

## **Tales of Arasapha's First 50 Years: Seven Women Who Made a Difference**

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Arasapha Garden Club was founded 90 years ago in 1934. As I read about Arasapha's first 50 years, I was struck by how fortunate both Arasapha and New Castle were to have so many remarkable women lead community improvement initiatives. These women were clearly bright, talented, and capable. They undertook positions requiring skills in organization, communication, fundraising, ingenuity, problem solving, and leadership. They left enormous impact. Arasapha and New Castle would be very different today without their influence.

But the women of Arasapha's first 50 years were largely—and literally—hidden behind men. If they were married, they were only referred to by their husband's names. Florence Bayard Hilles, for example, was always referred to in newspapers and Arasapha records as Mrs. William S. Hilles. I often had to track down obituaries to learn these women's names! Some of them had no opportunities for careers of their own, so they focused instead on challenging but unpaid volunteer work. Yes, their accomplishments were acknowledged, but they rarely received quite the accolades of the men in their circles.

There are dozens of Arasapha members who made a real difference in the club and in New Castle over its first 50 years. I'm highlighting seven members whose achievements I found especially impressive or intriguing. While some of them came from distinguished families or had husbands in positions of prominence, I am deliberately not mentioning their families or husbands here because I want to focus on the accomplishments of these extraordinary women.

### **Anne Read Rodney Janvier**



*Anne Janvier circa 1930*

Anne Janvier's birth name was Annie, but she apparently was known as both Annie and Anne. Four of her many community accomplishments had an especially profound impact on New Castle.

Anne Janvier's first major, lasting accomplishment was founding A Day in Old New Castle. The idea came from Reverend Joseph Earp, pastor of Immanuel Church, and he called the first meeting to discuss the idea. But Anne Janvier presided at that first meeting and organized and chaired the first Day in Old New Castle in 1925. Anne Janvier continued to chair A Day in Old New Castle for its first fifteen years until her death in 1940.

Anne Janvier's second major, lasting accomplishment was leading the development of the Amstel House into a museum. She chaired the Amstel House Committee, a group of local residents formed in 1929 to acquire the Amstel House and turn it into a museum.

Anne Janvier's third major, lasting accomplishment was helping persuade Brandywine Garden Club to undertake a rehabilitation of the Amstel House Garden. In 1931, probably at Anne Janvier's impetus, the Amstel House Committee sponsored an afternoon of bridge at the Amstel House. One of the attendees was Helene Layton, president of Brandywine Garden Club. During the afternoon, someone suggested to Helene Layton that Brandywine Garden Club might want to undertake a cleanup and planting of the Amstel House garden as a project. We don't know who made this suggestion, but it's likely that Anne Janvier either made it or was the driving force behind it. Brandywine Garden Club agreed, and the beautiful garden surrounding the Amstel House today is largely the result of its work. The Amstel House garden would probably look very different today if not for Anne Janvier's influence.

Anne Janvier's fourth major, lasting accomplishment was helping to found Arasapha Garden Club with Mary Shaw and Harriett Cavenaugh. The three of them—all members of the Amstel House Committee—are credited with suggesting the club, and Anne Janvier and Mary Shaw organized the first meeting in January 1934. You can read more about the founding of Arasapha at [https://www.arasapha.org/uploads/6/1/0/5/61052407/how\\_arasapha\\_began.pdf](https://www.arasapha.org/uploads/6/1/0/5/61052407/how_arasapha_began.pdf).

### **Mary Shaw**



*An undated early image of Mary Shaw*

**"Colonial Day" Hostess**



**Miss Mary E. Shaw**

*1 Mary Shaw in 1941*

Although Mary Shaw was the only one of these seven women who never married, I think of her as the mother of Arasapha. Yes, she, Anne Janvier, and Harriett Cavanaugh are collectively credited with suggesting the club, and she and Anne Janvier organized the first meeting in January 1934. But Mary Shaw chaired that first meeting and continued to preside over Arasapha until 1942.

While others of her time focused on restoring New Castle's important historic buildings, Mary Shaw focused on general improvements to the town, especially beautifying its open spaces. Under her leadership, Arasapha planted 400 streetside trees and improved the Green, Veterans Triangle Park, the narrow park between Market and Second Streets, the stretch of Chestnut Street between East 4<sup>th</sup> and East 6<sup>th</sup> Streets, and vacant lots throughout the city. Also under her leadership, Arasapha advocated for cleaning up trash in city streets. In leading all these projects, Mary Shaw inspired others to make their own improvements to New Castle's

open spaces. Without her focus on beautifying and improving New Castle, the city might look very different today. Yes, it would still have beautifully restored buildings, but they might be situated in a less picturesque environment.

**Florence Bayard Hilles**



*Florence Bayard Hilles circa 1916 (Library of Congress)*



Harvard University, Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, W482525.1

*2A later, undated photo of Florence Bayard Hilles*

I think of Florence Bayard Hilles as Arasapha's celebrity member. A prominent and active suffragist in the early 20th century, she was once arrested for blocking traffic while picketing the White House. She served three days of her 60-day sentence before receiving a presidential pardon. In the 1930s she served six years as national chair of the National Woman's Party.

Florence Bayard Hilles was in her 70s when she was an Arasapha member. In the 1930s and 1940s she hosted Arasapha summer meetings at Ommelanden, her now-vanished estate on River Road south of New Castle, where she raised lotus lilies and other plants. She donated trees from Ommelanden to Arasapha's tree planting program.

By odd coincidence, one of the leaders of the movement opposing women's right to vote was also active in New Castle in the 1930s. Mary Wilson Thompson headed the Delaware

Society for the Preservation of Antiquities, which purchased the Dutch House in 1937. The two women would have moved in overlapping circles and must have run into each other from time to time. The 19<sup>th</sup> amendment to the Constitution, giving women the right to vote, had been ratified in 1920, but I still would have loved to have been a fly on the wall whenever these women met!



*Undated photo of Mary Wilson Thompson (Wikipedia)*

### **Isabel Jenkins Booth**



*Isabel Booth circa 1930*

I think of Isabel Booth as New Castle’s Energizer Bunny—I wish I could have bottled her energy. In the late 1920s, for example. Isabel Booth was concurrently president of the Century Club (a New Castle women’s club), the Business Girls Club of the YWCA, and the new local chapter of the Visiting Nurse Association (VNA), while also serving as Vice President of the Delaware State Federation of Women’s Clubs. Here’s one small example of her initiative: in 1928 she got New Castle’s women’s groups and clubs to place a community bulletin board at the post office. The bulletin board included a calendar where the groups could post upcoming events and prevent conflicts.

By the early 1940s, Isabel Booth was still president of the local VNA and had launched two annual fundraisers for it: a book sale and a rummage sale. In 1942, under Isabel Booth’s leadership, the two events were combined and a flower sale added to create a Flower Mart event. The next year the event was renamed May Market.

Isabel Booth now headed not only the VNA and May Market but also Arasapha. In 1944 the VNA became part of the wartime equivalent of the United Way and could no longer hold May Market as a fundraiser. No doubt because of Isabel Booth, May Market moved to Arasapha. Isabel Booth continued to chair May Market through 1946.

Without Isabel Booth’s vision, New Castle would not have May Market, Arasapha’s beloved signature fundraiser and a treasured annual community event.

Isabel Booth made two other important contributions to Arasapha and its projects. She and her father had long collected stones from American historic sites, including the homes of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. Isabel donated some of these stones to create a path to the side entrance to the Amstel garden house called the Path to Independence. Visit

[www.arasapha.org/amstel-house-garden](http://www.arasapha.org/amstel-house-garden) for a diagram of the stones and information on where each stone came from.



*The Path to Independence in the Amstel House garden*

Isabel Booth's last significant contribution to Arasapha was in 1959, when the club experienced some internal turbulence. The club president resigned abruptly, and the club could not find anyone willing to run. Eventually Isabel Booth, now in her 60s and less active, was persuaded to come back as president for one year, adding some much-needed stability while the club worked its way through its issues. We don't know if the club would have survived had she not stepped up.

### **Edna Appleby Deakyne**



*Edna Deakyne on left, helping at a May Market luncheon in front of the Court House in the 1940s*

An obituary for Edna Deakyne described her as one of New Castle's leading citizens. She was best known as owner of the Old Court House Tea Room, which operated from 1925 to 1942. She was one of the earliest members of the Century Club, a New Castle women's club founded in 1915, and one of the first board members of New Castle Historical Society, founded in 1934.

Edna Deakyne was a charter member of Arasapha in 1934 but became more active after the tea room closed. She was president of Arasapha in 1944, when May Market moved from the Visiting Nurse Association to Arasapha. As chair of May Market both under the VNA and Arasapha, Isabel Booth would have had lead responsibility for moving the event to Arasapha. But Edna Deakyne, as Arasapha president, is described as "instrumental" in bringing May Market to Arasapha. Without Edna Deakyne's support, May Market might not have been taken over by Arasapha, and this beloved annual event might not exist today.

In 1948 the Wilmington Garden Club visited the Amstel House garden and, displeased with the

garden's condition, launched a rehabilitation of it. Edna Deakyne stepped up to chair Arasapha's Amstel House garden committee, which worked alongside Wilmington Garden Club in 1949 and 1950. Edna Deakyne continued to chair the Amstel House Garden Committee through 1955. A 1954 newspaper editorial said she was "due much credit for the present beauty of the garden."

But what fascinates me most about Edna Deakyne has nothing to do with Arasapha. In her youth, Edna was the subject of several Saturday Evening Post covers painted by Ellen Pyle. Ellen Pyle painted 40 covers for the Saturday Evening Post between 1922 and 1937. We don't know which ones featured Edna as their subject.



*An early photo of Edna Deakyne (New Castle Historical Society)*



*A 1922 Saturday Evening Post cover by Ellen Pyle. Could Edna Deakyne have been the subject?*

## Mary Earle



Mary M. Earle

*Mary Earle, in a photo accompanying her 1996 obituary in the New Castle Gazette*

Like Edna Deakyne, Mary Earle was a business owner. She worked as a floral and interior designer and wrote a book on fruit arrangements. And, like many of the other women I'm profiling here, Mary Earle was a leader in multiple New Castle community organizations. Her first major community accomplishment was in 1949, when she chaired New Castle's first antiques show. The event was sponsored by the Presbyterian Church's women's group and raised over \$1100 for the restoration of the church. The antique show became an annual New Castle event for over 70 years.

In the 1950s Mary Earle oversaw Arasapha's major rehabilitation of the Dutch House garden. Wilmington architect Victorine duPont Homsey was hired to update the 1935 Wheelwright design for the garden. Many elements of the Homsey design remain in the garden today; learn more at [https://www.arasapha.org/dutch-](https://www.arasapha.org/dutch-house-garden.html)

[house-garden.html](https://www.arasapha.org/dutch-house-garden.html)

But Mary Earle's most significant contribution to Arasapha was conceiving of its annual Christmas decoration project in 1963. Her proposal had two elements: decorating the town with all-natural materials and lighting the cupolas around the Green with white lights. Today the cupolas are lit year-round, and every year Arasapha decorates over 100 wreaths with all-natural materials. Learn more about the history of the project here:

[https://www.arasapha.org/uploads/6/1/0/5/61052407/history\\_of\\_wreath\\_workshop.pdf](https://www.arasapha.org/uploads/6/1/0/5/61052407/history_of_wreath_workshop.pdf)

## Leona Galford



*3Leona Galford in 2004*

I think of Leona Galford as Arasapha's white knight. She repeatedly took on challenging, often thankless jobs that no one else was willing to do and saved the day. In 1972, just four years after she moved to New Castle, she became Arasapha treasurer *and* May Market chair. The following year, Arasapha couldn't find anyone willing to serve as president. There was talk that perhaps Arasapha had outlived its usefulness and its objectives were no longer of interest to its members. Leona Galford agreed to serve as president...and for a two-year term, not one, keeping the club going.

By the 1970s the rehabilitation of the Dutch House garden led by Mary Earle was 20 years old, and the garden again needed rehabilitation. Leona Galford led major rehabilitations of first the Dutch House garden and then the Amstel House garden. Ironically, she never considered herself a gardener; the skills she brought to these projects were leadership, organization, planning, and fundraising.



In the 1980s Arasapha was not earning enough at May Market to support the Amstel and Dutch House gardens. Just as she saved Arasapha in the 1970s by becoming president when no one else would, Leona Galford now saved the day again. In 1988, when she co-chaired May Market, Leona Galford greatly expanded the number and variety of herbs sold and featured them at a separate table. May Market's herbs have generated thousands of dollars of revenue and are more popular than ever today.

Then in 1992 Leona Galford launched an annual project to raffle a quilt that she designed and that was hand sewn by Arasapha members. Arasapha's quilt raffle continued for almost 30 years. Like herbs at May Market, over the decades the quilt raffle brought in thousands of dollars to support the Amstel and Dutch House gardens.

Who knows what Historic New Castle would be like today without the contributions of these seven women? There might be no Day in Old New Castle, no May Market, and no Antiques Show. The Amstel and Dutch House gardens might not be the gems they are today. Holiday decorations in Historic District might be tacky plastic instead of all-natural greens. The cupolas around the Green might be unlit. And there might be no Arasapha Garden Club with its 90-year history of beautifying and improving Historic New Castle.

*For more information on Arasapha's history, visit [Arasapha.org/history](http://Arasapha.org/history). There are many holes in club archives! If you have any documents, photos, or information related to Arasapha's history, please contact us at [ArasaphaGarden@gmail.com](mailto:ArasaphaGarden@gmail.com).*