Finding Aid

Helen Penniman (1880-1964) Collection

Descriptive Summary

Extent
Number of containers: 2 boxes
Linear feet: 0.75 lin. ft.

Repository
Peabody Archives
Johns Hopkins University

Location
Archives stacks, second floor of the Friedheim Music Library

Processed by
Lauren Anderson
(October 1, 2015)

Administrative Information

Accession Number
1996.12

Provenance
Unknown

Access
Materials in the Helen Penniman Collection are available for use by appointment, Monday through Friday from 9:00 am until 5:00 pm.

Publication Rights
All requests for permission to publish or perform materials in this collection must be submitted in writing to the Head Librarian.

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Biography

“Mrs. Penniman was born in New York City, the daughter of Gilbert Fraser, of Invernesshire, Scotland, and Josephine Eldridge Noyes Kellogg Fraser. Her father, then British consul in New York, later became consul general in Baltimore. Through her mother, Mrs. Penniman was a
descendant of William Coddington and Peleg Sanford, two colonial governors of Rhode Island, and of James Noyes, one of the founders of Yale University.

Her musical education began when she was 5 years old, first with the piano. At 8 she took up the violin, her mother having hopes for her as a concert violinist. At 15 she added the study of art to music and became active in amateur theatricals, both as a director and an actress.

When her family moved to Baltimore, a short time later, she made her debut at the Bachelors Cotillion. And in a day when Baltimore society restricted itself to a few choice downtown residential sections and entertained in a grand style, she came to know the city as only those members of her generation knew it. At Grace Church--now Grace and St. Peter’s--she was married to Nicholas Griffith Penniman, a member of an old and distinguished Baltimore family. Mr. Penniman, whose tall, stooped figure became as familiar as his wife’s season after season when he escorted her about town, was then a lacrosse star who shared her special interest in the arts.

Mrs. Penniman became an actress with the Vagabond Players during the first season that little theatre group, founded in 1916. Later she was active in the group’s reorganization and directed numerous productions. Her husband became an enthusiastic member of the little theatre’s backstage crew and, as he laughingly recalled in later years, saw his wife in at least 1,500 performances.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Penniman was writing book reviews and special articles for The Sun, and theatrical criticism for the Baltimore American. In 1928 she became society editor of the Sunday American, and in 1930 music and arts critic for the News-Post. She signed her newspaper articles with the initials ‘H.A.F.P.’

She was also the author of a novel, The Proud Thistle, a tale based on family traditions of her father’s ancestral Scottish clan. The publication of this volume and its display in a Pratt Library window and was the high point in her life she said.

Travel was another interest which Mrs. Penniman shared with her husband, particularly after his retirement from the grain and fertilizer business. Returning home from a tour of Spain and Portugal in the summer of 1936, their steamer came under rifle and machine-gun fire of Spanish revolutionist at the port of Corunna. ‘I wouldn’t be honest if I didn’t admit I enjoyed it,’ said Mrs. Penniman when she got home. With all her other interests she continued her painting and each trip afield—to the West Indies, Mexico, Europe—invariably produced new canvases which were hung at 609 Cathedral Ttreet where she and her husband lived in the converted stable of her father’s old residence at that address. In 1958 more than 200 of her friends gathered at the Sheraton-Belvedere Hotel for a testimonial dinner in her honor. Mrs. Penniman was presented with a portrait of herself by Stanislay Rembski, and with a bronze miniature, ‘Happiness’ donated by its sculptor, Louis Rosenthal.

Also at the banquet she was named Maryland’s honorary minister of fine arts, by then Governor McKeldin. She is survived by two nephews, George Dobbin Penniman, Jr, and Nicholas G. Penniman 3D and three nieces, Mrs. J.A. Dushane Penniman, Mrs. Sterling Patterson and Mrs. J. Kemp Bartlett Jr., all of Baltimore. Her husband died in 1958.”

(The Baltimore Sun, January 1964)

Scope and Content

This collection contains music, news releases, programs, program notes, scripts, newspaper
clippings and reviews by Helen Penniman.

**Container List**

**Box 1**

1. Music: Operetta: Penelope
2. Music: Operetta: Pickwick
3. Music: “Song of the Vagabonds”
4. Music: *Twenty-Five Best Music Ballads*
5. News Releases
6. Programs: Ballet 1942-1949
7. Programs: Ballet 1951-1959
8. Programs: Baltimore Civic Opera Company
9. Programs: Baltimore Institute of Musical Arts
10. Programs: Baltimore Museum of Art
11. Programs: Baltimore Symphony Orchestra
12. Programs: The Baltimore Youth Guild
13. Programs: Brown Memorial Church
14. Programs: Estelle Dennis Dance Theatre
15. Programs: Ford Theatre
16. Programs: Handel Choir of Baltimore
17. Programs: Martha Graham Dance Co
18. Programs: Metropolitan Opera
19. Programs: Programs and Notes-Misc
20. Programs: Programs-National Symphony Orchestra
21. Programs: Peabody
22. Programs: The Philadelphia Orchestra
23. Scripts
24. Scripts

**Box 2**

1. Clippings: Chamber Music Ensembles
2. Clippings: Chamber Music and Ensembles
3. Clipping: Choirs
4. Clippings: Conductors
5. Clippings: Dance
6. Clippings: Dance-2
7. Clippings: Ford Foundation Games
8. Clippings: Miscellaneous
9. Clippings: New Music
10. Clippings: New Music 2
11. Obituary
12. Opera
13. Soloists
14. Miscellaneous Fragments
Related Materials


Mentioned in *The Sun* article, “Vagabond Through the Years.” Pictures of her are also found here: [http://www.baltimoresun.com/entertainment/arts/artsmash/bal-vagabond-players-through-the-years-2015082-003-photo.html](http://www.baltimoresun.com/entertainment/arts/artsmash/bal-vagabond-players-through-the-years-2015082-003-photo.html).