

# Dublin Historical Society

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## LOON POINT

In a topographical sense, Loon Point is a five-acre peninsula jutting from the southern shore of Dublin Lake. To those lucky enough to have been there, the words “Loon Point” also conjure up a remarkable complex of buildings and landscape, including formal gardens and two outdoor theatres, reflecting the taste, talent and imagination of Joseph Lindon Smith, his wife, Corinna, and their descendants down to the present day.

### How the Smiths came to Loon Point

For most of the 19th century, Loon Point was known as Phillips Point after the family that owned the south shore of Dublin Lake. Mrs. J.S. Copley Green acquired the Phillips Farm in 1882, and there originated the artists' colony known as the “Latin Quarter”. In 1889, she made a present of the northern part of the Loon Point peninsula to

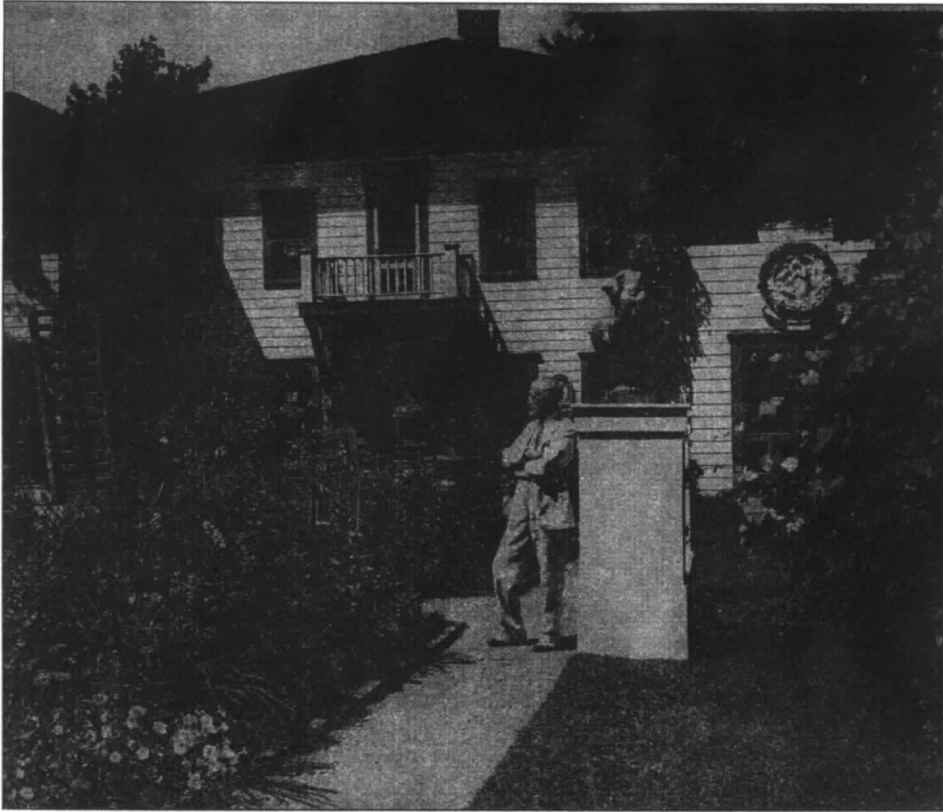


*The first house at Loon Point, built by the Smith family in 1890.*

Henry Francis and Emma Greenleaf Smith, whose son, Joseph Lindon, was a rising young portrait painter in Boston.

Joseph Lindon Smith (1863-1950), who had gained his first success as a portrait and fresco painter, was later principally known for his ren-

*This article was written by William L. Baubhan to mark the occasion of the Society's meeting at “Loon Point” on August 11, 1995.*



*Joseph Lindon Smith in his garden,  
c. 1929.*

derings of ancient Egyptian carvings and other archeological finds, as well as for his skill in acquiring European art works for wealthy American collectors like Isabella Stewart Gardner. As Mrs. Gardner's agent, Smith bought many of the works in her museum on the Boston Fenway.

### **The building of the first house**

In 1890 Smith, with the aid of his father and his brother, Albert Greenleaf Smith, designed and built the original house-studio, later moved and ultimately demolished. The Smiths formed a tightly-knit family "cooperative" centering around Joseph, the rising portraitist, with his brother as frame-maker, and his father, a retired lumber merchant, as horticulturist and man-of-all-works.

During the 1890's they created a remarkable complex of formal and natural landscaping, two outdoor theatres, the main garden (south of the house), and a Japanese garden, to which a pagoda, stone buddha, and trees were later contribut-

ed by Baron Kaneko, the Japanese foreign minister, who was a house guest in 1905. The gardens have been simplified for easier care, but the main garden south of the house retains its stone wall border.

They also built another studio (no longer standing), which Smith often lent to other artist friends, including George deForest Brush and American Impressionist and bird painter Frank W. Benson.

### **The *Teatro Bambino***

In 1896 Smith built the *Teatro Bambino* (the children's theatre), with the help of his family and several summer neighbors, including explorer-geologist Raphael Pumpelly and author-editor Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Modeled on a theatre in Siena, Italy, *Teatro Bambino* is enclosed by a high semi-circular stucco covered wall, defining the stage area, complimented by stone benches, and carved niches, bas reliefs and urns.

The *Teatro Bambino* was among the first out-

door theatres built in America, and became the scene of many of J.L. Smith's improvisational plays and pageants — using local talent as well as guests. It was the scene of a talk by Japanese statesman Baron Kaneko in 1905 (after he had signed the Russo-Japanese peace treaty at Portsmouth). And in 1924 it was the site of a "command performance" play for an audience of one: John Singer Sargent.

Both the *Teatro Bambino* and the larger outdoor theatre (on the east nearer the lake) were built in amphitheatre form of natural materials with raised earthen stages, stone retaining walls, and backdrops of trees and shrubs. The larger

theatre, with an excavated semi-circular seating plan, uses clumps of birches and the lake as a backdrop behind the raised earthen stage, flanked by two groups of free-standing Corinthian columns. (These columns had originally held up a portico at the Daniel Catlin house. When the Catlin house was remodeled and the portico removed, the columns were floated across the lake.)

### The present house on Loon Point

In 1899, Joseph Lindon Smith married Corinna Haven Putnam (1876-1965), daughter of the

*Play at Loon Point for the 80th birthday of George D. Markham, 1939.*

*L - R: Rebecca Smith Malicbeff, Jessie Taylor, Paul Lehmann, Joseph Lindon Smith*



*Extract from the diary of Mary McKittrick Markham (Mrs. George D.) , courtesy of the Missouri Historical Society, St.Louis:*

"25th Tues. [1939] G's 80th Birthday. Home in a.m. 29 telegrams, 23 gifts, 16 cards and letters - In Joe Smith's 'Teatro Bambino' Joe Smith as Father Time and Jessie Taylor 10 yrs. as his Secretary and Betsey Mauran King with her baby. Becky Smith Mallisheff and Paul Lehman [sic] expounded G's career before 100 guests,... Following the play all came to our house, a fine day so the party was held on our terrace. A wonderful 3 story cake with scenes of lake and mountain and 80 candles. 98 people drank 34 quarts of Bollinger besides whisky. A grand party?"

New York book publisher, George Haven Putnam. Among their wedding presents was a complete Della Robbia fireplace and mantel, a gift from the celebrated orientalist, Sturgis Bigelow. In 1906, using this mantel as a focal point, Smith built the present house on the point, a larger more formal dwelling than the old one. The house, has a U-shaped plan in a Georgian revival style with Italian and Oriental overtones.

Smith designed the house himself and built it with the aid of his father and Leon Patrick, a Dublin contractor. Among the decorative elements were a blue-painted balcony over the south doorway facing the garden courtyard, as well as ornamental panels and bas reliefs on exterior wall surfaces.

The following year (1907) he added a single-story Chinese-style enclosed porch (40' x 40') which served as a summer dining room. Its most remarkable feature is the south-facing circular Moon Gate, dedicated to Smith's patroness, Isabella Stewart Gardner (1840-1924), founder and builder of the Gardner museum in Boston. "Mrs. Jack", as she was known, was present in August 1904 for the room's – and the Moon Gate's – dedication, at which she played the role of the moon goddess. She thereafter visited Loon Point nearly every summer.

### **Loon Point as a social center**

Loon Point quickly became the gathering place of artists, writers, and their followers among the summer colony, and remained so for over 50 years both for permanent summer "cottagers" and a wide circle of visitors such as Mark Twain (who gave readings there), John Singer Sargent, and others.

The attraction lay in the characters of the Smiths themselves, "the king and queen of Dublin", as Claude M. Fuess called them. Fuess, Headmaster of Phillips Academy, Andover, describes the versatile Joseph Lindon Smith as "not only an archaeologist and artist, but also an actor and an incomparable raconteur... at heart a

child, an adult Peter Pan." Smith's theatrical gifts and romantic temperament were complimented in his wife Corinna, a woman of forceful character, who combined high intelligence with beauty and hospitality.

Joseph and Corinna Smith, ("Uncle Joe" and "Aunt Corinna" to generations of Dubliners) were the guiding spirits of the Dublin summer colony for over 50 years. They were among the founders of the Dublin Lake Club in 1901, and served as its president and secretary respectively from 1901 until their deaths. Over the years, their house at Loon Point was a magnet for both permanent summer residents and numerous notable figures in American and European life. Some of these distinguished visitors have been mentioned earlier. Others have included Henry and Brooks Adams, Ethel Barrymore, Augustus Saint-Gaudens, Gen. John J. Pershing, Amelia Earhart, and Countess Mountbatten, and others.

Mrs. Smith left Loon Point to her granddaughter, Jessie Taylor Hale. She and her husband, the Rev. Samuel Whitney Hale (a descendant of Gov. Samuel W. Hale and of Joseph F. Hay, both early Dublin residents), have built the new and more manageable house between Lake Road and the Loon Point gardens.

*Loon Point was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1983 as a site of national significance in American historical and cultural life.*

### **C R E D I T S**

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