



# A Brief History

of Biltmore Industries

By Bruce Johnson

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1



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## A Brief History of Biltmore Industries

In the years shortly after the completion of the Biltmore House in 1895, George and Edith Vanderbilt spent hours exploring the surrounding Blue Ridge Mountains, buying for their Northern friends homespun fabrics from the women who lived and worked in mountainside cabins.

Their interest in the people of western North Carolina coincided with the arrival in Asheville in 1901 of two recent graduates of the Moody Bible Institute — Eleanor Park Vance (1869-1954) and Charlotte Louise Yale (1870-1958).

An accomplished woodcarver, Eleanor Vance began teaching the young boys who lived in Biltmore Village near Vanderbilt's estate how to carve wooden bowls and picture frames. By the end of 1901 Vance and Yale had established the Boys' Club of All Soul's Church, which soon was brought to the attention of Mr. and Mrs. Vanderbilt.

In 1905, with the financial support of the Vanderbilts, Eleanor Vance and Charlotte Yale formed what was to be known as the Bilt-

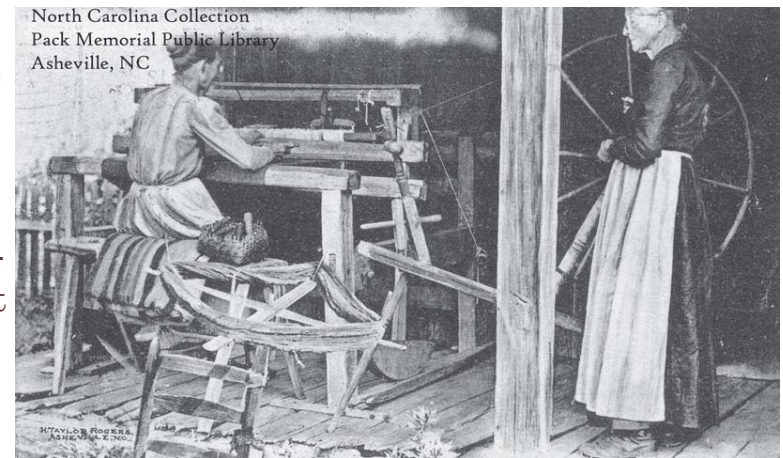




## A Brief History of Biltmore Industries

more Estate Industries. While many crafts were taught in those early years, the hand-weaving of fine cloth, woodworking and wood-carving proved the most popular and practical.

Edith Vanderbilt arranged for Yale and Vance to travel to Scotland to learn even more about looms and the art of weaving. George Arthur, who was among the original group who first met in Vance and Yale's small cottage, eventually became the woodshop foreman and a nationally recognized craftsman.



**Weavers: 1907–1915, WNC;  
photographer: H. Taylor Rogers**





## A Brief History of Biltmore Industries

Under the leadership of Yale and Vance, and with the benevolent guidance of Edith Vanderbilt, Biltmore Estate Industries soon established a reputation for quality craftsmanship across the country. By 1916 the eight looms of Biltmore Estate Industries could not meet the demand for their homespun cloth; their hand-carved walnut, and mahogany bowls, candle-sticks, bookends and furniture sold briskly in their shop in Biltmore Village.

The need for additional space was only partially relieved by moving the wood-workers into another building in Biltmore Village. But at a time when the Biltmore Estate Industries needed additional leadership and business experience, tragedy struck. In 1914, the 52-year old George Vanderbilt died from complications related to a recent surgery. Edith Vanderbilt became solely responsible for the sprawling Biltmore Estate and a single parent for their 14-yearold daughter Cornelia.

Without the time, experience or money to expand and direct Biltmore Estate Industries, Edith Vanderbilt elected to sell Biltmore





## A Brief History of Biltmore Industries

Estate Industries to Fred Seely, the son-in-law of Edwin W. Grove. Seely had supervised the construction and furnishing of the Grove Park Inn in 1913 and since 1914, leased the 150-room hotel from Grove and managed it himself. Only after assuring Edith Vanderbilt that he would “continue its educational features and develop the arts as it was commercial” did she consent to sell Biltmore Estate Industries to Fred Seely in April 1917.

Crucial to their agreement was Seely’s promise to erect buildings for the woodcarvers and weavers adjacent to the Grove Park Inn. The change of ownership and move from Biltmore Village was reflected in the name. Beginning in 1917 it became Biltmore Industries. Locally it was also called the Homespun Shops.

At the time, Seely had 10 years remaining on his lease for the Grove Park Inn, but control of the hotel remained in the firm grip of his father-in-law, Edwin Grove. Looking for additional means of enticing buyers to north Asheville, Grove agreed to lease Fred Seely a parcel





## A Brief History of Biltmore Industries

of land immediately north of the inn for the new location of Biltmore Industries.

The first of six buildings was completed in 1917. Designed by Fred Seely to complement the Grove Park Inn, the rough-stucco exteriors and gently-rounded roof lines are reminiscent of English country cottages tucked amid the tall Carolina pines on Sunset Mountain. Inside, each building hummed with activity.



**Shops of the Biltmore Industries, 1940s**

Under Seely's direction, the woodworkers began constructing additional looms for the weavers until, by 1920, a total of 45 looms were





## A Brief History of Biltmore Industries

in steady operation, producing bolts of some of the highest quality homespun fabric in the country.

Although Seely established the woodworkers in their own building on the grounds, it soon became apparent that he had more of a personal and financial interest in the weaving operation. George Arthur resigned soon after Seely took control of Biltmore Industries and later started his own woodworking business, The Artisans Shop.

The number of woodworkers at Biltmore Industries gradually declined until by the mid-1930s their output was small fraction of what it had been earlier. Fred Seely's death in 1942 was mourned by area residents, for few had done more than he to promote the scenic wonders of the Blue Ridge Mountains and Asheville.





## A Brief History of Biltmore Industries

His youngest son managed Biltmore Industries for a few years, but as demand for homespun dwindled, the business and the buildings began to deteriorate. In 1953, Asheville businessman Harry Blomberg purchased Biltmore Industries, providing the leadership and resources necessary to keep the looms in operation for 30 additional years.

Upon his death in 1991, ownership of Biltmore Industries transferred to Blomberg's daughter, Barbara Blomberg and Marilyn Patton, and his son-in-law Buddy Patton, who renovated the grounds and buildings.

In 1992 Biltmore Industries came to life again with the opening of Grovewood Gallery. Each of the original six buildings has since been painstakingly stabilized and renovated by Harry Blomberg's family, providing two floors of gallery space for Grovewood Gallery, several studios for craftspeople, and the Grovewood Café.





## A Brief History of Biltmore Industries

The grounds have been restored as well, with winding stone walkways, outdoor seating and dining areas, and an array of annuals and perennials. Grovewood Gallery is managed by Sherry Masters and Vanessa Osborne, who with their staff, represent more than 400 artisans from around the country.

The original grounds also feature the Estes-Winn Memorial Automobile Museum, the North Carolina Homespun Museum and the Grovewood Café, all of which display historic photographs and memorabilia from the early days of Biltmore Industries.

*For additional information, please see "Eleanor Vance, Charlotte Yale and the Origins of Biltmore Estate Industries" by Bruce Johnson in May We All Remember Well, Volume II, edited and published by Robert S. Brunk, 2001.*

**More . . .**





## A Brief History of Biltmore Industries

### **Sidebar: Richard Parham...a part of the history of Biltmore Industries.**

Mr. Richard C. Parham, a valued employee of Biltmore Industries, passed away recently. Stories told by relatives relate to times when Richard's own father, Henry Parham, worked for Fred Seely.

Henry was hired early on to help operate machinery and construct buildings. Henry died suddenly when his son was only 9 years old, and it was then that Mr. Seely asked Richard to join the millwork company when old enough. Richard never forgot that kindness, and did start working there in 1936 for a wage of 35 cents per hour.

Richard was trained on the same machine his father operated, the "picker machine," and thus learned one of the initial stages of wool processing. Willing to do any of the different jobs, Richard soon had experience in all phases of cloth-making. He also worked as night





## A Brief History of Biltmore Industries

watchman on the grounds. At times it seemed like work would not get done without Richard there.

Richard stayed for many years, but eventually left for other employment. After retiring, Richard returned to Biltmore Industries to reminisce, and learned of a job opening as a Homespun Museum attendant. The weaver's knot was tied again and there was thread once more on the shuttle of Richard's career.

His first-hand knowledge gave visitors an opportunity to have a genuine experience of the workings of the industry. With the loss of Richard Parham, a living legend of Asheville and its weaving history passed





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write us at [presociety@bellsouth.net](mailto:presociety@bellsouth.net)  
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