

The Remarkable Matthiessens

by Patrick Gilmartin

Editor's Note: This version includes the author's notes and source materials. See the Roost Winter 2017 for the published article with photos and captions.

Near the shore of the Hudson River, just south of a sandbox and children's swings, a bronze plaque affixed to a boulder records a farewell gift to the people of Irvington from two of its wealthiest residents. It reads:

Matthiessen Beach Park
Public Dedication – Sept. 9, 1945
to commemorate the gift of
Mr. & Mrs. Ralph H. Matthiessen
to Irvington-on-Hudson, N.Y.

Behind that gift was a dynastic marriage of first cousins, a deeply felt family tragedy, and the remarkable success in America of three immigrant brothers.¹

On Sunday, July 14, 1889, as the French steamer *La Champagne* docked in Manhattan, Cyrus Field's yacht *Inanda* waited alongside the pier. It was there to meet Franz and Emma Matthiessen, and to carry them and the embalmed body of their daughter, Helen, home to Irvington.²

Franz and Emma had had two children, but their son died in early childhood. Helen, their daughter, had grown into a vivacious young woman, described in a memoir published in 1957 by her close friend, Isabel Benjamin, as "an enchanting looking girl, sparkling brown eyes, gold hair and a bright mind."³

The family had embarked on a grand tour in October 1888 to introduce Helen to Europe, and vice versa. In Rome, Helen so beguiled a prince of the Borghese family that he wanted to marry her. Her parents were reluctant to agree to this, but conceded that the prince could see their daughter again when they traveled to Paris

in May. This all ended tragically on June 30, when 19-year-old Helen died suddenly of acute appendicitis.

Helen's death had a profound effect on her parents. A lengthy article in the *New York Times* after Franz's death in Paris on March 9, 1901, reported that he had kept Helen's body "in his residence in Irvington-on-Hudson for several months, refusing to have it interred. He closed up his house at 580 Fifth Avenue and retired from all social life. Mrs. Matthiessen was so stricken by the grief that her nervous system was undermined and she is now an invalid."⁴

Franz, whose full name was Franz Otto Matthiessen, but who outside the family was usually known as F.O. Matthiessen or Francis O. Matthiessen, was the first of the family to live in Irvington. He, like his brothers, came from a town named Altona at the base of the Jutland Peninsula, which separates the North Sea from the Baltic Sea in the part of Europe known as Schleswig-Holstein. Franz was born there on December 23, 1833. For many decades prior to his birth the area had been the subject of repeated conflicts by or among various European powers claiming ownership. That history is reflected in the fact that one of the brothers declared birth in Denmark, others in Germany. Today Schleswig-Holstein is part of Germany and Altona is a suburb of Hamburg.⁵

When Franz was fifteen he started apprenticing in sugar refineries in Hamburg. Ten years later, in 1858, he left Europe for the United States. Once here, he worked in several refineries in Boston and New York before joining another immigrant, William Alfred Weichers, in opening their own sugar refinery in Jersey City. Franz was granted many patents involving the refining process and the firm rapidly grew to become one of the strongest sugarhouses in the nation. In 1887 the firm merged with the sugar interests of the Brooklyn-based Havemeyer family to form the American Sugar Refining Company.

By 1891 several other major sugar refining companies had merged into the American Sugar Refining Company. It became known as the Sugar Trust, and its product later became known as Domino Sugar. Franz was named chairman of the Manufacturing Committee of the Board of Directors of the company, giving him overall supervision of its entire refining operations. The Sugar Trust soon

controlled 98 percent of the sugar refineries in the nation, and Franz was dubbed the “Sugar Baron” by the press.

Franz may have given up social activities after Helen’s death, but he remained active in business, not resigning from the Sugar Trust until 1900. In addition, he, among other things, became a director of a new “whiskey trust” in 1898⁶ and was president of the Western Electric Instrument Company in 1896.⁷ He is interred with his family in Woodlawn Cemetery, Bronx, N.Y.

Franz had married Emma Boyles of Philadelphia in 1865.⁸ In 1870, 18.94 acres in the Village area today known as Matthiessen Park were bought in her name. In 1890, an additional 2.84 acres were purchased, also in Emma’s name. The funnel-shaped estate had its wide end on Broadway north of the Presbyterian Church and ran to the Hudson River. The neighbor to the north was J. C. Fargo, one of the founders of Wells Fargo & Co., whose property extended to West Sunnyside Lane. To the south lay the estate of Charles Tiffany, founder of Tiffany & Co. and father of Louis Comfort Tiffany.

Franz’s fortune, estimated at \$15 million (equivalent to \$417 million in today’s purchasing power) would at some point have become his daughter Helen’s had she lived. So, too, would Emma’s Irvington property have passed to Helen. Her untimely death changed everything. Whether, but for that change, Ralph and his wife later could or would have made their gift to the Village that is memorialized on the plaque is an unanswerable question.

Franz’s will provided that Emma would have income from his estate for so long as she lived, after which time his fortune would pass in equal shares to his brothers Erard and Frederick, each of whom was already wealthy.

Erard Adolph Matthiessen, the eldest of the immigrant brothers, was the first to come to the United States. He arrived in New York in August 1850,⁹ about two months shy of his 25th birthday. In his early years here he seems to have split his time between New York City—living at times on Staten Island—and Chicago. In

New York, he met Adele Gignoux, the Brooklyn-born third child of 14 of a prosperous silk wholesaler from France. They were married in Chicago on February 11, 1858, and had eight children, among them Ralph's father, Conrad Henry, who was born in Illinois in 1865.

Erard's exact occupation in the United States is unclear, but either he had a meteoric success in business, or enjoyed inherited wealth, or both, because a scant twenty years after his arrival he and his family were living in Cornwall-on-Hudson in Orange County, N.Y., with as many as six servants. In the 1875 census taken by the State of New York, Erard described his occupation as "retired merchant." He died May 26, 1905.

The third immigrant brother, Frederick Wilhelm Matthiessen, arrived one year before his brother Franz, having completed mining engineering studies at the University of Freiberg. He and a classmate named Edward Charles Hegeler decided to go to America to seek success in their chosen field. They first traveled through mining centers in Germany, Belgium, and England, and then took a steamer to the United States, landing in Boston in 1857 and proceeding to New York. There they learned that deposits of zinc ore near Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, were being used to produce material for paints because attempts to smelt metal from the ore had been unsuccessful. The two young men invested their own funds and used their ingenuity to successfully extract metal from the ore but decided against further investment in that venture. Instead they looked west.

After spending several months in Pittsburgh to acquaint themselves with American business methods, Matthiessen and Hegeler moved to Missouri in 1858 to investigate opportunities for zinc mining. Finding uncertain and dangerous "political conditions" there, with both pro- and anti-slavery fervor, Matthiessen and Hegeler continued on to Wisconsin, where they were welcomed. This was also the case in LaSalle, Illinois, about 100 miles south of the Wisconsin border where there were extensive coalfields near the route of the Illinois Central Railroad. Here they built a smelter that successfully ran until the outbreak of the Civil War caused a temporary shutdown. It soon resumed operations, however, and the Matthiessen and Hegeler Zinc Company and associated mines became industry leaders.

Frederick Wilhelm married Frances Clara ("Fannie") Moeller of Mineral Point, Wisconsin, who was the daughter of the owners of the boarding house where

Frederick first stayed in Wisconsin. Once the zinc works became successful, Frederick Wilhelm became active in other areas. About 1880 he organized the Western Clock Manufacturing Co., maker of “Big Ben” clocks, which in 1930 merged with the Seth Thomas Clock Co. to become General Time Corp. He also invested in other businesses, including real estate in LaSalle and elsewhere. Frederick Wilhelm served as mayor of LaSalle from 1887 to 1897, and reputedly almost had to beg the city to allow him to retire from that position. From their school days in Freiberg until Edward Hegeler’s death on June 4, 1910, Frederick and he remained close friends and business partners.

Fannie died in 1913; Frederick died five years later on February 11, 1918. They are interred in Oakwood Cemetery, LaSalle, Illinois.¹⁰

Frederick Wilhelm’s daughter, Eda Wilhelmina Sophie Matthiessen, born in 1865, married her first cousin Conrad (Erard’s son, born the same year) on May 24, 1888.¹¹ The fact that both were prospective heirs to substantial fortunes has caused some to suggest that their marriage was not a love match but more in the nature of dynastic union made to keep fortunes in the family.¹² Eda and Conrad’s son, Ralph, would later donate the beach park to the Village of Irvington.

Not long after Franz’s death, Charles Tiffany died, and in May 1902, Conrad bought Tiffany’s property from his executors. Undoubtedly helped by his uncle, the Sugar Baron, Conrad was president of the Chicago Sugar Refining Company before forming the Glucose Sugar Refining Company in 1897. It became a dominant player in making sugar from corn and was eventually bought by the Corn Products Company.

Two months after Conrad bought Tiffany’s property, Franz’s widow Emma conveyed her Irvington property to him, bringing Conrad and Eda’s holdings in Irvington to more than 52 acres,¹³ comprising most of the land between Broadway and the Hudson River from Bridge Street to fairly close to West Sunnyside Lane.

In 1910, Conrad and Eda were living with their sons, Ralph, Conrad Jr., and Erard Adolph along with eight servants in a house built for the parents at 41 North Broadway (now known as 2 Fargo Lane). Erard had been named for his paternal grandfather but became known as Matty.

Ralph graduated from Yale with an engineering degree in 1912 and on April 3, 1913, he married Madge Victoria McCormack in Medford, Jackson County, Oregon.¹⁴ Her father was a New York lawyer who had purchased part of J. C. Fargo's Irvington property but was practicing at that time in Medford.

Ralph was a pioneer in the trucking and moving business, forming the Motor Haulage Company in New York in 1915. In 1921, he was made a special assistant to the United States Postmaster General and charged with re-organizing the Post Office's motorized transportation system.¹⁵ From at least 1931 until 1941, he was president of the General Time Corporation, the successor to the company founded by his maternal grandfather, Frederick Wilhelm, and was board chairman until 1961.¹⁶ In 1942, after retiring as president of General Time, Ralph moved from Irvington to Hume, Virginia, where he raised beef cattle until his death there in July 1975 at age 85.¹⁷ Madge died in Hume on June 16, 1977.¹⁸

Ralph bought the former Tiffany property from his father, Conrad, in 1922, and in that year signed a dollar-a-year "lease" with the Village that allowed Irvington residents to swim in the Hudson from the part of his property lying between the river and the railroad tracks. In 1927, Conrad and Eda transferred to Ralph and Matty ownership of the approximately 23 acres that originally had been owned by Franz's wife Emma. For a few years Conrad Jr.¹⁹ also owned some of the property but in 1927 it too went to his brothers, Ralph and Matty.

Erard, or "Matty," was born May 27, 1902, in Chicago, graduated from Yale and the Columbia School of Architecture, and married Elizabeth Bleeker Carey of Short Hills, N. J.²⁰ He was a member of the architecture firm of Henry Otis

Chapman & Son before founding his own firm, Matthiessen, Johnson & Green, with offices in Manhattan and Stamford, Connecticut. He was active in conservation work and had a home on Fishers Island, where he started an oyster farm. He also served on the board of the National Audubon Society for twenty years and as a trustee of the Nature Conservancy and the American Museum of Natural History. Elizabeth died in 1977. Erard died in Sanibel, Florida, on March 8, 1999, at age 96. He and Elizabeth are both interred on Fishers Island.

From time to time the Matthiessens would subdivide and sell parts of their acreage, principally the areas bordering Broadway north of the Presbyterian Church, or alongside the road leading to 41 North Broadway, but major dispositions were not made until the 1940s. By 1940, Erard (Matty) and Elizabeth had moved to a 47-acre property in Stamford, Connecticut, that they bought in 1937²¹ and they began disposing of the 10.161 acres they owned bordering Bridge Street, a task that was not completed until June 1947.

Ralph and Madge had also decided to sell, but first, on June 5, 1945, they deeded to the Village 3 acres of their property on the river side of the railroad, plus 5.75 acres of adjacent underwater land to which they held title, on the sole condition that the property be used and maintained forever by the Village as a public park, free to the people of the community. This is the gift memorialized on the plaque.

The following day the balance of the estate, including 5.93 acres of other underwater land, was sold to the Seaboard Surety Company, who planned to move its general offices to the house on the property. Two years after the purchase, Seaboard abandoned the idea of moving its headquarters there. It donated to the Village the underwater land north of the underwater tract already deeded to the Village by Ralph²² and sold the house and dry land.

In the mid 1960s, the Village accepted the suggestion of a contractor that the little waterfront park be extended at least 20 yards into the river using rock and construction debris from a project that tore up Ashford Avenue in Dobbs Ferry. A further extension was made in the 1970s, giving Matthiessen Park, or more correctly Matthiessen Beach Park, its present scope.²³ A family's association with

Irvington that began more than 145 years ago continues in the form of the park on the shores of the Hudson that had its genesis in the gift they made to the Village.

—Pat Gilmartin

Author's Note: Initial research on the Matthiessen family done by longtime Irvington resident Carolyn Stifel inspired this article. Her contribution is gratefully acknowledged by the author, who takes full responsibility for any errors.

NOTES

1. There was a fourth Matthiessen brother, Matthias, who came to the United States, but whether to visit or to stay is not known. On June 7, 1858, in St. Patrick's Cathedral in Manhattan, Matthias and Elise Gignoux, "both of Clifton, Staten Island," married. Elise was a sister of his brother Erard's wife. Little is known about Matthias but for the fact that on February 22, 1860, while he and his 20-year-old bride were on the way to France from the United States, he died at sea. On arrival in France, Elise, who did not speak French, was welcomed by representatives and members of the Gignoux family. She resided in France for the rest of her life, making her home in Nice. Erard's will created an endowment for her of \$6,000 per year for life.
2. *New York Herald*, July 16, 1889, p. 3. See also, *New York Herald*, July 20, 1889, p. 1, and July 21, 1889, p. 15.
3. *From Dawn to Twilight* (1957).
4. *New York Times*, Mar. 10, 1901.
5. Lord Palmerston, a British statesman who served as Prime Minister twice in the nineteenth century, once said of the region: "Only three people have ever really understood the Schleswig-Holstein business—the Prince Consort [i.e., Prince Albert, German-born husband of Queen Victoria] who is dead—a German professor, who has gone mad—and I, who have forgotten all about it."
6. *New York Tribune*, June 29, 1898.
7. *New York Tribune*, Jan. 7, 1896, p. 13.
8. *New York Times*, April 28, 1865.
9. Passport Application, October 26, 1878.

10. Find A Grave #6997626.

11. Marrying first cousins seems to have been an accepted practice in the Matthiessen family. On August 4, 1902, in St. John's Episcopal Church, Cornwall-on-Hudson, N.Y., one of Conrad's sisters, Frances Sophie ("Sophie") Matthiessen, also married a first cousin [*New York Times*, Aug. 5, 1902, p. 9.]. So did his sister Harriet's son.

12. Eda lived until 1957. Conrad moved to California where he died in Santa Barbara on Apr. 14, 1936. *New York Times*, Apr. 15, 1936.

13. *U.S., Indexed County Land Ownership Maps, 1860-1918*, from Library of Congress, available on Ancestry.com.

14. *Medford Mail Tribune*, Dec. 26, 1939, p. 2.

15. *New York Times*, Sunday, Sept. 25, 1921, Section 7, p. 7.

16. *New York Times*, July 25, 1975, p. 34.

17. *New York Times*, July 25, 1975, p. 34.

18. *New York Times*, June 18, 1977.

19. Conrad Jr. was born June 3, 1894, in Chicago and died in Dec. 1966 in California. He graduated from Yale in 1916 and was a 1st Lt. in the Army Air Force in WW I. He married Mary Elizabeth Caldwell in 1923 and in 1931 had a 15-acre estate in Centre Harbor, L.I., N.Y. He and Mary had four children. *New York Times*, May 28, 1931. *New York Times*, Aug. 19, 1923.

20. *New York Times*, June 15, 1924.

21. *New York Times*, March 20, 1937.

22. *Irvington Gazette*, April 6, 1947.

23. Former Mayor Peter Peyser, quoted in the *Rivertowns Enterprise*, Sept. 1, 1995.