



The Stepping Stones News

A Publication of the Stepping Stones Foundation

Spring 2004

Stepping Stones Receives Highest State Historic Designation

National Designation Assured

Sixty-three years to the month that Lois and Bill Wilson moved into their home at Bedford Hills, Governor George E. Pataki acted on the recommendation from the New York State Board of Historic Preservation and signed the declaration making Stepping Stones a New York State Historic Site.

The prized designation comes after almost two years of filing reports, maps and other documents to meet the stringent requirements for this important classification. The state has forwarded the documents to Washington, DC in consideration for the National Register, thereby endorsing and recommending a national listing. Since the extensive documentation requirements are the same for state and national recognition, we are assured placement on the National Register, according to Pete Shaver, Field Specialist, New York State Department of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation.

Pete Shaver and a colleague visited Stepping Stones in October, 2003, along with Margaret Gaertner of Stephen Tilly Architect, the preservation specialist who prepared our application and wrote the required essays. Mr. Shaver visits sites to assess them first hand as part of the nomination process.

The reaction of Mr. Shaver and his associate was extremely positive. He was surprised that the house was so beautiful and beautifully situated on a large parcel of woodland and lawn.

What is so gratifying to us is that here was yet another professional with a wide frame of reference who views special sites regularly to remark emphatically how unique and wonderful Stepping Stones is. We have had similar reactions, for example, from the conservator who assessed our property as part of a federal grant and a journalist who had visited every



historic site in the New York Hudson Valley. "What is so singular about the house", the conservator, C. R. Jones, said, "is that it's as though someone had put a bell jar over the house." The journalist told us that walking into the house was like "walking back into a moment in time," and that of all the historic house he had visited, Stepping Stones was, by far, the most interesting and rare.

This is because there are very few historic places that contain the intact possessions of the people who lived in them. Some historic places might have some furniture, artifacts and personal items from the principals who inhabited them, but it is extremely rare to have virtually everything as does Stepping Stones.

This is one of the reasons visiting Stepping Stones is so moving. So much of what the Wilsons owned is still here; the house is full of Lois and Bill, everywhere one sees the everyday items that they saw, that belonged to them, were used by them and cherished by them. The photographs in the long gallery upstairs are the photos of people who meant something to them, were important and loved by them. We were fortunate that we did not have to guess whose photos should be displayed then try to find them; they were already there, Bill and Lois told us who they are. It was already done and left for posterity.

The photos of Lois' beloved family, Bill at college, Bill with Searcy W. and Ebby. Photos of Marty Mann, Dr. Bob *Continued on page 6*



The Wilsons in the garden 1950.

To Sell or Not To Sell...

One of The Many Questions

Thanks to all of you who responded to our recent survey about Stepping Stones. It was the first time we surveyed our visitors, and the response was overwhelming. There were a few glitches in the mailing, and we are especially appreciative of those who sent back their replies despite receiving the survey after the deadline response date. The mailing house sent them out free, but we were not aware that there would be delay. We also thank you for using your own stamps even though the letter indicated a postage paid envelope. We had printed the surveys only to be told that acquiring a business return stamp would take weeks to receive. Appreciation, too, to those who responded online. They had registered on our web site, and we encourage everyone to do so. We would like to be able to be in communication with you, and using the Internet makes it possible more often.

We created the survey because wanted to determine if there

are ways of enhancing the experience of visiting Bill and Lois' home and making it more available to those who wish to come here. Some of the questions reflected suggestions from our visitors over the years.

What we learned:

- 72% heard of Stepping Stones from a 12-step program
- 65% were motivated by participation in a 12-step program
- 61% visited the Stepping Stones once
- 67% came by themselves or in a small group
- 92% had a tour
- 72% had an extraordinary experience
- 60% said their visit was perfect
- 74% said they would buy mementoes and/or books in a gift store
- 65% are willing to be charged admission
- 86% intend to return
- 98% would recommend a visit
- 72% had not visited the web site

The Questions Asked

1. How did you hear about Stepping Stones?
a) From a friend b) From 12 Step Program
c) From articles I've seen d) Don't remember
2. What motivated you to visit Stepping Stones?
a) I was in the neighborhood b) From a friend
c) From 12 Step Program d) Interest in Bill and Lois
e) Don't remember
3. How many times have you visited?
a) Once b) Twice c) Three to Five d) More than Five
4. Did you come on your own or group?
a) On my own or with a small group b) With a group over ten
c) Both
5. Did you have a tour of the house and property?
a) Yes b) No
6. How would you rate your experience at Stepping Stones?
a) Extraordinary b) Satisfying c) Missing something
7. What could have made your experience at Stepping Stones better?
a) Nothing, it was perfect b) Better parking c) Better weather
d) Available facilities e) Something to take home
8. If Stepping Stones had a store, what kind of merchandise would you be interested in buying?
a) Mementos b) Books c) Prefer SS not to have a store
9. Currently, Stepping Stones is open to the public for donation only. Would you be willing to pay an admission charge for your experience?
a) Yes b) No
10. Do you plan to return to Stepping Stones?
a) Yes b) No
11. Would you recommend a visit to Stepping Stones to a friend?
a) Yes b) No
12. Have you visited the web site www.steppingstones.org?
a) Yes b) No

Many people wrote notes next to the questions and some included detailed writings on the backs of the survey or included letters. Please know how much we appreciate receiving these and that all have been read and considered. We are touched by how much Stepping Stones means to so many.

Two questions provoked a few strong reactions - the gift store and admission.

Some people expressed concern about commercializing Stepping Stones and implored us not to sell "drunk junk", trinkets and the like while others asked for mugs, key chains and caps. We started last fall selling some items in the small room off Bill's office at Wit's End (most people didn't even know there was a small room) and the response has been very good. We offered note cards featuring photos of Stepping Stones as well as drawings of the property, *Lois Remembers* and a few gift items including a pen, ornament and keepsake box.

Comments regarding admission ranged from one person expressing distaste at being asked the question in the first place to those who felt a reasonable admission is acceptable. Most people favored donations even if they responded positively to the question and felt that admissions should be charged only if necessary.

One comment was "Keep it free, like the program." As we know, the program is not "free", it is self-supporting through contributions. AA and Al-Anon depend on members' donations.

And, at this point, we would like to thank again those who included donations to us with the survey. You have been already acknowledged in a letter from us, but we want to thank you all publicly for your thoughtfulness and generosity.

By the way . . .

We welcome visitors throughout the year.
Please call 914-232-4822 to arrange a tour, or email us at Stepsfoundation@aol.com
To view the newsletter photos in color, log onto www.steppingstones.org

Why A Stepping Stones Foundation?

Some of the comments sent to us on the Visitor Survey uncovered misunderstanding about The Stepping Stones Foundation and how we function. The following addresses some of those comments:

Lois Wilson created the Stepping Stones Foundation in 1979. It is a legal entity, a not-for-profit private operating foundation incorporated in the State of New York. It is required to have by-laws and run by a board of directors. There must be officers: a president, vice president, treasurer and secretary, as the board is accountable to the state and to the organization it serves. The executive director is also an officer but does not vote on motions at board meetings. Over the years, many board members have been officers.

The first officers were, Lois Wilson, President; Lyman Burnham, Vice President; Henrietta Sutphin, treasurer, and Nell Wing, Secretary. Lyman was Lois' brother; Nell, her friend and former secretary of Bill's, and Henrietta, one of the Al-Anon pioneers. Today, there are ten Board Directors, and Robert L. Hoguet is the President. As such, he signed the survey letter.

The board members are all volunteers who donate time and energy to Stepping Stones. They are stewards of the foundation's assets and of the legacy of Stepping Stones. Board meetings are held quarterly and the

directors work on committees throughout the year.

Lois created the Foundation to maintain Stepping Stones and to be able to do things that AA and Al-Anon cannot, such as speak out on issues regarding alcoholism as we do. Also, we accept donations from anyone who finds Stepping Stones a worthy cause. AA or Al-Anon receive contributions from only their members and limit the amounts as well.

Neither organization endorses Stepping Stones nor supports it financially, according to their 6th Tradition. And although there is much good will and genuine friendship among us, we are all independent of one another.

Stepping Stones is about the entire lives of Bill and Lois and not limited to their roles in the Fellowships they co-founded. Stepping Stones should not be confused with AA or Al-Anon. Lois, of all people, understood those Fellowships and the need and utmost importance of their Traditions. Her own Foundation, Stepping Stones, was conceived for different purposes and, therefore, needs to function freely as any other not-for-profit foundation.

We appreciate all the comments regarding Stepping Stones, and if there are more to be made or questions to ask, please contact us.

You Are Invited To Attend! *The Annual Stepping Stones Picnic*

Saturday, June 5, 2004

We continue the tradition from the early 1950s, Lois and Bill's Picnic at their home in Bedford Hills for their Al-Anon and AA Friends.

**GROUNDS OPEN AT 12 NOON
THE HOUSE WILL BE OPEN FOR TOURING**

**THE OPEN SPEAKER MEETING
STARTS AT 2PM**

Speakers include:

**AA – Johnny A., Washington, DC – Member 22 Years
Al-Anon – Fran M., Massapequa, NY – Member 32 Years
Alateen – Chris, Lynbrook, NY**



Bill with picnic guests June 1960.

**BRING YOUR OWN FOOD
WE SUPPLY THE SOFT DRINKS**

CARS AND VANS ONLY -- NO BUSES!
Directions: I-684 to exit 6; turn west onto Rt. 35. Proceed 1½ miles to Cherry St. & make a left. (Cherry St. is left turn directly before reservoir overpass). Proceed to Woodfield Rd. – turn right onto Oak Rd. – volunteers will direct you. Please observe parking instructions.

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

Metro North to Bedford Hills Station; taxis at station can bring you to Stepping Stones – 62 Oak Road, Katonah. Have the driver leave you off at bottom of driveway – Do not drive in. For more information call [ahead](tel:9142324822) we cannot answer calls the day of the picnic.

(914) 232-4822

A Great Idea... Until It Wasn't

Bill was a “big idea man” whose mental labors help create new systems – his on-site investigation of companies and, of course, AA. At Stepping Stones Bill was the sole creator of practical conveniences, such as the “automatic coal stoker” and the waterworks. (Bill loved to dabble and invent things. In the early 1920s, he passed a test at the Edison laboratories in New Jersey and was invited by the one of the greatest inventors in history, Thomas Edison himself, to join Edison and his team at the labs in Menlo Park. Bill declined the extraordinary offer, preferring to ply his considerable energy and intelligence at making his mark on Wall Street.)

The waterworks had to do with getting enough water into the Wilsons’ house often left near dry by usage amplified by the many visitors the couple entertained either by invitation or not and by bringing it in with decent pressure.

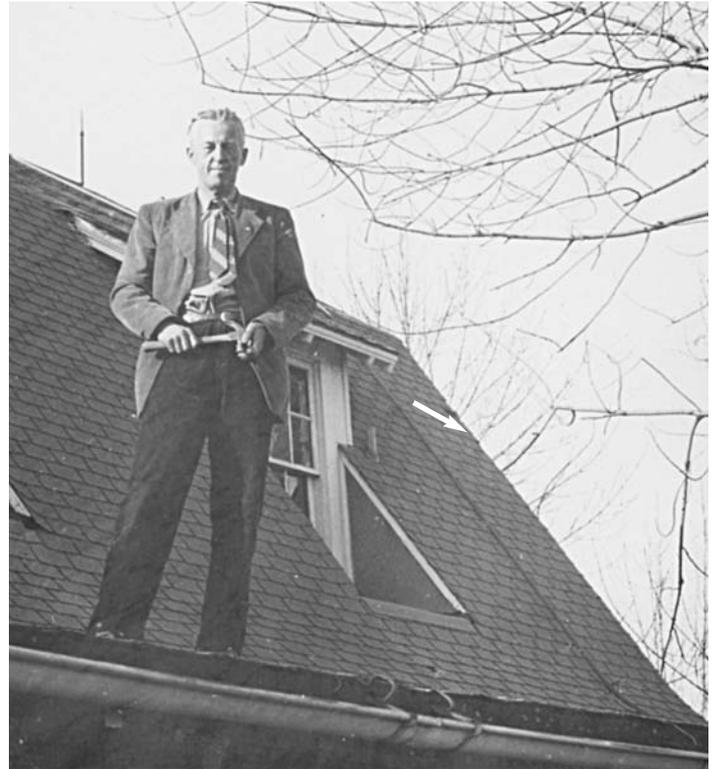
Originally, water came into the house by a pump that sat inside a tiny house down the east hill from the back porch. Still there, the little house is quite charming; it’s function, however, practical. The pump inside pushed water from the spring up to the house to a tank under the porch for distribution throughout the house. Trouble was, pushing the water to the upstairs master bedroom and the toilet and baths. Tired of anemic showers with hardly any pressure and running out of water in the middle of one, Bill hit on a great idea. He bought a 500-gallon galvanized steel cattle trough from Sears and Roebuck and installed it in the space between the top-floor ceiling and roof. Thinking of everything he could to make it safe and foolproof, Bill reinforced the attic beams to hold the weight of the tank and the water.

The problem was solved. Water now descended from above and the strong pressure assured satisfying showers for Lois and Bill and enough water for everyone, including company.

Bill even devised a system to know when to fill the tank. A light installed in the kitchen indicated when the tank was low. He placed a bell with open wires dangling inside the tank that would short out when the water hit them, ringing the bell to alert Bill that the tank was at capacity. The water would be stopped until the red light appeared in the kitchen and the process started over again.

It was great until the fateful day when Bill thought it a good idea to top the tank in preparation for guests. He planned to have just enough put in, run the water for maybe 15 minutes or so. But then a call came in from neighbors inviting the Wilsons out for the evening. Bill and Lois accepted; both forgot about the pump.

A loud, ringing bell welcomed them as they returned several hours later. As Lois described it, “Our hearts sank!” As they opened the door, a waterfall of water was



Bill stands on ledge of Stepping Stones’ roof above back porch, spring 1949. Note the pipe along roofline to his right (see arrow).

cascading down the stairs, through the rungs at the landing into the living room. Lois’s pride and joy, her artfully designed and laid linoleum kitchen floor, was starting to float. Upstairs, it was worse. The ceiling above her desk had completely collapsed. We really don’t know whether this ended the tank experiment or not. But what is clear is that the waterfall never happened again.

And what about the “automatic coal stoker”? That was Helen Wilson, Bill’s half sister who stayed with the couple long periods of time. She was 20 years younger than Bill, the daughter of Bill’s dad, Gilliam, and stepmother, Christine. Helen was born in British Columbia where the Gilliam Wilsons lived, so Bill only got to know her when she grew up and came to New York. They were very fond of each other, and

both Bill and Lois were happy to have Helen stay with them at Stepping Stones. In fact, the yellow bedroom was dubbed “Helen’s Room” because she always stayed in it.

Stepping Stones was built as a summer home, and Bill winterized it when they moved in by installing a coal stove. Bill himself put in the grate in the living room floor through which the heat rose to warm the house. Coal had to be shoveled into the stove, and every morning the coals had to be stoked in order to get the heat going.

Bill was the one who had to get himself out of bed on cold mornings and walk down the stairs into the living room and then into the kitchen and down to the basement to get the coals going. He did this each morning until he thought of an alternative - have Helen do it!

Continued on page 6



The still-existing pump house.

From The Archives:

The Letter To Mr. Orvis

In "Bill's Story" in the Big Book, Bill recalls his meeting with Ebby T. in the kitchen of 182 Clinton Street, Brooklyn, when his newly-sobered boyhood friend called and a visit arranged. Bill mused about the evening ahead, one of much drinking and reminiscing. He writes: "Unmindful of his welfare, I thought only of recapturing the sprit of other days. There was that time we had chartered an airplane to complete a jag!"

"Jag" is defined by Mirriam Webster as a state or feeling of exhilaration or intoxication usually induced by liquor. Bill and Ebby had plenty of these, but the most "celebrated" was the jag Bill was thinking of that fateful November day in 1934 when Ebby came to visit. Here's the story that many already know:

It was 1929 and Bill was on his way to Manchester, Vermont from Brooklyn Heights. On a whim and most likely inebriated, he got off the train at Albany to visit Ebby. Here is how Bill remembered the incident many years later:

"Then there was that absurd episode of 1929. Ebby and I were on an all-night spree in Albany. Suddenly we remembered that a new airfield had been constructed in Vermont, on a pasture near my own hometown. The opening day was close at hand. Then came the intoxicating thought: If only we could hire a plane we'd beat the opening by several days, thus making aviation history ourselves! Forthwith, Ebby routed a pilot friend out of bed, and for a stiff price we engaged him and his small craft. We sent the town fathers a wire announcing the time of our arrival. In midmorning, we took to the air, greatly elated -- and very tight.

Somehow our rather tipsy pilot set us down on the field. A large crowd, including the village band and a welcoming committee, lustily cheered his feat. The pilot then deplaned. But nothing else happened, nothing at all. The onlookers stood

in puzzled silence. Where were Ebby and Bill? Then the horrible discovery was made -- we were both slumped in the rear cockpit of the plane, completely passed out! Kind friends lifted us down and stood us upon the ground. Whereupon we history-makers fell flat on our faces. Ignominiously, we had to be carted away. The fiasco could not have been more appalling. We spent the next day shakily writing apologies."

Here is one from our archives. Lois attached a small note to it: "1929 (?) Apology to Franklin & Mrs. Orvis for Bill's & Ebby's arrival by plane at the new airfield (having first wired the Orvis' of their arrival & falling on their faces, dead drunk when trying to alight.)"

Dear Mr. Orvis:

Until I found that I could not reach you on the phone I had been minded to call upon you and apologize for the disgraceful happenings of yesterday.

I do not know what I said or did but it is painfully evident that I have done you grievous wrong.

I certainly merit nothing but your contempt and fear that a situation has been created which cannot be lived down.

Though you perhaps prefer that I do not call on you I would like you to know how keenly I feel about the matter and if you can bring yourself to doing so I shall appreciate it no end if you will accept this my most sincere apologies

I do not know whether your mother was present at the field or not -- in any event I hope that she will also accept this apology.

**Sincerely,
William G. Wilson**

1929
Dear Mr Orvis:
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I do not know what I said or did but it is painfully evident that I have done you grievous wrong.

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Sincerely,
William G. Wilson

A Great Idea . . . *cont. from page 5*

He wasn't so heartless as to have his sister get out of bed as he did. Instead he devised an ingenious and complicated system that did the trick. Simply told, Bill drilled a hole under Helen's bed on the first floor and set an alarm clock in her room to go off at six am. (Obviously, he didn't mind waking her up while he slept.) Barely awake, Helen would reach under the bed and pull a rope that was attached to the furnace door that would open and cause heat to rise to the upper levels.

Before arriving at this solution, various attempts resulted in coal dust floating all over the house. One thing to be said for Bill though, he never gave up until he got it right, even if it did mean inconveniencing his sister. But since she was staying at the largess of her brother and sister-in-law, she really didn't complain.

When Calling

If you connect with our answering machine when calling, it does not necessarily mean that the office is vacant. Many times we are on the other line and cannot interrupt the call or are away from our desks temporarily. Please leave a message for us and we will call you back.

State Historic Designation *cont. from page 1*

and Anne, Sackville M., the great friend of the Wilsons' and AA who helped spread AA in England and wrote "The Career Officer", (Big Book 3rd edition), drawings of Lois and her mother and Bill's step-mother Christine. We are grateful to have these, and, especially to Lois, who realized the importance of all of Stepping Stones and insured its protection by creating a foundation that would preserve it as she wanted it preserved, in perpetuity, in tact, as it was the day Lois died, for AAs and Al-Anons now and generations hence.

To be considered for the award, a site must meet one criterion out of four; Stepping Stones met two: One, that the site is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history (Al-Anon Family Groups were founded at Stepping Stones and the work Bill did, especially his writings at Wit's End) and, two, the site is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past. (The two other criteria pertain to architecture and yielding information important in prehistory or history.)

In announcing the recommendation in November 2003, Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation Commissioner Bernadette Castro said that the Governor and The Historic Preservation Board were committed to recognizing and protecting the state's most valued historic and cultural treasures. The Governor agreed that Stepping Stones was one of these and made the designation official in April. National recognition is expected in June. Just in time for Lois' picnic, June 5th and AA's founding day, June 10th.

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