

Woods Hole Historical Museum Archives  
P.O. Box 185  
Woods Hole, MA 02543

REGISTER  
Ellen Donovan Collection  
1903 - 2003

1 box

## **ELLEN DONOVAN (HEILBRUNN) COLLECTION**

**Recataloged 2019**

### **BIOGRAPHY**

#### **ELLEN DONOVAN 1903 - 1977**

Ellen Donovan was a beloved teacher, artist and summer resident of Woods Hole. She was born in Philadelphia in 1903 and received her training at the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts, the Barnes Foundation and at the Thurn School of Modern Art. Early in her career she taught at private schools in the Philadelphia area, among them the Agnes Irwin and William Penn Charter Schools. Her art, mostly oils and pastels, is in the Philadelphia Academy's permanent collection.

Woods Hole became her summer home after her marriage in 1932 to Dr. L.V. Heilbrunn of the Biology Department of the University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Heilbrunn was very active and vibrant, a well-known summer researcher in cell physiology at the Marine Biological Laboratory. They spent many summers in their old house, once known as the Edwards place, on School Street just beyond the Woods Hole School. The property consisted of large lawns running down to the edge of Eel Pond with two attached houses and Ellen's little studio at the water's edge. Beginning in 1933, she taught art classes in Woods Hole for many summers. The classes were held on her own lawns at first and later in a small building at the head of Little Harbor, which had been the boathouse of Sarah Bryant Fay, a photographer and artist. Ellen exhibited her work many times in Woods Hole.

In November 1950, she opened the Ellen Donovan Gallery at 1716 Rittenhouse Square in Philadelphia, where Leopold Stokowski had once lived. Her partner in the venture was Barbara Phillips, an English sculptor. They had met when Miss Phillips came through Woods Hole on her way to Naushon Island. An early exhibitor at the Donovan Gallery was William H. Littlefield of Falmouth, and one of the first paintings sold there was a Littlefield oil of Locust Street in Falmouth. Mr. Littlefield and Ellen Donovan were close friends and colleagues in the Falmouth art scene, often painting together outdoors, along with other local artists including Rose Danzig Grundfest.

Dr. Heilbrunn was mentor to many graduate students starting in the 1930s. The Heilbrunns rented half the house to doctoral candidates and their families. One of their first tenants was Heilbrunn's first graduate student, Burr Steinbach and his wife, Susie. Ellen presented Susie with a painting as a wedding present, which is a family treasure to this day.

On summer evenings Ellen and her husband held large “ice cream parties” on their lawn. Guests were not only students and their families but members of the larger community, such as the Irish poet Padraic Colum, who greatly admired Ellen’s wonderful Irish beauty, her sparkling blue eyes and black hair. Often present were Dr. James P. Warbasse, an advocate of social change; artists, an assortment of Nobel Prize winners and Ellen’s lovely black standard poodle, Bombo. They all regarded Ellen with great affection and were devoted to Dr. Heilbrunn, fondly calling him “The Boss”.

Unusual for the 1930s, Ellen retained her own last name after she married. One time, Dr. Heilbrunn, wearing his pince-nez and typical old tweed jacket, was walking Bombo down the street, when someone passed saying “Good evening, Mr. Donovan”, to which he replied “No, my name is Heilbrunn. I kept my maiden name.”

Ellen was a passionate woman. She didn’t give a damn for the proprieties of life. She was an artist. Though disengaged from domesticity and step-motherhood, she was enamored of L.V. Heilbrunn. When he died, she lamented “What am I supposed to do? I’ve been living with a giant. How do I live without him?”

After L.V. died in 1959, Ellen Donovan moved her winter residence from Philadelphia to New Hope, Pennsylvania, where she kept a studio for several years. She became a charter member of the New Hope Art League but continued to come to Woods Hole every summer. Ellen died at Doylestown, Pennsylvania on March 4, 1977. She was survived by her step-daughter, Constance Heilbrunn Tolkan (now deceased) and a grandson, Victor Tolkan of Washington, D.C., the current owner of the School Street property. We thank Victor Tolkan and his father Norman for the loan of these paintings.

## **SCOPE**

Material in the Ellen Donovan Collection consists of her original Woods Hole school announcement brochures, her Philadelphia gallery brochures, Christmas cards, a large number of Ellen’s pencil sketches, as well as items and information gathered for an Exhibit of her paintings in Gallery Two of the WHHM in 2003. There is also material on her husband’s scientific research in biology.

The paintings were also photographed; those digital files are under Donovan in the My Pictures directory of the desktop.

### **FOLDER 1: Origin of Collection**

1. Note from Marsden Williams about items removed from Victor Tolkan’s cottage (48 School Street)
2. Genealogy of Donovan-Heilbrunn-Tolkan family

3. Norman Tolkan's Washington, DC address

### **FOLDER 2: Photos**

1. Photo of L.V. Heilbrunn and Ellen Donovan, color print. Donated by Catherine R. Williams
2. Photo of L.V. Heilbrunn, b/w. Donated by Catherine R. Williams

Copies mounted for the Exhibit are at the bottom of the box.

### **FOLDER 3: Obituary of Ellen Donovan**

- Obituary of Ellen Donovan Heilbrunn. Falmouth *Enterprise*, April 15, 1977  
(xerox copy)

### **FOLDER 4: Christmas Cards of Ellen Donovan**

1. Christmas card, 1925, block print of church, hand-colored, "Christmas Greetings Ellen Donovan, 1925". Second side printed in gray, no color.
2. Christmas card, 1926, block print of Colonial house in snow, "Christmas Greetings 1926"
- 3 and 4. Christmas card, 1926, block print of Colonial house in snow, hand-colored, "Christmas Greetings 1926" (two copies).

### **FOLDER 5: Agnes Irwin School Prospectus**

- Paper-covered ribbon-tied booklet with school description and faculty list, 1931-1932, for The Agnes Irwin School, 2009 and 2011 De Lancey Place, Philadelphia (Ellen Donovan was the Art Instructor)

### **FOLDER 6: Copy of *The Last Writing of Baron Takuma Dan***

Paper and cloth covered book of the last writing and speech given by Baron Takuma Dan at the League of Nations Commission of Inquiry, 1932 (the Baron was an MBL scientist and friend of the Heilbrunns)

### **FOLDER 7: Woods Hole Art School**

1. Prospectus (3 copies) for the Woods Hole Art School established by Ellen Donovan in 1933 on Little Harbor
2. Artwork (3 copies) for the cover of the prospectus, Woods Hole Art School
3. Prospectus for the Woods Hole Art School, 4<sup>th</sup> year, at 48 School Street
4. Woods Hole Art School announcement of music instruction by Stanley Sprenger, 1941

### **FOLDER 8: Falmouth *Enterprise* Correspondence**

1. Letter from George Hough, Jr. about using her artwork in the Mail Away Edition (March 1, 1942)
2. Letter from George Hough, Jr. about designing a new cover for the summer vacation folder (March 9, 1942)
3. Envelope addressed to Mrs. L.V. Heilbrunn (Ellen Donovan) from the Falmouth *Enterprise*, containing a note dated March 12, 1942, written in pencil, with her response to Hough's letter of March 9, 1942
4. Copy of completed brochure (Falmouth on Cape Cod by the Sea)

### **FOLDER 9: Ellen Donovan Gallery, Philadelphia**

1. Announcement (two copies) of an art show of Savo Radulovic, 1953, at the Gallery
2. Announcement of an art show of William H. Ferguson, 1954, at the Gallery

### **FOLDER 10: Writing about Cape Cod**

Handwritten manuscript. 5 sheets of paper, written in pencil, with a description of life on Cape Cod

### **FOLDER 11: Reprint of Article co-authored by L. Victor Heilbrunn (husband of Ellen Donovan)**

*The Relation of Protoplasmic Gelation to Oxidative Processes*, W.L. Wilson and L.V. Heilbrunn, Reprinted from *EXPERIMENTAL CELL RESEARCH*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 234-243, 1957. Academic Press Inc. Publishers, New York, N.Y.

### **FOLDER 12: L.V. Heilbrunn**

Information on – from MBL Archives

### **FOLDER 13: Original Pencil Sketches (Small)**

### **FOLDER 14: Original Pencil Sketches**

### **FOLDER 15: Original Pencil Sketches**

### **FOLDER 16: Original Pencil Sketches**

### **FOLDER 17: Exhibit text (2003)**