The project began as a gift. In 1883, twenty-four-year-old Emma Roberts started collecting, identifying, and painting watercolor portraits of wildflowers growing on the untamed edges of Minneapolis. She was aided by her older brother Thomas, who knew where special plants grew—early in the project, he discovered a non-native low hop-clover in A. J. Hill’s yard in St. Paul and took it home to her.1 She may not have told him that the paintings were destined as a present for him, but surely she caught his enthusiasm for Minnesota’s wildflowers and transferred it to her brush. Her artistic eye for the beauty and delicacy revealed in Minnesota’s wildflowers led to myriad watercolors now housed at the University of Minnesota’s Anderson Horticultural Library at the Landscape Arboretum in Chaska.

Emma and Thomas had come to Minneapolis in 1867 as children. Their father, John Roberts, a descendent of a Germantown, Pennsylvania, Quaker family, suffered from tuberculosis. His physician had urged a “fresh air” cure. As their father sought relief in the pure air of a young Minneapolis, the children frequently accompanied him, learning from him an appreciation of nature. Emma was particularly taken with plants, while Thomas focused on birds. In 1881 Emma began drawing lessons, the first indication from family papers that she was seriously interested in art.2

In September 1883, Emma bade her brother good-bye as he left for his second year of medical school at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. For Christmas that year, Emma traveled east, and the two met at the Baltimore home of relatives for the holidays. At some time during the visit, Emma presented Thomas with a portfolio of 40 of her original watercolor paintings of Minnesota’s wildflowers. They were done on heavy paper, the detailed images including bloom, leaves, stem, and often roots. The back of each painting was labeled with common and scientific names, and many of them included the habitat from which the flower had been collected. Thomas, a fine botanist himself, appreciated the scientific accuracy of the renderings and showed them to Philadelphia horticulturist Thomas Meehan, whom he met at a social gathering. Meehan, formerly of England’s Kew Gardens, praised the project as a gift.

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the painstaking detail. Emma was not exceptional in her attention to scientific detail, however. Many American women of the time were employing hand lenses and microscopes to analyze flower parts.³ Later that winter, Thomas showed the paintings to a Philadelphia friend, Agnes B. Williams, the sister of his roommate. Agnes was also a watercolorist and interested in natural history. She offered to contribute her own work to the portfolio. As spring came to the Pennsylvania countryside, Thomas purchased 48 sheets of Bristol board to give to Agnes in anticipation of the coming field season.⁴

Neither Emma nor Agnes had professional education in botany, but British and American society had long considered the study of plants an appropriate feminine pursuit. Scientific study was seen to ward off frivolity, offer an alternative to card playing, and make women better conversationalists and mothers. Botany was preferable to zoology for women because it did not involve using weapons or killing animals.⁵

Both women had some training, however. Emma’s drawing lessons doubtless attuned her eye to detail, and she probably received tutelage in plants from her brother, who was self-taught and had honed his expertise in his teen years. With like-minded friends, he collected and identified plants throughout the Minneapolis environs. In 1879 he had served on the state Natural History Survey, collecting plants along the north shore of Lake Superior. His identification list of Minnesota native plants was included in Warren Upham’s catalog of the state’s plants for the Geological and Natural History Survey’s annual report.⁶

Agnes had been a freshman at Quaker-affiliated Swarthmore College in 1876–77, where her uncle, Edward Magill, was president. She took a classical course of study that included natural history, comparative anatomy, and comparative physiology.⁷ There is no record of artistic coursework, but a few of the first flowers she painted several years later for Thomas Roberts were collected at East Gloucester, Massachusetts, home to the Rocky Neck Art Colony, hinting that she took summer classes there. Even her early work is finely wrought, suggesting that she had been trained in watercolor technique.

Both Emma and Agnes were raised in a Quaker environment, a culture long involved in nature study. This environment was particularly strong for Agnes, who grew up on the family farm in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, and remained in the area for most of her life. America’s first naturalists, father and son John and William Bartram of Philadelphia, were Quakers, and many bird watchers, plant illustrators, and shell collectors were spawned in the nurturing milieu of Philadelphia.⁸

Emma continued to paint through the summers 1884 and 1885, adding at least 57 portraits to the wildflower portfolio. She seemed not to have discriminated, selecting
whatever plants she came across that interested her: ground plums and wood anemone, trillium (from Minnehaha Falls) and violets. She collected blazing stars in Minneapolis and cardinal flowers in St. Paul. Many bog plants appear in her collection, perhaps taken from remnants of the tamarack swamp that lay west and south of the Roberts family home in the area that today encompasses the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden, Parade Stadium, and the city impound lot.9

Meanwhile, in the summer of 1884, Agnes took up her brush. Like Emma’s, her work is botanically detailed and accurate. With meticulous attention, she painted the intricate flower parts that identify the plant to species and the fine root hairs of root systems that are so difficult to collect intact. Most of her 1884 flowers grew around The Hedges, her familial home, and other locales in Bucks County, but she also painted flowers taken in Manchester, Vermont, and the New Jersey Pine Barrens. There are five paintings of bog flowers collected in Minneapolis, including a showy lady’s slipper. The back of one painting bears the initials T.S.R., probably indicating that Thomas collected the specimens while he was in Minneapolis for the summer and sent them to Agnes.10 There is no evidence that Agnes herself visited Minneapolis at that time, and there are other dated paintings that place her in Pennsylvania during the same period.

By the end of the 1884 growing season, the two women had added 60 paintings to the portfolio, 18 from Emma and 42 from Agnes. Emma contributed to the collection until 1888; Agnes continued to paint wildflowers through the 1890s.

The watercolors presumably returned to Minnesota with Roberts in 1886 when he completed his medical residency and set up a general-medicine practice in Minneapolis. A few years later, as the state of Minnesota was planning its display for the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, Emma was approached by Mrs. Louise Sampson of the exhibit’s Committee on Flora to provide her paintings for inclusion in the show. Mrs. Sampson, a social friend of the Robertses, had to coax Thomas to lend the collection. He was reluctant to have the cherished works leave his possession.11

At the fair, the watercolors were exhibited on the Minnesota Building’s main floor, where they held their own against a display of dried, pressed flowers that also depicted the state’s botanical specimens. The director of the exposition’s Anthropological Building was drawn to the paintings and arranged for them to hang in that venue for a short time, where they gained a wider audience and won an award.

After the close of the exposition in October 1893, the watercolors came back to Minnesota and hung on display in the Minneapolis Public Library. In 1922 Thomas Roberts donated a collection of 155 watercolors to the Museum of Natural History, forerunner of the Bell Museum, on the University of Minnesota’s Minneapolis campus. (He served as the museum’s director.) The paintings, a
welcome aid to aspiring botanists according to the *Minnesota Daily*, were installed in swinging wall frames on the third floor of the zoology building, home to the natural history museum at that time.¹²

**After producing** the wildflower paintings for her brother, Emma studied watercolor instruction with Rhoda Holmes Nicholls, a foremost New York City painter, spending the winters of 1892 and 1893 in that city at the Art Students League. Chaperoned by her mother, Elizabeth Sadler Roberts, she stayed in New York into June 1893. Like Agnes, Emma also summered at Gloucester, Massachusetts, presumably to study at the Rocky Neck Art Colony.¹³

Completing her training on the East Coast, Emma and another Minneapolis artist, Florence Wales, rented studio space in downtown Minneapolis’s New York Life Insurance Company building. They painted and taught, welcoming visitors into their gallery during Tuesday afternoon teas. In 1896 Emma took a paid job as assistant director of drawing for the Minneapolis public schools and became the head of the program in 1904. She turned her attention away from painting and toward art education. In the first decades of the twentieth century, she developed an art-appreciation curriculum that would reach all of the school systems’ children. Concurrently, she conceived of and founded the Handicraft Guild of Minneapolis, an Arts and Crafts organization that nurtured and trained local artists and taught public-school teachers how to teach art in the classroom.¹⁴

Little is known about the life of Agnes Williams Roberts between 1885 and 1937. She lived at The Hedges, caring for aging parents in the early 1900s. Her final painting in the wildflower portfolio was made in 1905, but it is not known when the last of her paintings made it into the collection. She was married—for the first time—in 1908, at the age of 48, to Mark Palmer, a farmer.¹⁵

The only record of the two artists meeting when both were young women actively producing artwork is an entry in Elizabeth Roberts’ diary for February 1893. Emma was living on New York’s Upper West Side and taking lessons. Agnes rode the train into the city from Philadelphia for a weekend and attended a watercolor exhibition with Emma. The visit in—
cluded a stay at the Robertses apartment, Sunday church service, and a concert. The artists must have been in communication in order to arrange the weekend. Perhaps, they were continuing a friendship forged ten years before when Emma had visited Thomas in the East. The two women became sisters-in-law in 1897, when Agnes married Thomas Roberts and moved from The Hedges to Minneapolis. Both Agnes and Thomas had lost spouses in earlier decades. She was 77 and he, 79.

That she retained a habit of carrying a sketchpad when out in the field is evidenced by several pencil drawings she made in Minnesota, dated from 1938 to 1942. Though the sketches are brief, unfinished pieces—a nodding trillium from the St. Croix River valley, done in May 1938 when she was still a newlywed, a Turk’s cap lily (July 1938), pasque flowers from Nine Mile Creek in Bloomington (April 1940), and a houseplant of Caroline Bovey (Mrs. Charles C.), sketched at the Boveys’ Minnetonka home in 1942—the drawings show the same accuracy and delicacy as the work she did when she was a young woman of 25."

**The Watercolors**

The watercolors of both women are housed today in the Andersen Horticultural Library of the University of Minnesota. Numbering more than 250 paintings, the exquisite images have retained the color and vibrancy of freshly rendered art. Some have yellowed labels from the University of Minnesota’s Museum of Natural History stapled to the lower-right corner and others, by Agnes, have a “Pennsylvania Flora” label. The watercolors came to the Andersen library in the 1990s, after the small natural history library on the third floor of the Bell Museum (Thomas Roberts’s personal collection) was dismantled and its contents shuttled off to other University of Minnesota repositories. The wildflowers caught by pencil and brush are an enduring legacy of two women who took to the field with sketchbooks and pens, collecting baskets, and keen eyes in order to capture nature’s ephemeral beauty.

**Notes**

7. Christopher Densmore, curator, Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College, e-mail to author, Nov. 24, 2014.
9. The swamp also included Bassett’s Creek to the west and today’s rail bed between the Basilica of St. Mary and the Bryn Mawr neighborhood; Leaf, Love Affair with Birds, 49.
12. Minnesota Daily, Feb. 18, 1922, 1; T. S. Roberts, “Report from the Zoological Survey and Museum,” in President’s Report to the University of Minnesota Board of Regents for Year 1921–22, 256. The collection included paintings by both Emma and Agnes.
15. Agnes Williams to Thomas Sadler Roberts, Feb. 23, 1900, folder 106, Box 11, Bell Museum of Natural History Records, University of Minnesota Archives, Minneapolis; Christopher Densmore, e-mail to author, Nov. 25, 2014.
17. Agnes’ sketches are included in Emma Roberts and Agnes Williams Botanical Artworks, Andersen Horticultural Library.

The photo on p. 277 (right) is courtesy Nancy C. Roberts (scan by Anne E. Wright); p. 277 (left) is from the collection of the Mercer Museum, Bucks County Historical Society, PA; p. 280 (top) is in MNHS collections. All wildflower watercolors are in the Emma Roberts and Agnes Williams Botanical Artworks Collection, Andersen Horticultural Library, University of Minnesota.
Emma Roberts, common virgin’s bower, Minneapolis, 1885
Emma Roberts, wild yellow lily, Minneapolis, 1885
Emma Roberts, prairie clover, “prairie and open woodland,” Minneapolis, 1884
Emma Roberts, great yellow water lily, St. Paul, 1885
Agnes Williams, chestnut, Tioga County, Pennsylvania, 1885
Emma Roberts, hedge bindweed, "open wood and along streams," Minneapolis, 1883
Agnes Williams, dandelion from her family home, The Hedges, Bucks County, 1886
Agnes Williams, chicory, Tioga County, 1884
Agnes Williams, tea berry and wintergreen, Atco, New Jersey (near Philadelphia), 1895
Agnes Williams, lady’s slipper, this one from Bucks County, 1895
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