



The Volunteer and Staff Newsletter

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BBG's first Shakespeare Garden was built in 1925 on the site of what is now the Discovery Garden and was administered by the Education Department. While we know that Brooklyn philanthropists Henry and Emily Folger donated the funds to help establish the garden at the behest of Auxiliary member Mrs. Glentworth Butler, very little information is available in the BBG archives regarding the details of the grant. Anne O'Neill, garden-er in charge of the Shakespeare Garden put us in contact with Dr. Stephen H. Grant of Arlington, VA, who generously contributed the following article for publication.

HENRY AND EMILY FOLGER EDUCATE CHILDREN THROUGH SHAKESPEARE GARDENS

By Stephen H. Grant

As early as 1916, the Shakespeare Birthday Committee of New York was thanking **Henry Folger**, president of Standard Oil Company of New York, for his humanitarian gesture of financing a Shakespeare garden in Central Park. Two years later, Folger insisted that labels be installed so schoolchildren could learn to identify the varieties. Folger worked at 26 Broadway in Manhattan, but he and his wife **Emily** lived at 24 Brevoort Place in Brooklyn. The collectors of Shakespeariana subsequently turned their attention to the nearby Brooklyn Botanic Garden. Henry Folger wrote a check of \$500 to **Antoinette Butler**, who presented the gift to the BBG in 1925 for the establishment of a Shakespeare Garden as part of the Children's Garden. The same year, the curator of elementary instruction, **Ellen Eddy Shaw**, proudly reported that 58,000 schoolchildren visited the garden, an instant success. She spoke to the Society of Old Brooklynites on "The Shakespeare Garden at the BBG." The members were impressed. **Frank L. Babbott**, president of the board of trustees of the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences, expressed gratitude to Folger for his imaginative contribution. Not many people knew that in the late 1870s Babbott had organized a Shakespeare discussion group at Amherst College in the Alpha Delta Phi fraternity house, and that Folger was an avid participant.

Soon after Henry Folger died in 1930, Antoinette Butler wrote, "My most delightful meeting with Mr. Folger was in connection with his gift of a Shakespeare garden to the children of the Brooklyn Botanic Garden. The conceiving imagination, the planning purpose, the creating thought, the quiet insight impressed me in my acquaintance with Mr. Folger." Emily Folger did not hesitate to carry on the couple's generosity in developing the Shakespeare Garden. In 1931, she donated \$1,000. Mrs. Butler penned a note of profound appreciation: "I know the lovely little Shakespeare Garden will bloom and thrive under the care that your bountiful check will supply. Please know how grateful we all are and how happy that a friend has been so generously provided for the upkeep of your own part of the Botanic grounds." In 1932, Mrs. Folger contributed a further \$100. By that year, the garden counted fifty-six varieties from aconitum to yew, all mentioned in the Bard's work. Two years later, the Mrs. H. C. Folger Fund had grown to just under \$10,000.

In 1933, Antoinette Butler traveled to England. She sent a final letter to Emily Folger from her hotel in Stratford-on-Avon with fond remembrances from the Bard's birthplace. Just as Mrs. Folger had stepped in to support the Brooklyn garden, so had she risen to the task of supervising the construction of the Folger Shakespeare Library one block from the Capitol in Washington, DC. The Folgers had together collected Shakespeare items for forty years. When the Library was dedicated on Shakespeare's birthday in 1932, its collection was so varied and so rich that it had become the finest Shakespeare repository in the world.

Emily Folger brought back poppy seeds from Stratford to plant in America. She established a Shakespeare garden on the grounds of the Library in Washington, and at her alma mater, Vassar College, in Poughkeepsie, New York. Mrs. Butler obtained a photograph of Mrs. Folger and had it displayed in the children's library of the BBG. A childless couple, the Folgers demonstrated poignant devotion to other people's children, and to their learning and appreciation of nature's beauty through flowers and plants. As old Brooklynites, the Folgers were visionaries, planners, and creators. They set an example of civic mindedness and a strong commitment to make America a better place.

Stephen H. Grant is writing the first biography of Henry and Emily Folger. For information about this project, including images and other articles that might be of interest, see his website, www.stephenhgrant.com.