

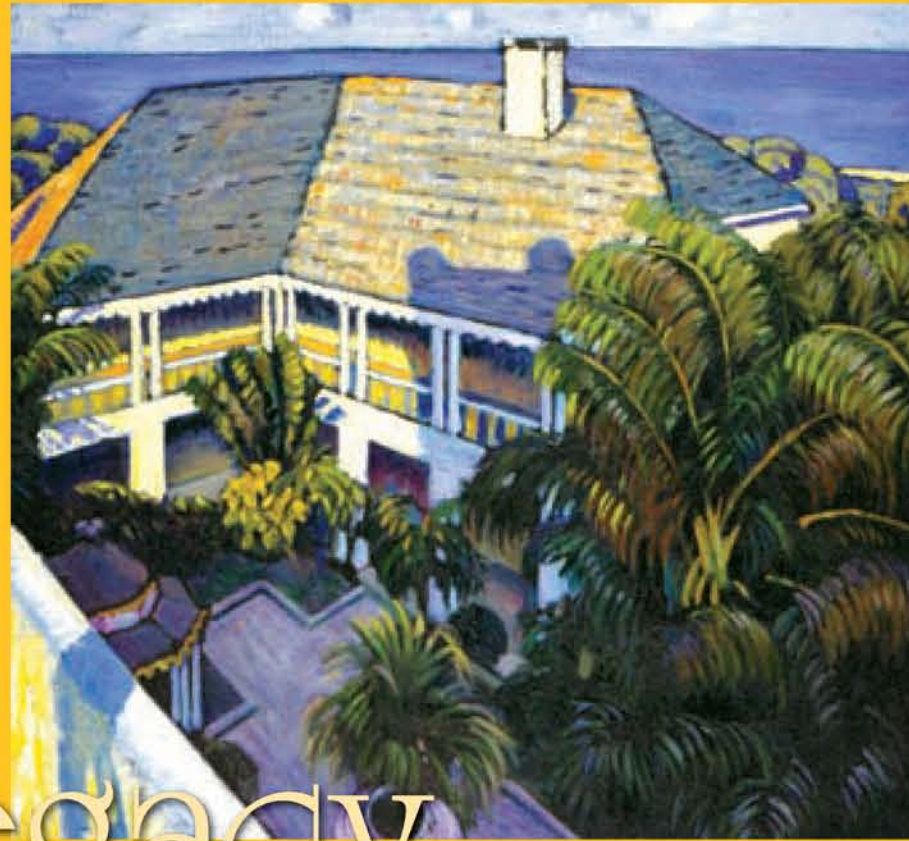
About the author . . .



A native of Pekin, Illinois, J. Kent Planck holds bachelor's and master's degrees from Northwestern University where he was elected a charter member of the Medill School of Journalism's Hall of Achievement in 1997. He worked nearly 30 years in the field of communications before retiring in 1994 as Vice President of Public Relations at AT&T. A life-long history buff, Planck has held board positions at both Bonnet House Museum & Gardens and the Wellfleet Historical Society on Cape Cod where he has summered for more than 35 years. Now a resident of Fort Lauderdale, Fla., Planck is a volunteer tour guide at the Fort Lauderdale Historical Society and tour guide and annual historic lecturer at Bonnet House. He is also a self-taught artist who exhibits his oil-on-canvas landscapes in both Florida and Cape Cod.

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Cover, *Bonnet House from the Tower*,
Frederic Clay Bartlett, ©Bonnet House
Rear, *Bonnet House Slough*,
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BONNET HOUSE



A Legacy of Artistry and Elegance



Chicago-born artist Frederic Clay Bartlett created Bonnet House in 1920 on South Florida oceanfront land given to him and his second wife, Helen Louise Birch, by her father, Hugh Taylor Birch, a prominent Chicago attorney, real estate investor, and naturalist. For more than seventy years, Bartletts and Birches then resided on and sustained and enhanced these 35 acres, their buildings, and decorative contents. Today, the estate is a preeminent house museum dedicated not only to historic and environmental preservation, but also to learning and creative expression – much like the Bartletts and Birches themselves.

In both words and lush color photography, *Bonnet House: A Legacy of Artistry and Elegance*, tells the story of both Bonnet House Museum & Gardens and the creativity of these families.

Thrice married and twice widowed, artist and collector Frederic Bartlett joined his life with three artistically talented women. His first wife, artist Dora Tripp, helped design some of Frederic's early Chicago murals. Helen Louise Birch wrote and published piano music and romantic poetry and assisted Frederic in assembling a preeminent collection of post-impressionist art. Third wife Evelyn Fortune Lilly painted and exhibited vibrant portraits and still lifes. She also collected china and animal figures, raised a thousand orchids, and nurtured a virtual menagerie. Their influences can all be seen at Bonnet House today.

Chicagoan Hugh Taylor Birch gave birth to the Bonnet House story in 1894 when he began to acquire hundreds of acres of undeveloped oceanfront land where he could grow fruit trees and other tropical flora. Son-in-law Frederic Bartlett's eclectic design for a Caribbean-style plantation house then provided the canvas on which to display both the family's extensive collections and Frederic's whimsically painted decorations on walls, ceilings, and floors.

The history of Bonnet House also reflects more ancient times when not only aboriginal people camped here, but so did early Northern European explorers who predated even the Spanish conquistadors. Thus, the story of Bonnet House Museum & Gardens told here spans and parallels virtually all of American history and makes a visit both to these pages and to the estate a uniquely educational and entertaining experience.





INTRODUCTION

*“It was the most beautiful spot upon which
I had laid eyes in all my travels.”*

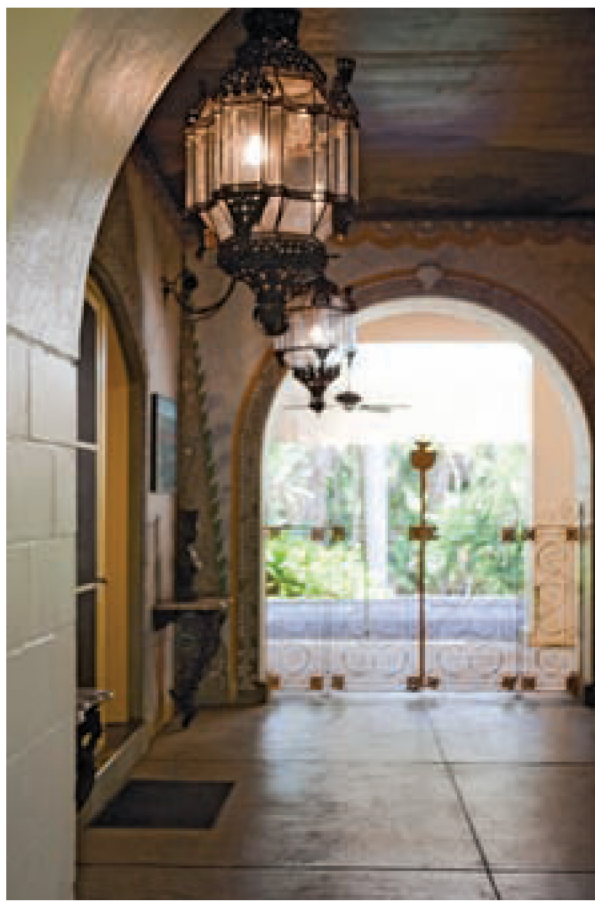
HUGH TAYLOR BIRCH

Bonnet House is an enchanting, eclectic oceanfront estate that epitomizes the lives and loves of those who created it.

In the early 1890s, Hugh Taylor Birch – a Chicago attorney and real estate investor – began purchasing hundreds of acres of South Florida oceanfront dunes. His daughter, Helen, would soon visit there with him and write starkly dramatic poetry to portray the exotic tropical landscape.

Twenty-five years later, Birch gave a two-thirds interest in much of that land to Helen and her new husband, Frederic Clay Bartlett. A noted Chicago artist, Bartlett was a young widower whose first wife, Dora Tripp, had also been trained as an artist and who had collaborated on some of Frederic’s early work and shared his love of collecting. Now inspired by his new wife’s reverence for nature and his own love of architecture and the decorative arts, Frederic fashioned an artistic winter retreat that survives today on 35 acres of Mr. Birch’s original land.

Sadly, Helen was soon also lost to death, but Frederic remarried once more, to Evelyn Fortune Lilly, of prominent Indianapolis roots. Through her own painting, collecting and gardening, Evelyn helped to vault the unique artistry of Bonnet House to even greater heights. Then, for more than 40 years after Frederic’s death in 1953, she treasured and nurtured the estate’s



Frederic Bartlett's design for a Caribbean plantation house included a central courtyard and a broad veranda but also incorporated vernacular and Moorish elements.





The Dining Room, used mainly for breakfasts, is octagonally shaped and houses a potpourri of collections: bright Portuguese tiles around a door, beer steins from Germany, mounted fish caught by Frederic and his son, Clay, and a wide variety of china.

The Drawing Room is a study in contrasts: the formality of a marble fireplace, leather wing chairs, and windowed alcoves against plain cement-block walls and a ceiling of rough-hewn wood. Frederic marbleized window frames and flanked the doors with ornate painted pillars from an antique church. Evelyn filled the room with images of animals – in statuary, on cushions, even on lamps.

(left) Frederic Bartlett framed a dining room door with colorful, hand-painted, antique tile from Portugal.

(below) The only paneled room in the house, the dining room displays a wide range of collections.



*"He'll know my birds and
my trees and my flowers
And in friendship or in strife
He'll be a man as I love a man
And live a Good Man's life."*

HELEN BIRCH BARTLETT, FROM "BIG BOSS," A POEM
WRITTEN AT AGE 15, ABOUT HER FATHER, HUGH
TAYLOR BIRCH

Mr. Birch's daughter, Helen, wrote poetry, composed music, and shared her father's love of nature. By the turn of the century she was spending winters in Florida with Mr. Birch and capturing those experiences in poetry that reflected the exotic tropical environment.

Frederic Clay Bartlett, a neighbor and family friend of the Birches on Chicago's fashionable South side, had turned 19 in 1893. Frederic was captivated by the artistry at the Columbian Exposition and persuaded his father – wealthy businessman Adolphus Clay Bartlett – to allow him to forego a career at the family's prosperous wholesale hardware firm, Hibbard, Spencer, Bartlett & Company and instead study art.

Frederic studied with a private art tutor in Germany and was then accepted to the prestigious Royal Academy in Munich. There he fell in love with fellow student Dora Tripp from White Plains, New York. They were married in 1898 and went to Paris where Frederic studied with James Whistler and was inspired by the renowned muralist Pierre Puvis de Chavannes.

(above) Hugh Taylor Birch

(right) Shown at age 9, Frederic Clay Bartlett, Jr., who became a talented artist and musician, died two years after his father in 1955 at age 48.

