

The Charles M. Pratts and Henry C. Folgers of Glen Cove and Standard Oil

Deep Friendship 1865–1935



Signed photo of Charles M. Pratt of Standard Oil Co. Mrs. Charles M. Pratt, c1885, Courtesy of Amherst College Archives and Special Collections.

Signed photo of Henry C. Folger as president of Standard Oil Co. of New York for a fraternity brother, Courtesy of Amherst College Archives and Special Collections.

By Stephen H. Grant

Stories abound about prosperous New York clans summering on Long Island's Gold Coast during the Gilded Age. Yet behind the extravagance of their mansions and the glitter of their receptions, who can name one deep friendship?

Charles Millard Pratt (1855–1935) and Henry Clay Folger (1857–1930), both first sons, met in PS 15 elementary school in Brooklyn when the Civil War was raging. Charlie left for school from his parents' mansion; Henry from a modest clapboard home. Henry received an academic prize from Charles Pratt Sr., who was the world's largest oil refiner in 1870. Henry's

Uncle James founded Folgers Coffee in San Francisco. Sadly, the heiress to the coffee fortune, Abigail Folger, perished among the Charles Manson murders in the California desert in 1969.

After attending Brooklyn's Adelphi Academy, Charlie and Henry enrolled in Amherst College in western Massachusetts, rooming together for four years in the Alpha Delta Phi fraternity on the main drag of the town of Amherst. Only three blocks away lived Emily Dickinson! There is every reason to believe they never met. Henry and Charlie were studious on campus; Emily was reclusive at home.



Studio portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Henry C. Folger and Mr. and Mrs. Charles M. Pratt, c1885, Courtesy of Folger Shakespeare Library.



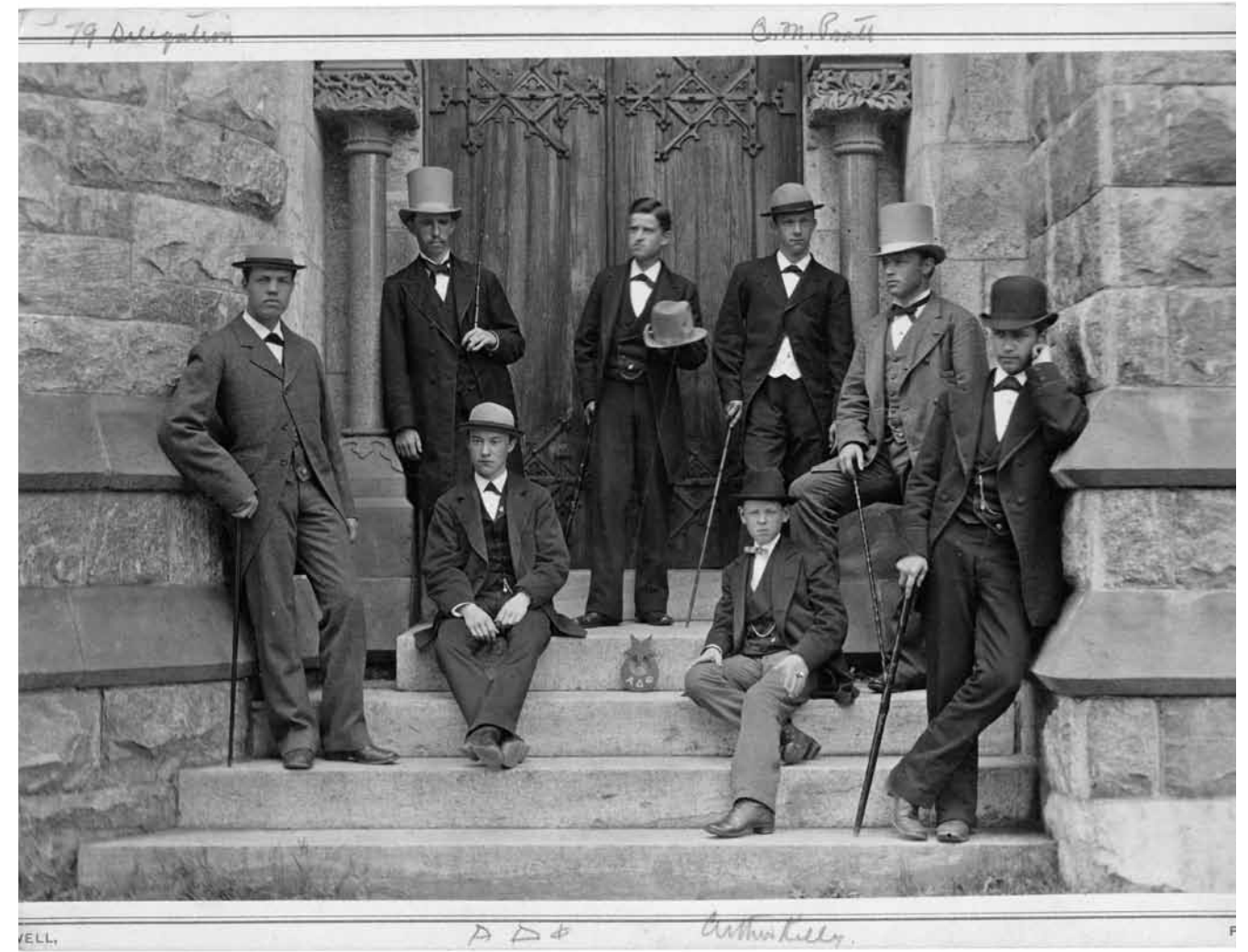
The Charles M. Pratts' eldest son Morris died of cancer while an undergraduate at Amherst College, Courtesy of Author's collection.

One week after graduation in 1879, Henry started working for Pratt Oil Works, part of Rockefeller's Standard Oil Co. After a summer touring the American west, Charlie joined Henry where they spent their entire careers and came to hold senior executive positions at Standard Oil. Charlie and Henry were welcomed into the firm as among the first who were college educated. Rockefeller Sr. and Pratt Sr. and most of the men around them had no more than secondary schooling. Charlie's duties eventually included president of Charles Pratt & Co., director of Standard Oil Co. of New Jersey, and vice-president of Standard Oil Co. of Kentucky. Henry became director of Standard Oil Co. of New Jersey, president and board chair of Standard Oil Co. of New York, succeeded by Herbert L. Pratt. While some of these company names may ring dim bells today, Standard Oil Co. of New Jersey became Exxon and Standard Oil Co. of New York became Mobil.

Linked by Brooklyn schooling, an Amherst education, and toil in the petroleum industry, the pair of young gents further bonded by marrying bluestocking alums of Vassar College on the Hudson River in upstate New York. Charlie wed Mary Seymour Morris in 1884 with Emily as bridesmaid and Henry, best man. In 1885, Henry married

Emily Clara Jordan, with Vassar grad Lillie Pratt, maid of honor and Charlie, best man. Henry had met Emily at Charles Pratt Sr.'s home on Clinton Avenue, Brooklyn at a literary salon. Both Mary (Latin and Greek) and Emily (general studies) taught secondary school until they married.

As hinted above, the financial means of Folgers and Pratts were vastly different. Henry's father, a wholesale milliner, suffered from the Panic of 1873. It left him with seventy-five cents in his pocket, he wrote in an autobiographical sketch. Henry was forced to live frugally in college. After buying a towel for seventeen cents, he hastened to write home to his mother asking whether he had been cheated. In contrast, Charlie received packages of pickled oysters from his mother, regaling the brothers with what came to be known as "Pratt's spread." Henry dropped out of Amherst junior year as his family could no longer pay tuition. For a spell he lived at home and took courses gratis at the City College of New York. Obviously aware of the roommate's dire situation, the Pratts stepped in decisively, loaning Henry the money to be reinstated at Amherst and finish his college education. Henry was forever grateful, repaying the loan as soon as he could.



Alpha Delta Phi fraternity brothers with hats and canes, Amherst College, 1879, Courtesy of Amherst College Archives and Special Collections.

Lying in the Folger Collection in the underground vault at the Folger Shakespeare Library two blocks from the U.S. Capitol, I found evidence of Henry's first of many debts he would pay off over more than a half-century. On June 27, 1878, when they were on summer break before senior year, Charlie loaned him \$100 (\$2,500 in today's money). "Three years after date," Henry wrote, "I promise to pay to the order of Charles M. Pratt \$100 at 7% interest, signed Henry C. Folger Jr."

By 1890 Henry Folger had started to collect what he called Shakespeareana, anything to do with the Bard. It started as a hobby and gradually became an obsession. He was earning a comfortable living, constantly investing in his Company. In 1896 Emily Folger earned a master's degree from Vassar in Shakespeare Studies. She was the perfect companion to lend scholarly assistance in developing the collection. The couple was childless; Henry's books became "his boys."

In 1897, Folger learned that the entire library of the Earl of Warwick in England would be auctioned off. The collection contained several

early editions of Shakespeare's works. He purchased the Warwick Castle library for 10,000£ (\$48,000 at the time). Again, Henry turned to the Pratt family to advance him the money. Charlie's reply came with one condition: Folger had to invite him to his house for a private lecture on the collection. By this time, the Charlie Pratts lived at 241 Clinton Ave., in Bedford-Stuyvesant. The Henry Folgers had recently relocated as tenants from 212 Lefferts Pl. to 24 Brevoort Pl. also in Bedford-Stuyvesant.

These last years of the century was the period when Henry and Emily Folger started renting summer homes in Glen Cove, near the 700 acres of Pratt family's properties in the northernmost part of the city, Dosoris. Charlie and Mary Pratt moved into their wood-shingled summer home facing Long Island Sound in 1890. In a play on Mary's middle name, Seymour, they named the mansion that looked out on the Long Island Sound, Seamoor. The Folgers bought their first home when they were in their 70s: 11 Saint Andrews Lane in Glen Cove, across from the Nassau Country Club and the railroad station. For comparison, Seamoor occupied 130 acres, the Folger home, two.



Front façade, Seamoor, residence of Mr. and Mrs. Charles M. Pratt, Glen Cove, LI, 1890–1947, Courtesy of Robert R. Coles LI History Collection, Glen Cove Public Library.

Front façade, 11 St. Andrews Lane, residence of Mr. and Mrs. Henry C. Folger, Glen Cove, LI, 1928–1936, Courtesy of Folger Shakespeare Library.

Amherst College has always tried to keep up with its alums' activities by soliciting periodic reports sent to a class secretary. Today such solicitations are encouraged quarterly, to correspond with the publication of a graduates' journal. In Folger and Pratt's day the appeal was moderate: every five years. While grads today are likely to be more open and communicative, in the Victorian era people were more reserved. In 1894, Folger timidly shared, "I have delayed answering your circular intentionally, as up to the time of its receipt I had no history to report. Yet there is no reason why something shouldn't happen to make me a person of interest to others at any time. I don't dare wait longer, lest I be omitted altogether."

A decade later, Henry had screwed up his courage to divulge aspects of his life that he was accustomed to keep private. "For me, the history of the 5 years just passed is quickly told. I can report no children born, no books written, no degrees received. Still, the years have been full of hard, and in the main, satisfactory work. The days have been given to business, in which a responsible position in the Standard Oil Co., has called into play much patience and offered a field of unlimited originality and thought. The nights have been employed in bringing together a library of Shakespeareana. In the gathering of books I have been signally fortunate during these years, quite beyond my greatest hopes, and have made a collection of material illustrating Shakespeare which I believe will soon be notable." The term notable was an understatement. The couple acquired 92,000 books (on average, six books a day) on Shakespeare and his times plus hundreds of thousands of other items that he donated to the American people in the institution he financed and endowed, the Folger Shakespeare Library.

Since Henry and Emily consulted book auction catalogues every day to

acquire new Shakespeare treasures, they could easily turn from Literature to another category where books for sale were described. Knowing that Mary Pratt was building up a serious book collection on butterflies, Emily perused the catalog section under Science on Lepidoptera. Every Christmas, and on other occasions over thirty years, Mary wrote a letter of thanks to Emily, with Charlie sending a second note of gratitude to Henry. Charlie to Henry in 1906, "Your scientific books on our hobby were more than welcome." In 1918, "You have made a very fine addition to our butterfly collection of scientific books." When Mary wrote Emily on Christmas Day 1918, she referred to Henry as "Mr. Folger" and to butterfly books as "my hobby."

Some of the gifted books were old and rare indeed. One was a volume in Latin, *Muscarum scarabeorum*, from 1646 by Wenceslaus Hollar. Half-hidden in the back of this book lies a handwritten note from Henry on the back of his business card, confirming his ever-analytical mind: "1646 strikes us as an early date for butterfly engravings."

Once, Folger returned a butterfly book in a pitiful state to Quaritch's bookshop in London due to what some would consider a minor flaw. As he explained: "You sent me recently a very nice lot of books on butterflies... I have these books rebound and use them for presents. When I sent to the binder Wright's *Butterflies of the West Coast of the United States*, 1906, he found, on checking it up for binding, that it lacked a signature, pp. 241 to 255, but in its place had a duplicate signature. This they did not discover until after they had torn off the binding. I am returning the volume for such disposition as you think can be made of it, and for such credit as you think is fair, as of course, I cannot use it in a scientific library." Folger had his standards.

Discovered after his death in 1930 were stacks of butterfly books Henry had set aside for future gifts. As Mary noted, Henry "even took the time and trouble to assemble and arrange groups of pamphlets and had them bound for us—surely a labor of love for one whose mind and hands were so full of matters of enduring importance that an interest in mere butterflies might well have been as transcendent [sic] as the lives of the subject." Today 1,440 butterfly books lie in the stacks of Special Collections in the Amherst College library, a bequest from the Pratts.

Folgers and Pratts commiserated with each other movingly when struck by family deaths. After Charlie and Mary's first son Morris died while an Amherst undergraduate student in 1910 following years of illness, Charlie penned to Henry: "Mary and I thank you with all our heart for your letter of sympathy and its affectionate token of kindness."

Four years later, when Henry's father died, Charlie's expression of sympathy resonated with deep emotion. "My dear old Friend, I did not know that your dear Father had been ill until this morning when I saw the notice of his death. I should have gone to you today to learn the facts more than all else to express my sincere sympathy. You had twenty years more of human companionship with your Father than I did with mine. We were both blessed in being intimately associated and affectionately personally drawn to these men. These memories are very precious. So I know how you feel your loss and how great the loss is. May God help you to bear it! I have found it helpful to live over in spirit the life my Father and I had together on earth. He isn't so far away as one might think. Nor is your Father to you. Try to take up your busy life again with that thought. Charlie." Charlie uses a sweet, big-brother tone in writing to Henry; he was eighteen months his senior.

For two couples with a Brooklyn winter address and a Glen Cove summer residence, the Pratts and the Folgers displayed remarkably different patterns when they traveled. Outside of the rare business trip taking Henry to the west coast, you could find the Folgers a) on a spring health retreat to the Homestead in Hot Springs Virginia, b) on a fall visit to the Wallingford, Penn. home of Shakespeare scholar, Horace Howard Furness, or c) in England on a Shakespeare pilgrimage and book-buying spree. The Pratts' travel program was more peripatetic. Charlie and Mary chose Alaska as their unusual honeymoon destination in 1884. Charlie, Mary, and eldest son Morris visited Europe in 1892. With all five children, the Pratts spent ten months in Europe in 1897. In Pasadena in 1908 and in Hot Springs, Calif. in 1909 they sought a better climate for their twenty-three-year-old son Morris, who was plagued with "attacks." Morris died on July 15, 1910 in Bethel, Maine, of brain cancer. Charlie celebrated the memory of his first son by donating a new dormitory to Amherst College, the first by an alum. Charlie's classmates roomed in Morris Pratt dormitory at their thirty-fifth reunion.

Henry kept up a constant stream of correspondence to his best pal Charlie when the latter was out of the office, especially when the Standard Oil Co. was going through the four years of trials leading to the its breakup into thirty-four companies by the Supreme Court due to monopolistic

practices. In 1909, Charlie expressed from California his gratitude for Henry's thoughtfulness. "Your weekly memos are of great interest." In 1911 he wrote from the Mediterranean in appreciation for Henry's "most interesting collection of papers, pamphlets, and books." In return, Charlie encouraged Henry, at the grindstone, to take a vacation, and "play 72 holes with peace of mind." For her part, Mary Pratt admired Emily's industriousness, writing "your energy is wonderful and I salute it." Viewing the couple in retrospect, Charlie opined to Henry, "I find much comfort in thinking of you and Emily and the steady unchanging philosophy of life which each of you has never varied since I first knew you." Absolutely on target, the characterization of the Folgers as single-mindedly devoted to Shakespeare, loyal friends and alums, was recognized by all.

Charlie worked at the firm for forty-three years; Henry for forty-nine. However, on the side, Charlie devoted himself to running an educational institution, the Pratt Institute, which his father founded in Brooklyn in 1887. Charlie's list of educational and philanthropic activities was prodigious, including director of the Long Island Rail Road, American Express Co, and Brooklyn Academy of Music, as well as trustee of Amherst and Vassar College. Charlie admitted that in 1899 he let up due to "nervous strain." In 1914 he confessed, "I have retired from business." Engaging only in charitable activities from then on, Charlie hung on at Standard Oil until 1923. By 1924, he was on his way to becoming an invalid. Henry, however, was in it for the long haul, without interruption, for almost five decades. Charlie died of bronchial pneumonia in 1935, five years after Henry of an aneurism following a prostate operation. After Henry died in 1930, Mary spent more time with Emily. They took long walks together in the country and at Coney Island. When Emily returned from her lonely task of dedicating the Folger Shakespeare Library in 1932 without Henry by her side, Mary had festooned the St. Andrews Lane home with flowers. Charlie, Henry, Mary, Emily. Two couples, two alma maters. Parallel professions, similar interests. Industrialists and philanthropists. In the Gilded Age where Glen Cove and Standard Oil Co. spawned names associated with wealth and success on the outside, these Pratt and Folger couples demonstrated in many forms how their steadfast fidelity and deep friendship, through thick and thin, reflected inner core values.

Author of the biography, Collecting Shakespeare: The Story of Henry and Emily Folger (Johns Hopkins Press, 2014), to celebrate the 450th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth, Stephen H. Grant of Arlington, Va. wrote an earlier biography, Peter Strickland: New London Shipmaster, Boston Merchant, First Consul to Senegal (New Academia, 2007), an Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training "Diplomats and Diplomacy Book." Before turning fulltime to writing, he served as Foreign Service officer with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), with long-term assignments in Ivory Coast, Guinea, Egypt, El Salvador, and Indonesia. His website is www.stephenhgrant.com, on which one can find blogs and book trailers.