

Rescue Mission: The Ellen Shipman Garden Photography Collection

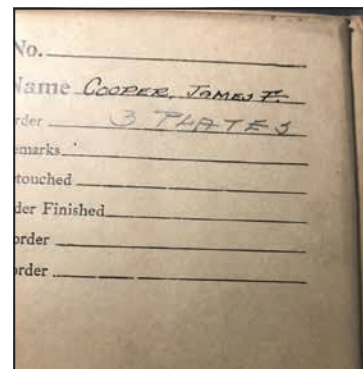
By Judith B Tankard, Boston, Massachusetts

In the course of my work, I often receive queries from homeowners requesting assistance in tracking down the history of their gardens. . . and if it's a bonafide Shipman garden, I'm more than happy to point the way. The query I received from a man in Florida in October 2020, however, threw me into a frenzy. "Good morning," he wrote. "I have come across a fairly large number of antique glass negatives that my grandfather and brother had stored. They were moved to Florida from Garrison NY some 20 years ago. I have only looked at a few, which are labelled Ellen Shipman, Grosse Pointe, among others. . . I would welcome any advice you can provide." As he later explained, he found them in his brother's house in Lake Worth, Florida in 2020 and recognizing the Shipman name, did a quick Google search, found my name, and "the rest is history." History indeed, this wonderful collection now comprises the Ellen Shipman Garden Photography Collection, Archives of American Gardens,

Smithsonian Institution <https://sova.si.edu/details/AAG.SHP> The contents comprise 0.48 cubic feet, three boxes, 184 film negatives, 127 glass plate negatives, eight glass lantern slides, and one autochrome, the donation of Taylor (Mike) Belcher III in 2021.

As the story unfolded, Mike's grandfather, Col. Taylor Belcher (1884-1971), owned the Garrison Oil Company, in Garrison, New York (across the river from West Point). As part of his business, they delivered coal and oil to local homes, and later expanded their services to hauling and cleaning out old estates. And one of the estates that his company cleared out was High House, the home of

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Negative sleeve.

Photo Mike Belcher, 2020.



Negatives stored in wooden box.

Photo Mike Belcher, 2020.



Box of lantern slides by Edward Van Altena.

Photo Mike Belcher, 2020.



Boxes of photographic safety film.

Photo Mike Belcher, 2020.

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Ellen Shipman Angell, Ellen Shipman's elder daughter who died on May 3, 1968. Somehow the heavy boxes of negatives, as well as some books belonging to Ellen Shipman, were overlooked by the Angell family when they went through the belongings. When Mike Belcher and his brother Anthony Belcher moved to Garrison's Landing in 1970, Anthony (an amateur photographer) rescued the boxes of negatives from his father's house and stored them in his house. Years later, when Anthony moved to Florida, he shipped the negatives to his new home where his brother, Mike Belcher, later found them stored in a closet. That's when Mike contacted me. After a long correspondence,



Photo Harry G. Healy, c. 1937.

Mitchell estate.



Photo Harry G. Healy, 1935.

Rynwood (Salvage estate).



Photo Harry G. Healy, late 1930s.

Penwood (Tucker estate).

accompanied by iPhone photographs of the boxes comprising the collection, I suggested he donate everything to the Archive of American Gardens at the Smithsonian. Unfortunately, Covid-19 slowed down the delivery (the option of shipping fragile boxes of glass negatives was quickly rejected), but the collection was safely handed over to the Smithsonian in the summer of 2021 and has now been catalogued. Credit goes to Anthony W. Belcher for recognizing the value of the collection and safeguarding it for over fifty years, as well as to Mike Belcher for facilitating their transition to the Smithsonian.



For Shipman scholars, this collection offers new information on some of her best-known mid-career gardens. Among the well-known names are Russell Alger, Jonathan Bulkeley, James Fenimore Cooper, Eugene duPont, Sir Samuel Salvage, Carl Tucker, and many more clients from Shipman's peak years. One interesting aspect to the collection is the variety of photographers represented. In the early years of her career, until the mid-1920s, Shipman used the well-known photographers Mattie Edwards Hewitt and Frances Benjamin Johnston. By the late 1920s, when she was swamped with work and had moved to her Beekman Place office in New York City, Shipman was using a variety of photographers, both national and local, but none are well known today. They include Harry G. Healy, John Wallace Gilles, Thomas Ellison, Edward Van Altena, and Rose Studio, among others. Their names are noted on some of the envelopes holding the negatives or in the published photographs.

The Shipman Collection has not been digitized yet, and it is hoped that funding will be found to enable this as well as cataloguing the collection. Only after the negatives have been digitized and positives printed will there be a greater understanding of the scope of new material. It is also important to remember that the original positive prints for many of these images are held in Ellen McGowan Biddle Shipman Papers Collection 1259, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library <https://rmc.library.cornell.edu/EAD/html/docs/RMMO1259.html>. Many of these images are reproduced in my book *Ellen Shipman and the American Gardens* (UGA Press, 2018). It remains to be seen what new images are found in the Smithsonian collection. Many thanks to Joyce Connolly, museum specialist at the Smithsonian, who has spent untold hours researching the collection.



Ellen Shipman at Beekman Place.

Photo Bradley Studio, 1920s. Nancy Angell Streeter Collection



The Moorings (Alger estate).

Photo Thomas Ellison, 1930s.



Barbour garden

Photo Thomas Ellison, 1936.