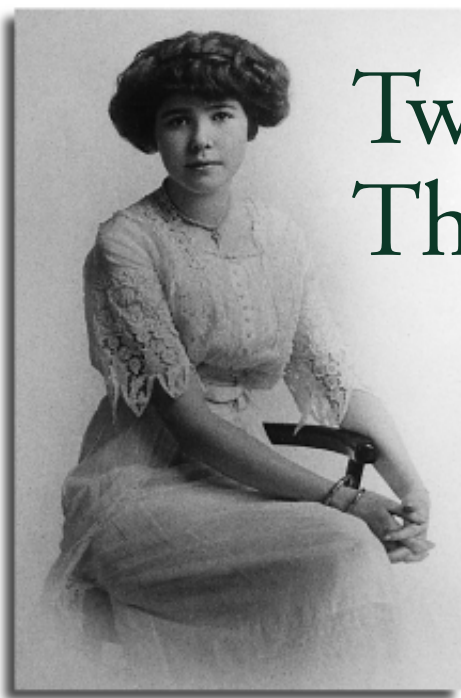


Two Boxes, Three Trusts: *The Legacy of Ethel Donaghue*



by Barbara Donahue

ON THE COVER: The City of Hartford, as recorded by the
Atlas of the City of Hartford, 1896, the year Ethel Donaghue was born.



Two Boxes, Three Trusts:

The Legacy of Ethel Donaghue

Ethel Frances Donaghue died in December 1989 at the age of 93 and left a fortune to charity, most of it in the form of three carefully thought-out testamentary trusts. She had practiced law, traveled the world, and made friends in many countries, and when she died her house at 995 Prospect Avenue, West Hartford, Connecticut was crammed with the collections of a full life: pictures, letters, scrapbooks, law school notes, journals of the many cruises she had taken. Today, most of that material is gone.

Four years after her death, when the Junior League of Hartford decorated and exhibited her house as its 1993 Show House, the boxes were still there, tucked into cabinets in the attic and basement. Then the cabinets emptied. Some mementos went to the historical society in Manchester, Connecticut, where her mother's family had lived. One box was shipped to a cousin. A second box turned up when the new owner of 995 Prospect Avenue moved in.

The rest disappeared.

So Ethel Donaghue's life must be reconstructed from conversations with a few remaining acquaintances, from her will, and from the extraordinarily miscellaneous contents of two cardboard boxes. ♦

The fortune passed on in Ethel's will started to build in 1875 with a few silver dollars slid across the counter at Donaghue Brothers, Wholesale Liquors, at 161 State Street in the very center of fast-growing Hartford, Connecticut. The Brothers had a convenient location for their shop, with grocers, hardware and dry goods stores, and hotels all around them, and the silver dollars stacked up well. In 1886 one of the Brothers, Patrick Donaghue, began to invest a little of his earnings in choice parcels of downtown Hartford real estate, and, as time went on, profits from those properties were in turn invested in the stock of the mighty banks and insurance companies that called Hartford home. What with one lucky thing and another, the Donaghue fortune had grown to \$60 million in the Spring of 1990.

Then the bulk of it was returned to its source: the community from which it came. In her will, Patrick Donaghue's only daughter Ethel left a variety of minor bequests and created three trusts. The first of these set

aside \$25,000, the income to be used for Masses to be said for the Donaghue family and for flowers and maintenance of the family plot in Mt. St. Benedict Cemetery in Bloomfield. The second trust was the Ethel F. Donaghue Trust for Elizabeth Park. Funded with over \$1 million, it was Ethel's own memorial and provided for the continuing beauty of the Park, just

a block from her home. The third trust was a memorial to her parents. The Patrick and Catherine Weldon Donaghue Medical Research Foundation was funded with over \$50 million "for the purpose of providing fi-

"Bird's-eye" view of Hartford as it appeared in 1877, two years after Patrick Donaghue and his brothers set up shop on State Street, just a few steps east of the Old State House (top center in this view).



nancial assistance for research in the fields of cancer and heart disease and/or other medical research to promote medical knowledge which will be of practical benefit to the preservation, maintenance and improvement of human life.” In its first five years of operation, this foundation dispensed over \$11 million to Connecticut institutions to aid them in health research. In March 1997 the fund amounted to over \$73 million.

The woman behind this benevolence was a paradox. Adorned with orchids and jewels in her old age, she seemed to live for nothing but parties — but she had been the first female graduate of Hartford Public High School ever to earn a law degree. She dispensed the minimum in Christmas tips — and won the lifelong loyalty of her staff. She was a recluse at home — and a generous, congenial friend everywhere else.

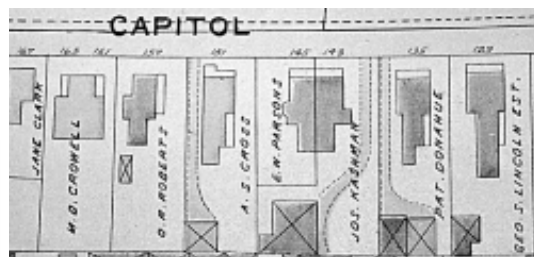
She was born in Hartford on Monday, July 6, 1896. That day, the *Connecticut Courant* carried ads for “wash caps” and straw hats, mason jars and corset clasps, carriage mats and tanglefoot fly paper. Columns were filled with reports of the town’s Fourth of July celebrations, held the Saturday before. Colt’s Band entertained a crowd of 3,000-4,000 (the count was blithely vague) in Sigourney Square. More revelers listened to band music at the corner of Park and Affleck Streets, and down by the streetcar barn on Wethersfield Avenue.

More quietly, Ethel Frances Donaghue slipped into the world. She was Irish, clear through. Her father, Patrick, was born in County Armagh, Ireland, in 1848, in the midst of the potato famine which caused the death of a million Irish and the emigration to America of twice as many more. Patrick himself emigrated as soon as he was old enough. At 17 he sailed to New York, one of three brothers who would eventually settle in Hartford. He kept a fruit stand at the old Union Station, moved to Middletown and managed a hotel with his brother William, then returned to Hartford, where he, William, and third brother Edward entered



*Ethel's parents,
Patrick Donaghue
and Catherine
Weldon Donaghue.*





The Donaghue home at 135 Capitol Avenue – Ethel's birthplace – was a block south of Bushnell Park, a favorite place for leisurely strolls. These views, from 1899, show the Memorial Arch and State Capitol, still in place today, and the Park River, which is now underground. Patrick also owned real estate just north of the park, on Asylum Avenue.



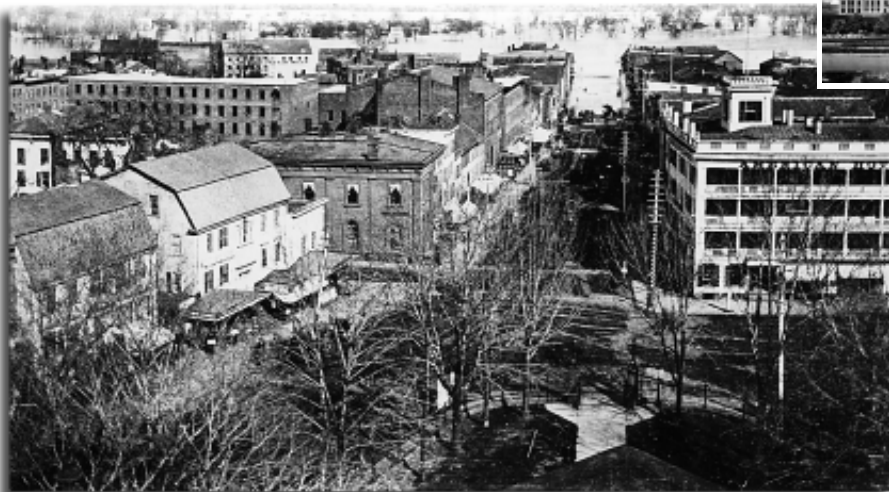
the wholesale and retail liquor trade in 1875. The trio subsequently broke up, with Edward and William moving their business to Union Place and Patrick continuing on State Street. He did well enough to marry, on June 17, 1890, Catherine Weldon of Manchester, Connecticut. He was 42, his bride 21.

The young Mrs. Donaghue was second-generation American and nicely established in the world. Her parents, Mary Campbell and Thomas Weldon, were both born in Ireland in 1826 and joined the great famine migration to America. Thomas Weldon, a weaver, settled in Manchester around 1850. Mary Campbell was also a weaver; she may have come to Manchester to work at a mill in the Buckland area. The couple were married in the Union Village section of Manchester in 1856 and established a farm on Tolland Turnpike in an area nicknamed Boggy Stow, possibly after the Irish who settled there. The immigrant Weldons prospered, and were able to send several of their seven children to the comparatively distant Hartford Public High School. Their third child, Thomas, became a doctor and a leading citizen of Manchester. When he took an extended

trip to Europe in 1905, he was greeted, on his return, by a band and, reputedly, “thousands” of citizens. Catherine was their sixth child, born in 1868.

Patrick and Catherine Donaghue produced their first child and only son, Thomas Weldon, on March 31, 1891. Their second child and only daughter, Ethel Frances, followed five years later, on July 6, 1896.

The family lived at 135 Capitol Avenue in downtown Hartford, a few blocks west of Main Street. The neighborhood was pleasant, if not stylish. A step away from their house was Bushnell Park, where baby Ethel was wheeled in her pram. A few blocks to the east lay the local church, St. Peter’s, a few blocks to the south, the grammar school Ethel would attend. Patrick Donaghue could walk easily from his house to his store, passing, along the way, the Hotel Capitol and the splendid new Linden building. Crossing the Park River, he might stop and admire the first of his major purchases, a brownstone warehouse and retail store, built between the river and Wells Street sometime in the early 19th century. Further along, Patrick would pass the white-spired red brick Congregational Church and the ancient burying ground, then turn right at the Old State House and head downhill to his store.



Left: The view down State Street, looking east from the Old State House to the flooded Connecticut River, circa 1862. Patrick would establish his wholesale liquor business here in 1875. His State Street property is today part of Phoenix Plaza (above, looking west).



Front Street in 1906— the neighborhood just north of Patrick's State Street business property.

To the east, beyond the store, the old immigrant neighborhood tumbled down to the Connecticut River. To the south lay Colt's great factory; southwest, beyond Bushnell Park and the still-new State Capitol, was a pleasant residential zone. Factories lined the Park River. Headquartered in Hartford in this turn-of-the-century time were Pratt & Whitney, Columbia Bicycle,

Jewell Belting, and Capewell Manufacturing. Downtown, Aetna, The Hartford, Phoenix and Travelers led the insurance industry.

The city was on the move, and Patrick Donaghue kept pace with it. Asylum Street led west from downtown to the "Asylum" or school for the deaf, which stood on the present site of The Hartford. From there, the

Main Street, Hartford, in the 1860s, looking south from Talcott Street. The site on the left would later become G.Fox. Patrick's purchase of 859 Main Street, south of Christ Church Cathedral, in 1904 put him right in the hub of Hartford's bustling downtown business district.





street led past fine homes and churches to the developing and increasingly fashionable West End. To buy on Asylum Street was to buy the future. So in 1891 Donaghue bought 361 Asylum Street, on the south side of the street, just north of Bushnell Park. Fourteen years later, in 1905, he matched that property with one on the opposite side, just east of 361 and catty-corner to it. On this second piece, 272 Asylum Street, at the corner of Ann and Asylum, was the Foster Building. Built just after the Civil War, this was a monumental chunk of brick and brownstone, four stories crowned with a tall mansard roof. It was clearly a major investment, and demanded a name which would make it his. He rechristened it The Weldon.

In 1904, in the time between the purchase of the first Asylum Street property and the second, he managed to buy a piece of Main Street as well. 859 Main is on the west side of the street, in the middle of what was then a growing retail district. Brown Thomson's store was across the street, and a little farther north was G. Fox. With trolleys bringing shoppers from all over the city to downtown, this was clearly a sound investment, a

Patrick bought this stately Asylum Street office building in 1905, rechristening it The Weldon. Today, the property (now a parking lot) neighbors the Hartford Civic Center.



The busy Patrick was able to take his family on the occasional vacation, as this postcard of Ethel (approximately age 10), made at Watch Hill, RI, attests.

good spot for the shops and offices of innumerable businesses that clustered around the two retail giants.

In 1906 Patrick Donaghue completed his string of purchases with 133 State Street, to which he moved his liquor business. Each purchase was free and clear, it being Donaghue's custom to pay cash for what he wanted, and avoid the encumbrance of a mortgage. By 1910 his real estate was worth an estimated \$500,000 — not bad for an immigrant lad from Ireland.

Today it is hard to find Donaghue's once-grand pieces of real estate, as most of them have been buried under a sea of asphalt. The family home at 135 Capitol Avenue is now a parking lot, as are both properties on Asylum Street. The State Street liquor store fell victim to urban renewal in 1959 and is now somewhere beneath the plaza surrounding the Phoenix Building, sometimes called the "boat building."

The Main Street properties survive, in new forms. A brick office building replaced the graceful warehouse by the Park River in 1926, and the river itself was forced underground. Further up Main Street, at 859, the Wise/Smith store was built in 1919. Now known as the American Airlines building, it has held a succession of stores and offices.



Patrick Donaghue died of heart disease on June 17, 1910, at the age of 62, as his daughter Ethel was completing her freshman year at Hartford Public High School and his son Weldon was midway through Yale.

Hartford Public, founded in 1638, was the school of choice for the sons and daughters of the rich as well as the middle-class of the city. In Ethel's time it occupied an enormous brick and brownstone castle at the corner of Farmington Avenue and Hopkins Street. Like most of the Donaghue properties, this, too, has disappeared. 1-84 swept through the site in 1962 and the school moved west to Forest Street.

At Hartford Public, Ethel joined the Katherine Burbank Literary Society, as much a dramatic as literary group, and played the role of “The Piper” in a production by the same name.

Membership in the “KBLS” must have been important to her, as she kept a framed picture of the club members in her house all through her life.

Four small, neat copy-books stored at the Connecticut Historical Society in Hartford hold a few of Ethel’s high school essays. They are worth reading. Apart from a speech on women’s rights written in the early 1920s, the high school essays are the only scraps left of what must have been mounds of text — letters, diary entries, essays, and legal documents — written during Ethel Donaghue’s long, well-educated, well-travelled life. There are no legal briefs preserved, no letters home from college, not even a postcard from a cruise to some ex-

otic place. So the high school output must be studied for clues to this woman’s personality.

What do they reveal? Surprisingly, a good deal. Even as an adolescent, she was putting forth what she thought in a straightforward, logical way, her practical prose leavened with a dash of humor. Discussing the “Advantages and Disadvantages of the Demerit System” in her sophomore year, she came out strongly in favor of demerits: “...in case of misdemeanor, a teacher can give a demerit in a moment, instead of delivering a lecture to the offender. This would not only waste her time, but that of the class she is teaching.”



(Above) Ethel with peers in the Katherine Burbank Literary Society during her senior year at Hartford Public High School. (Left) Playing the lead in “The Piper.” Ethel would become the first female graduate of Hartford Public ever to earn a law degree.



On the dangers of motoring: “While not free from casualties [her spelling] neither is the railroad train nor the trolley and why not risk an accident in the pleasantest way?”

She criticized the wealthy English gentry: When they moved from city to country, these “newcomers immediately destroyed the natural beauty of the scenery and erected stiff mansions with artificial landscapes.” And she saw the roots of class conflict in the gap between English rich and poor: “A large part of the produce must now go to the owners who become very rich and the natives correspondingly poor... [Many poor people emigrated from England and] Those who remained became practically slaves to their masters... an ill fed, discontented peasantry.”

The sinking of the ocean liner *Titanic* when it hit an iceberg shortly before midnight on April 4, 1912 must have prompted class writing assignments across the country. Bruce Ismay, managing director of the White Star Line, was largely blamed for the disaster. He had urged the captain to sail at top speed, despite the danger from icebergs surrounding the ship, so as to arrive in New York hours ahead of schedule. Ethel believed he was not the sole culprit. She wrote, in a concise, lawyerlike way,

In every disaster the blame must rest on someone and, in that of the *Titanic*, Mr. Ismay offers himself as the handiest object. Admitting, for the sake of argument, that there was something wrong at the foundation of this calamity and that someone was responsible, the question is who? It seems to me that the people have brought this upon themselves through their insane desire for speed... if those in authority had gone back and taken a more southerly and safer course, thereby losing considerable time, the very people who are now holding up their hands in horror would have been the first to criticize their lack of bravery.

She graduated in 1913. Twenty-seven of the 156 girls in her class — a high proportion for the time — earned bachelors’ degrees at colleges like Smith, Mount Holyoke, Vassar, and Wellesley. Ethel Donaghue went to Vassar, where she joined the debating club, then moved on after graduation in 1917 to study law at the University of Pennsylvania. She chose Penn because it was one of the few highly respected eastern law schools to admit women. It was also one of the earliest. In 1870 Carrie Burnham

Kilgore, who already had a medical degree, sought admission to Penn. Eleven years later, in 1881, she was finally admitted. By 1918, 102 of the 129 law schools listed in the U.S. Bureau of Education Directory admitted women, but the “top” eastern schools were among the last to do so. Yale admitted a woman in 1918; Columbia held out until 1927 and Harvard until 1950.

At the University of Pennsylvania Law School, Ethel won the Pemberton Morris Prize for “having attained the highest standing for three years in evidence, pleading, and practice.” One newspaper account of the time credits her with being elected president of her class two consecutive times and being the first woman admitted to the law clubs of the university, but, apart from the Pemberton Morris Prize, the University of Pennsylvania alumni office has no record of her achievements.

Sometime in the early 1920s Ethel typed out a passionate speech on women’s rights for delivery to fellow Vassar women. “Because of her actions during the war and because of the efforts which she had made for enfranchisement for many years, woman was given the vote,” she stated, then went on to list injustices which still prevailed, among them these:

A woman who marries an alien loses her citizenship...in some states a woman cannot sell or mortgage her own property without her husband’s consent, whilst in others her property passes completely under his dominion and no remedy is provided for his mismanagement...

Equality for women would benefit society as a whole, she wrote: “When these disabilities...shall have perished in the flames of legislation, a new woman will spring forth...better able to render service to the community...” And she pressed for a constitutional amendment to ensure equal rights. Attached to her script is a tattered carbon copy of one of the many drafts of an Equal Rights Amendment circulated in the 1920s. It is headed “TENTATIVE—CONFIDENTIAL—NOT FOR PUBLICITY.”



*Ethel's
yearbook
picture at
Vassar
College,
Class of
1917.*

Shortly after graduation from the University of Pennsylvania, Ethel was tapped for a job in the U.S. Justice Department. Her immediate supervisor, and possibly the man who secured the position for her, was Thomas J. Spellacy, who had known her since she was ten years old. Spellacy, mayor of Hartford from 1935-1943, was Assistant Attorney General of the United States in 1920, and Ethel Donaghue became a special assistant in charge of admiralty affairs. Defined as “the whole body of law relating to maritime affairs,” this was a major field in 1920, when international business went by sea, not by air. Admiralty law was an unusual specialty for a woman, but Ethel was an unusual woman.

How much time she actually spent in Washington is not known. If she went to the Justice Department as the protégé of Democrat Spellacy, as was probably the case, she would have left in the spring of 1921, when Democratic president Woodrow Wilson left office and Republican Warren Harding came in. At any rate, between 1920-1922 she spent enough time in New York studying at New York University Law School to emerge in the spring of 1922 with the degree of doctor of juridical science. Six candidates for that degree were listed in the NYU Commencement program that year; she was the only woman.

In 1922 she appeared in the *Hartford City Directory* as “Ethel F. Donaghue, attorney at law,” with her address given as 135 Capitol Avenue, her home. Then, in 1926, she opened an office at 750 Main Street and announced her move with a half-page advertisement in the *Directory*. The *Directory* that year listed three women as practicing law in Hartford:

Ethel earned a degree of doctor of juridical science in 1922, and opened a law practice in Hartford later that year. She was admitted to practice before the U.S. Supreme Court in 1926.





Ethel displays one of the fruits of her legal career.

Ethel, J. Agnes Burns, and Mary Hall who had been, back in the 19th century, the first woman to be admitted to the Connecticut Bar. Ethel herself was admitted to that bar on April 14, 1926. She had already been admitted to the New York state bar in 1923 and admitted to practice before the U.S. Supreme Court in March 1926.

Ethel's brother Weldon shared her Main Street office, with his business described as "real estate and insurance." Weldon did not celebrate his arrival on Main Street with the fanfare of an advertisement, and it can be wondered exactly how much time he actually spent on "real estate and insurance." He was a jazz age playboy who drove an outsize Cadillac with his initials engraved on the engine block. He also drank, and drank heavily.

With Ethel's official return to Hartford, the Donaghue family moved from their old house. The Capitol Avenue neighborhood, never very fashionable, had slid downhill in the 30 years since Ethel Donaghue's birth. Multifamily dwellings surrounded the old homestead; the elite of Hartford had moved west, to the Golf Club District and into West Hartford, and the Donaghues joined the parade.

The new house was a splendid 30-room Georgian brick mansion at 995 Prospect Avenue, on the Hartford-West Hartford line. Built in 1916 for Elizabeth Keeney Gordon and her husband Lewis E. Gordon, resident



Ethel with unidentified friend(s) at 995 Prospect Avenue. The Donaghues moved to the 30-room Georgian brick mansion in 1926. Situated across the street from what is now the official residence of the Governor of Connecticut, the house is just north of Elizabeth Park, for which Ethel would later become a passionate advocate and generous benefactor.



manager of the American Mutual Liability Insurance Co., it was made for entertaining, with a large central hall, gracious living and dining rooms, and formal gardens. Directly across the tree-lined street was an equally large, equally Georgian house, built in 1907 for George C. F. Williams. That house has been, since 1943, the official residence of the Governor of Connecticut. (Williams's name was George Clinton Fairchild Williams, but Hartford wits insisted that the C.F. stood for "Comfortably Fixed" which, indeed, he was, thanks to his position as president of a family business, the Capewell Horse Shoe Nail Company.)

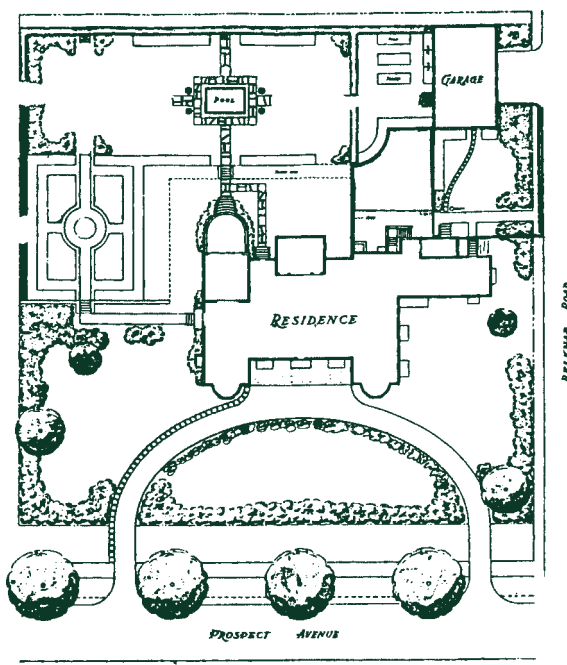
Ethel's mother may not have found the new home as congenial as her old one. The only hints to Catherine Donaghue's identity are scattered through two dozen letters she wrote Ethel in her freshman year at Vassar. In these she shows herself a woman family-centered and content in a



The Prospect Avenue property, with its large central foyer and formal gardens, was made for entertaining – but Ethel socialized rarely in Hartford.

small circle of friends and relatives who were mostly Irish, like herself. She also appears to have had very little to occupy her time, and could make a day's activity out of going downtown to buy a napkin ring for Ethel to use at college. Moving from her old, familiar home to her new one, she found herself flanked by members of the city's old-line Yankee establishment and may have felt a bit lonely.

Down in her office at 750 Main Street, Ethel worked at the law. Only one case survives, in the *Connecticut Supreme Court Reports*, but it is an intriguing one, originating from a decision of the Southington Probate Court. At issue was whether the estate of one Jane L. Donovan should pass to some first cousins or to one Bridget Donovan of Boston, who claimed that she was the decedent's aunt and therefore next-of-kin. The case hinged on a statement by yet another cousin, that Bridget Donovan's brother (Jeremiah Donovan) and Jane Donovan's father (James Donovan) were one and the same person, who left wife and family behind in Ireland, skipped merrily across the Atlantic, and assumed a new name, wife and family in America. The statement was hearsay, because the cousin who made it was already dead





ON BOARD THE CUNARD
R.M.S. "FRANCONIA"

The Captain presents his compliments
to

Miss Donoghue
and requests the pleasure of their
company in his cabin

at 7 P.M. Wed for Cocktails

Ethel took many long cruises in the '20s and '30s, sometimes with her mother and brother. At right, the Berengaria pulls into Chelsea Docks in Manhattan.



when the case was argued. The lower court had declared it inadmissible, but attorneys Lawrence A. Howard and Ethel F. Donaghue convinced the Appeals Court that, had the garrulous cousin been alive, he would have been summoned as a witness and that, by reason of his relationship to the family and the timing of his remarks (before the will was challenged) his statement would have been admissible under a recognized exception to the rule excluding hearsay. They won their case.

In 1927, Ethel moved her office to a family property, the brand new "Donaghue Building" at 525 Main Street. She began taking long cruises with her mother and brother aboard the luxury ships of the Cunard and White Star lines. The first one may have been in 1926-1927, as she kept a printed list of the "stores" carried aboard the R.M.S. "Carinthia" for the enjoyment of passengers on its round the world cruise that winter. Included were 2,000 ducklings and 250 jars of pâté de foie gras. Other ship-

board souvenirs show that she and her family were again on board the “Carinthia” for a “Round Africa” cruise in March 1929, then on the R.M.S. “Berengaria” in April. Later, she cruised on the “Britannic,” the “Aquitania,” the “Franconia,” the “Homeric,” for a tour of the Greek Isles in 1935, and the “Franconia” again in 1936. She always traveled first class.



The Palladian Lounge on the Aquitania. It was common for designers and decorators of the big liners to imitate the great shoreside palaces and mansions.

Shipboard entertainment featured parties, almost every night, and Ethel hosted many of them. The menu for a dinner given March 7, 1936 listed her as one of the “Troupe of Trained Seals” giving the party. The other seals bore names like Daphne Warren-Wilson and Count W. Van Limburg Stirum. Despite a worldwide depression, there was still a moneyed leisure class able to cruise the world, wear funny hats for shipboard parties, and list such forwarding addresses as “Morgan Bank, Place Vendôme, Paris.” Ethel Donaghue, one generation removed from the immigrant neighborhood of Hartford’s lower State Street, was part of it.

Catherine Weldon Donaghue died, at home, after a long struggle with cancer, on November 5, 1933. Patrick Donaghue’s fortune in real estate had passed directly to his children, subject to his widow’s life use, but since Patrick’s death in 1910 Catherine had amassed a fortune of her own: \$466,000, most of it in the stocks and bonds of Connecticut companies. She owned bonds issued by, among others, Cheney Brothers, whose silk and velvet mills employed most of her native Manchester, and the New York, New Haven & Hartford Railroad Company. She owned stock in the parent companies of today’s Aetna, CIGNA, Travelers, and Hartford Steam Boiler In-

spection and Insurance Company, in eight banks (with cash deposits in six more) and in Connecticut-based manufacturing companies like the Bigelow-Sanford Company, a major carpet maker in Thompsonville. The stocks, bonds, and bank deposits she left in trust for her two children, with the income divided between them. Ethel received her mother's jewelry, the house on Prospect Avenue, with all its furnishings, and the old Weldon homestead in Manchester. Catherine hoped that her son Weldon would continue to live in the Prospect Avenue house, but, if he chose instead to move out, she stipulated that her executors build or buy him a house of his own, for a sum "not to exceed \$40,000." The Prospect Avenue mansion was then valued at \$64,700, so \$40,000 would have secured Weldon rather a nice little home. He did move out within a few months and at his own death in 1955 owned a house on Ridgefield Avenue in Hartford.

With a fortune to manage, Ethel turned her considerable brain and legal talent to its supervision. She retired from the Connecticut Bar in January 1933, perhaps to care for her failing mother. Despite the declarations of independence in her speech on women's rights, Ethel was, first of all, a dutiful daughter. In January 1933, with her powerful father dead, her dependent mother ill, and her dissolute brother absorbed in his own concerns, she was needed to hold family and fortune together. Already she had proved her point: She could master the law as well as any man.

She managed her own money, working with trust officers at her bank, the Hartford-Connecticut Trust Company, which later became The Connecticut Bank and Trust. One bank officer, now retired, recalls her coming into the bank with a stack of dividend checks and borrowing one of the bank's adding machines to add them up. Why buy her own machine when she could use the bank's? Such thriftiness and practicality were typical.

She maintained the Prospect Avenue house and a Hartford office but kept a suite at the elegant Hotel Carlyle in New York, continued her shipboard life, and spent her summers at the New Ocean House, Swampscott, Massachusetts, or at Wentworth-by-the-Sea, Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Both were rambling Victorian resort hotels designed for people who arrived with their trunks and servants around the Fourth of July and stayed through Labor day, the seasonal homes of a quietly wealthy, privileged class.



Ethel kept a suite at The Carlyle in New York.

Wadleigh Woods, who was the tennis pro at Wentworth-by-the-Sea for 34 years, remembers Ethel Donaghue as “very generous. She put on great parties — they were tops,” he says. “She would play tennis with me. ‘Hit it as hard as you can,’ she would say, and she’d try to return the ball... She liked to go shopping in Ogunquit [a nearby town] then rush back and dress for

dinner. Guests always dressed for dinner and Saturday night was super dress.” Ethel kept her jewelry in the hotel safe and part of the ritual of dressing for dinner was going down to the desk and selecting her jewelry for the evening.

Single, without any known romantic interest, Ethel Donaghue made a family of the friends with whom she danced, played tennis, and exchanged party invitations. She saved dozens of notes thanking her for cocktail parties, for gifts of flowers, perfume, travel souvenirs, and such. One example shows how vital were her links to friends:

Dear Ethel: Last Sunday’s party is still “lobby talk.” I wish you could know how much happiness you brought to the 200 or more present, especially those who for one reason or another are not invited to many affairs... a friendship such as yours is one of the real rewards of life...

As time went on the circle of friends grew smaller. Ethel outlived many companions, and fewer and fewer people were left to spend whole summers by the sea. She was often depressed. Like many other lonely, aging women, she turned to the Arthur Murray Studios for dancing partners, chitchat, and companionship. On a trip abroad she let payments to the studio lapse and received a crisp note canceling her membership. She begged to be reinstated, but the Murray people were adamant. With all her millions, she could not buy her way back in.

The summer parties continued, with themes like Christmas in July,



Ethel spent several summers at Wentworth-by-the-Sea, on the New Hampshire coast, where she earned a reputation for hosting sensational parties.

for which her chauffeur hauled special decorations to The Wentworth. Rose Walsh, Society Editor of the *Boston Herald American*, described her arrival at one of her galas in 1976:

One of the leading hostesses is tall, slender 80-year-old Miss Ethel Donaghue of Hartford, Ct. who has spent 15 summers at The Wentworth and given her full share of glamorous fun parties. This year...Ethel broke her hip. (And Ethel loves dancing.) It was natural to expect that the party would be canceled. Not so with this valiant knowledgeable witty woman...Accompanied by two nurses, Ethel was in a wheelchair, beautifully gowned in formal pale gold silk adorned with twin white orchids and jewels — a nosegay of matching orchids in her dark hair...the band swung into “Hello Dolly.”

The broken hip, the wheelchair, the two nurses: These signaled the beginning of the end. Although Ms. Walsh chronicled another Donaghue party at the Wentworth in 1978, Ethel's days and nights of travel and dancing were at an end. Soon she would retreat to Hartford.

Since her mother's death, she had not spent much time in her native city. And when she was in town, she was not gregarious. She kept to herself. Neighbors recall that she gave an occasional fundraising party for Vassar College, belonged to an association of women lawyers and gave a party or two in honor of women who had been appointed judges. Two notes reveal her as part of the neighborhood, but emotionally distant. A card from Governor and Mrs. John Lodge invites her, not to a party of friends, but to a “Neighbors Tea” in December 1952, and a letter from Hartford civic leader Beatrice Fox Auerbach thanks her for congratulations on one of the many awards Mrs. Auerbach had won. It is addressed “Dear Miss Donaghue,” not “Dear Ethel.”

Rev. Charles W. Daly, a priest of the Archdiocese of Hartford was, like Ethel Donaghue, a graduate of Hartford Public High School. He was in charge of raising funds for the school's 350th anniversary celebration and,

noting her name in the list of alumnae, wrote to her, asking for a donation.

“The next morning the limousine was out in front and she walked into the Chancery Office with her check — just what we’d asked for,” he remembers. “She was so pleased to act on this immediately... but she didn’t come to the reunion.”

She gave to a few local charities, chief among them Elizabeth Park, just down the street from her Prospect Avenue home. Her generosity was at all times practical. Asked why she was so generous to the Park, she explained by observing that support of the Park was, of course, helping her own property value.

She gave often to hospitals, says Joseph Flood, now Director of Social Services for Hartford Hospital, who was appointed conservator of her person for the last five years of her life. And she had medical research in mind for almost 30 years before she signed the will which created the Foundation as it exists today. On December 17, 1952 she set up a small trust to be administered by the Hartford-Connecticut Trust Company. The trust provided that, during her lifetime, she would receive the income. At her death it would become a perpetual trust whose income would be used “for research for the cause and cure of cancer.” If the Trustee (the bank) decided that such research was no longer needed, the income would be used “for other forms of medical research as it shall deem wise.”

In 1977, perhaps pondering uses for her substantial estate, Ethel Donaghue created a foundation with broader scope and described it in more detail. In an agreement with the bank, which by this time was organized as The Connecticut Bank and Trust Company, she defined the foundation as existing “solely for the purpose of providing financial assistance for research in the fields of cancer and heart disease and/or other medical research to promote medical knowledge which will be of practical benefit to the preservation, maintenance and improvement of human life.” Recalling the heart disease which had taken her father’s life, and having seen many of her friends grow ill and die, she wished to conquer a host of afflictions.



Ethel established a \$1 million trust for Elizabeth Park in her will. Located just south of her Prospect Avenue home, Elizabeth Park is internationally known for its rose gardens.



*Portrait of Ethel, painted
in 1978 by Marian
Williams Steele.*

Her last will, signed December 21, 1979, used exactly the same words to define her foundation and its purpose. Her charge to the Trustees remained clear: The fortune was to be used to promote “medical knowledge which will be of practical benefit...” She had always favored the practical and her will was sprinkled with references to practicality and common sense. The Ethel Donaghue who signed that document was the same person who believed a teacher should hand out demerits and not waste time lecturing a culprit; who urged her Vassar classmates to stand up then and there for

women’s rights; who hopped out of her limousine to deliver a check. She was a woman of simple, direct action.

The appearance at the Wentworth gala in late summer 1978 was possibly her last one. Like her brother before her, she had a problem with alcohol. In addition, her eyesight was dim, her mind was failing and she could no longer handle her affairs. In January 1979 she was placed under the care of conservator Joseph Flood.

A few loyal friends continued to call, one from Greenwich, another from Hartford, each driven to Prospect Avenue by their chauffeurs. Ethel suffered a series of strokes, but Flood found she could still be charming. When prompted, she would respond. Otherwise, she was silent.

“Do you know me, Miss Donaghue?” he would ask.

“Why, yes,” she would answer.

“Then who am I?”

“Oh, you’re the handsome young gentleman who comes to visit me,” which was answer enough, all things considered.

She would occasionally be driven to Manchester to see her first cousin, Nan Weldon Flanagan, daughter of Dr. Thomas Weldon. The two old ladies would go out to lunch together, accompanied by Ethel’s retinue of chauffeur and nurse, and have a fine time talking about the old days on the Weldon farm. “She became quite lucid then,” Nan Flanagan’s granddaughter Susan Lyons recalls.



ethel Donaghue died December 30, 1989, and was buried in Mount St. Benedict Cemetery with the rest of her family. The Prospect Avenue house was emptied, the furniture and linens and rugs auctioned. The house stood unsold and empty for three years. In 1993 the Junior League of Hartford enlisted a crew of decorators and gardeners, made it beautiful again, and opened it to the public for the month of May as a fundraiser for community projects. Several months later, it was sold.

Meanwhile, through her own memorial trust, Ethel's Trustees and an advisory committee of friends and neighbors set to work carrying out her wishes for Elizabeth Park. Trees were pruned, guides were trained to give tours of the Park and its beautiful gardens. Members of the Connecticut Valley Garden Club pitched in to help create a Sunrise Overlook in the Park, near the corner of Prospect and Asylum Avenues, not far from where Ethel Donaghue lived and died.

The medical research foundation created by Ethel Donaghue's will was funded in May 1991 and is governed by Fleet National Bank and Raymond S. Andrews, Jr., as Trustees. As the Foundation has developed, it has focused on what Trustee Andrews termed

bridging the gaps...between the gaining of new knowledge and its effective application to meet human needs...between the hard work of our scientists and the hard lives of many of our people, for whose benefit Ethel Donaghue charged us with pursuing practical benefit to human life.

Speaking to Vassar classmates some 70 years earlier, Ethel Donaghue said that when women were truly emancipated, they would be "better able to render service to the community." If wealth alone could emancipate a woman, Ethel was most certainly free and through most of her long life she enjoyed whatever her wealth could buy. Still, as she had known all along, freedom imposes its own limits. Power, rightly used, implies concern. And Ethel turned that concern — for family and friends — into a legacy that would put her fortune to generous good use and "render service to the community" for ages to come. ♦

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About the Foundation

The Patrick and Catherine Weldon Donaghue Medical Research Foundation is a charitable trust created pursuant to the Will of Ethel F. Donaghue, late of West Hartford, Connecticut. The Foundation, which began operations in 1991, is governed by Fleet National Bank and Raymond S. Andrews, Jr., Trustees.

Its Purpose: “The Foundation established hereunder is created and shall be operated solely for the purpose of providing financial assistance for research in the fields of cancer and heart disease and/or other medical research to promote medical knowledge which will be of practical benefit to the preservation, maintenance and improvement of human life.”

— From Article Fourteenth of the Will of Ethel Donaghue

Its Vision: “We shall be an exemplary philanthropic participant in the ongoing conduct and continuing advancement of useful health research across the spectrum of health institutions and organizations in Connecticut.”

Its Mission: “To benefit human life and the individual lives of people as an active and collaborative supporter of useful health research in Connecticut — and thereby to honor the memory of Ethel Donaghue and her family.”

THE PATRICK AND
CATHERINE WELDON

DONAGHUE
MEDICAL RESEARCH
FOUNDATION

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