, Sloyd was a system of manual training which was intended "to cultivate the intellect in close and inseparable connection with action." In completing a graded series of woodworking projects, the

student learned the use of tools in proper posture, while "experiencing pride in producing a useful product of aesthetic value." The curriculum, taught to students in seventh through ninth grades, started with the creation of a simple garden stake, progressing through coat hangers and other simple projects to stools, benches and shelves.

Returning to Milton Academy in 1909, Helen began a teaching career which was to last for 19 years. Living on campus in a dormitory as house mistress, she taught Sloyd to seventh through ninth grade girls, and carving as an elective for older girls. She also taught physical education, rising to supervisor, and served as a substitute "nurse" in the school's infirmary. The sandwich service she began for students in 1910 rapidly grew into a cafeteria or snack bar for students. In 1925, she moved out of the dormitory, sharing an apartment in Boston with Imogene Weeks, assistant headmistress of the girls' school at Milton, with whom she had traveled in Europe during the previous summer.

Introduced to Westport, Massachusetts, by her friend



WESTPORT POINT FIVELMS MASSACHUSETTS

Imogene Weeks, Miss Ellis made up her mind to own a house at Westport Point. She embarked on a letter-writing campaign to home-owners, and located an available house on Main Road, which she purchased in 1916 and

named "FivElms." At first the house was mostly for summer use. The enterprising Miss Ellis established the Whaler Tea Room there, which ran for several summers in the front





THE WHALER BOOK SHOP, Inc.  
106 SCHOOL STREET, NEW BEDFORD, MASSACHUSETTS

rooms of the house. The restaurant served a light menu and sold postcards and etchings designed by Helen's architect-brother Francis, designer of Miss Weeks' house.

In 1928, Imogene Weeks and Helen Ellis left Milton

Academy to establish the Whaler Book Shop in New Bedford. Helen Ellis later said she had always dreamed of running a hardware store or a bookstore, and the bookstore won out.



The house they rented at 106 School Street provided rooms on the lower floors for the book shop and circulating library, and living space for the two proprietors above. The store featured books for children and adults in a homey setting, lectures by noted authors such as

Clifford W. Ashley, Henry Beston and Joseph C. Lincoln, as well as providing a small studio and exhibit space for Helen's carvings. In addition to showing Helen's works, the book shop also served for a short while as studio and sales space for the metalsmith Elizabeth Healy.

Not satisfied to wait for customers to appear on School Street, the proprietors established the Whaler on



St. Francis

Wheels, a 1928 Chevrolet coupe fitted out as a traveling bookstore, to take the business directly to the customers in their homes. The back cover of the car was removed and fitted with a case designed to carry 500 books, with sides designed to fold down to provide shelves for display. Managed by John Francis, often with the company of one of the proprietors or their assistant Miss Margret Hathaway, the Whaler on Wheels traveled the summer communities from Cape Cod to Rhode Island, and took longer trips to such areas as the Berkshires, where business was combined with pleasant vacations.

During the first year, 1930, the mobile bookstore managed to cover all expenses including the vacation. Helen later told a story of a policeman who held up traffic at an intersection to ask for a particular title, and was pleased to be able to obtain the book on the spot. Despite the entrepreneurial efforts of the proprietors, the bookstore venture could not weather the Great Depression, and the Whaler Book Shop closed after six years.



The difficulties with the bookstore coincided with a period of physical expansion at the nearby Old Dartmouth Historical Society. A generous contribution by Annie Seabury Wood had made possible the addition of new exhibit rooms. Then-president Henry Crapo recognized the talents of a capable



*Exhibit postcard, 1940*

woman, and hired Helen Ellis for the growing institution in 1934. In 1937, the Old Dartmouth placed Helen Ellis in charge of the newly-established department for non-whaling material; in 1939, she became assistant to curator William H. Tripp.

During her tenure at the Old Dartmouth Historical Society, Miss Ellis introduced the Society and the city to the decorative arts and furnishings of the area. She organized special loan exhibitions of lamps, china, textiles, costumes, dolls, glass, and scrimshaw. One exhibit featured miniature scale models of antique chairs owned by the husband of artist Ora Inge Maxim Kaulback. The early kitchen she set up in 1938 using fireplace woodwork from the Haskell house in Assonet and ceiling beams from the Winsor Tripp house in Westport is still a favorite with visitors today.

Helen also organized Sunday afternoon musicals featuring both classical music and popular tunes, as well as sea chanteys. She produced a dramatic theatrical complete with a lighted path to the New Bedford waterfront. To keep the public informed about activities at the Historical Society, she



wrote weekly articles for the local newspaper, the *Standard-Times*. Feeling strongly that New Bedford should preserve the whaler CHARLES W. MORGAN, Miss Ellis worked hard, albeit in vain, to help the MORGAN Fund Committee raise funds to make its purchase possible.

The illness of her older brother Benjamin occasioned Miss Ellis' retirement from the Old Dartmouth Historical Society in 1946. She attended to his affairs for the next seven years, becoming in the process better acquainted with stocks, bonds, and other types of investments.

Her museum experience and her love of teaching young people combined in 1952, when Miss Ellis helped Helen Wadsworth and Bertha Waldo transform the former church, once puppet theater, in Russells Mills Village, into a museum for children. Using wall cases donated by the Boston Children's Museum, then in Jamaica Plain, and much help from the community, the Children's Museum (of Dartmouth) was able to open free of charge to the public. Live animal exhibits were provided on a rotating basis by a local pet store owner, and later, summer nature classes were added. In 1962, the collection of birds and nests still a part of that Museum was purchased from local natural historian, Henry Burt by a group of supporters. With her friend Rosamond Peirce, Helen Ellis collaborated to produce a small book for





children, *Jolly Jingles*, which was published for the benefit of the Children's Museum. Miss Ellis served the Children's Museum as Trustee and President of the Board, participating through the early 1970's.

After a long and fruitful life, Helen Elizabeth Ellis died on April 15, 1978 at the age of 89. In Westport, her home for more than 50 years, Miss Ellis was active in the Historical Society, the Land Trust, the Women's Club, and the Public Library. She was survived by her friend and companion, Rosamond Peirce, who came out from New Bedford in 1943 for a weekend visit that continued until her own death in 1989.



*A Spring Fantasy, 1951*

From her childhood, Helen Ellis was fascinated by wood. She began woodcarving at Miss Ingalls' School in Cambridge, where the woodworking class was her greatest joy, building a doll house, and carving a family to inhabit it. Her decision to pursue a woodworking career was influenced by the director of the summer camp in New Hampshire where



*Annunciation*

Helen worked for six summers. The director introduced Helen to the Sloyd Training program at North Bennet Street Industrial School in Boston, where she prepared for her teaching career. When Helen retired from teaching, she decided that she could enjoy the craft of wood-working for herself alone. She made a conscious decision to select a method of working which required little physical exertion, work that could be done in an easy chair. As she said, "I do the work as most people pick up their knitting or crocheting." Working with a pen knife, she created small figures and decorated boxes, straying only occasionally to large projects and hard woods which required the use of traditional gouges and a mallet. She was opposed to covering up the grain lines of the wooden pieces, so when color was necessary, she applied it as a hand-rubbed stain. Her finish was usually a white wax.

The Whaler Book Shop, where Miss Ellis maintained a small studio in a second-floor room, provided the first



*Interior of home*

showcase for her works. The walls were decorated with her carvings; the shelves and some furniture were also crafted by the proprietress. Her reputation grew. In 1932, she was invited to exhibit her sculptures at The Art Center in New York City. A number of other exhibits

followed, including the Quincy Art Center in 1934, the Montclair (New Jersey) Art Museum in 1935, and the YWCA's in Boston and New Bedford in 1938. During this period she was honored by election to the National Association of Women Artists and Sculptors. In 1951, Miss Ellis showed three pieces in the American Sculpture Exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

In addition to her statues, she created relief-carved signs for the Monadnock Garden Club, for the (Dartmouth) Children's Museum, for landscape architect Allen Haskell; panels to decorate several rooms in her own home; as well as innumerable small covered boxes. In the 1950's, she tried her hand successfully at surface textile decoration, embroidering covers for two chairs and pillows to complement the carved panels in her sitting rooms.

Though a few of her sculptures still bear prices as evidence they were offered for sale, wood carving for Helen Ellis was mostly a personal and private artistic expression. Some



*Interior of studio*

pieces were given as gifts, but the majority of her works remained to adorn her home, which Miss Ellis hoped would endure as a house museum. Because this plan proved impractical, her collected sculptures and personal papers were removed to the Old Dartmouth





*Rosmond Peirce, Imogene Weeks, and Helen Ellis, c. 1958*

Historical Society at the death of her friend and companion, Rosamond, where they will be preserved as a testament to the exuberance with which this remarkable woman lived.





*Material for this publication is drawn from  
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