



Environmental Education on the Potomac

When Henry Met Alice

By Linda C. Simmons (originally published Hard Bargain News, February 2012)

The annual celebration of Valentine's Day prompted us to wonder about the romance of the courtship and marriage of Alice and Henry, affectionately known as "Fergie," once owners of Hard Bargain Farm and eternal residents here — yes, the mortal remains of both are interred in the Farmhouse garden. How did they meet, when were they married and where did they honeymoon? One might think these questions impossible to answer even though Alice and Henry did not live that long ago; she died in 1951 and he in 1966. The couple had no children, only a few people alive today knew them, and so far as can be determined, virtually no one has been found who knew them over a century ago when they were young. So, how can we learn anything about their meeting, courtship and marriage? The answer to such questions has been found very close at hand, at Hard Bargain Farm in the archival records of the Alice Ferguson Foundation.

Among the fascinating items found there are assorted photographs, albums, etc. from Edith Lowe, Alice's sister. Some visitors to the farmhouse at Hard Bargain may recollect being told that one wing (today offices) was once called Edith's wing. This is where she had a bedroom and bath when she stayed at the Farm. Edith and Alice were close all their lives and Henry continued to care for and support his sister-in-law after Alice's death. When Edith died she willed her papers and among them is a large scrapbook of family photographs where she discussed in a running narrative the people depicted as well as some of the events in their lives. Not long after the first page is found the story of how and when Henry met Alice:

When the dancing club met at our house various gentlemen were presented to us, including a Mr. Ferguson and a Mr. Mendenhall and others, but nothing at all was said of anything serious. We were a little surprised then at Christmastime for three packages to come to Alice. The first one six roses, the fragrance from which filled the house; the second one three high-bred apples in a beautiful carton; third, six dozen roses. The fragrance from these just as fine as the first six...

The significance of the roses is easily understood as expressing Henry's love for Alice but the three apples seem puzzling to a twenty-first century audience many of whom have never received the type of classical education which Henry and Alice must have been given. It is likely that Henry in sending apples to Alice was declaring his love as the ancient Greeks would have, using the apple to represent his declaration of love. But he was stating more than his love by sending her three apples. In Greek mythology three apples represented a declaration of marriage. They referred to the legend of Atalanta and Hippomenes in which Atalanta, a beautiful, athletic woman agreed to marry any man who could defeat her in a foot race. Hippomenes, a suitor, prayed to Aphrodite, the goddess of love, to help him win that race. Aphrodite gave him three golden apples to toss in Atalanta's path to distract and slow her each time she stopped to pick it up. He won the race and his bride. Edith notes that later in the spring Alice announced:

Mr. Ferguson and I decided to get married last night.

Then Edith added her own comment:

The apples had won.

The couple planned a September 14th wedding to be conducted at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C. by the groom's father, Dr. Henry Ferguson, an Episcopalian minister. A number of pre-wedding parties were held including one at the Powhatan Club where Edith noted much of the courting had taken place. That party, with Mrs. Vaughan Ferguson as chaperon, included "*a delightful afternoon on the river and a bountiful dinner out-of-doors at the Midriver Club*" before the young men returned to the city and the young ladies "*had a very delightful night and a splendid day, going back to the city barely in time for*" a dinner hosted by the groom's father.

The wedding, the next day, on Monday was reported to be a quiet affair:

Alice never looked so pretty as then in an old rose silk with Mother's Fayal lace shawl draped across it.

There were: *no official bridesmaids, but her friends shown to the front pew. There followed a wedding breakfast...* Finally the assembled guests were told by the best man they could not shower the departing couple with rice: *It's no use waiting. She just will not come down.*

But Alice and Henry did depart on a trip soon after. Two weeks before the wedding, on September 2, Henry had applied for a passport stating that he was going abroad with Alice and also stating he was taking a year's leave from the United States Geological Survey. Although no itinerary was given the trip concluded along the east coast of South America. The couple is recorded as sailing to the United States from Buenos Aires, capital of Argentina, in February 1915 on the S.S. Vasari of the Holt and Lamport Line. Their arrival in the port of New York City on March 15 is noted on the ship's passenger list.

We can only speculate about the significance of their choice of vessels for this final leg of the trip. It is not likely to have escaped their notice that the vessel's name, Vasari, is the same as that of the famous 16th-century Italian, long renowned for his artist's biographies that provided the ideological foundation of the field of art history. Alice, a professionally trained painter, must have read Vasari's *Lives* and even though she could not have known of the full artistic and creative life that lay ahead of her and Henry at Hard Bargain Farm it is likely the newlyweds might have found it amusing to sail home to their new life together on such a prophetically named vessel.