

Ellen Mills Battell Terry Stoeckel (1851-1939)

Arts Patroness and Grand Dame of Norfolk's Gilded Era

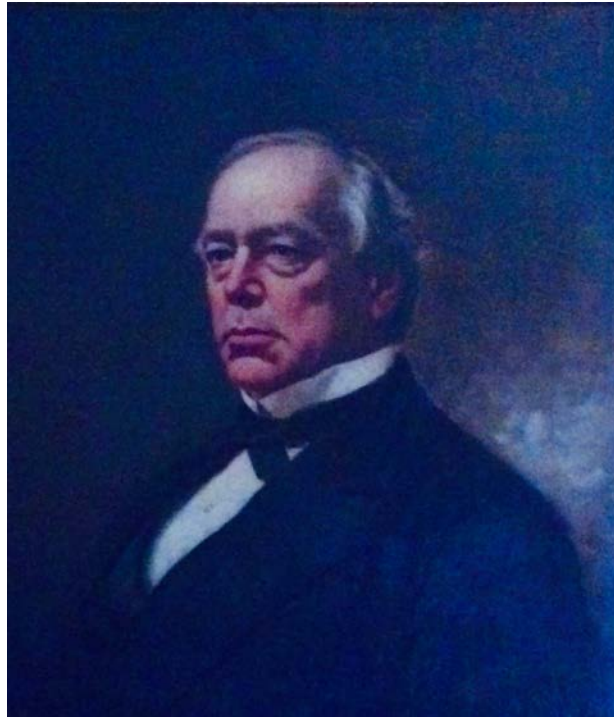


**Ellen Mills Battell, Age 28
George Augustus Baker Portrait - 1879**

When the estimable name Ellen Battell Stoeckel is evoked in Norfolk it is seldom, if ever, with regard to the Norfolk Country Club. But indeed, Ellen and her husband Carl Stoeckel were charter members of the NCC when it was formed on Maple Avenue in 1912.

Ellen 'Nelly' Mills Battell was born on March 10, 1851 into a privileged, influential Norfolk family blessed with 19th century wealth and prominence. Immersed in affluence and versed in culture, her life was nevertheless beset with personal misfortune and marked by family drama. The only child of Norfolk's most prosperous merchant and financier, Robbins Battell and his wife Ellen Ryerson Mills of Newark, NJ, Ellen grew up in New York and at **Whitehouse**, Norfolk's preeminent 1799 manse that still preens on the crest of a hill above the boomerang-shaped curve that sweeps through Norfolk on Greenwoods Road.

Affectionately known as the *Father of Norfolk*, Robbins Battell inherited a family fortune amassed by his father and older brother Joseph from business enterprises ranging from merchandising local cheese to investment in iron manufacturing to acquiring valuable land in rapidly developing western townships.



**'Father of Norfolk' - Robbins Battell, Age 71
Thomas Waterman Wood Portrait - 1890**

Robbins Battell graduated from Yale in 1839 and became an astute businessman but his life's passion was music. He played the flute beautifully, directed the church choir and composed many sacred hymns. He had a particular interest in chimes and oversaw the manufacture and installation of the bells in the steeple of the First Congregational Church on Norfolk's Village Green; and composed the melody we hear everyday marking the hours from on high. Battell was also a devotee and breeder of championship horses. He owned scores of pure bred Morgan carriage horses and created his own breed of Arabian horses, the Russian Orloff. Ellen was an equestrian who shared her father's love of horses. In a 1935 letter to Ellen Battell Stoeckel George Carr, father of NCC member, **Sally Carr Hannafin**, describes in detail his expertise and exacting research on the pedigree of every purebred horse on the Battell estate.

A true aristocrat, Robbins Battell was also very much a man of the people. A firm believer in education and culture for all, Battell for many years opened the art gallery and rare-book library of his grand, private home Whitehouse to the citizens of Norfolk. He also staged free morning and evening public concerts on the Green featuring some of the best musicians from New York.

With his sister Anna, Battell founded the Robbins School on Mountain Road and in 1888 built Battell Chapel next to the Congregational Church on the Green. Loyal to his alma mater, by 1885 Battell had donated over \$300,000 (\$7.5 million today) to Yale University. Due to Battell's quixotic efforts pleading his case to the CT legislature, the Central New England Railroad's plans to lay their tracks straight through the Village Green were never realized.



Whitehouse -19th Century Italianate Mien

Tragedy was first visited upon Ellen Battell just days after she born when her mother died from complications of childbirth. So bereft was her father by this enormous loss, he was unable to utter his wife's name for the rest of his life; and he never remarried.

A Tragic Wife and Mother

In the Victorian era, women from wealthy families were expected to possess beautiful manners, entertain brilliantly and dress impeccably in the extravagant, corseted fashions of the day. Doting on his motherless child, Robbins Battell brought up his bright, beautiful daughter in an environment suffused with music. Ellen played piano, flute and cello, studied voice and played the organ at the Congregational Church. She was also a gifted writer and lyricist who wrote the words to the plaintive hymn, *O Lord To You I Cry*, which her father set to music.

On February 5, 1873 in Montclair, New Jersey, Ellen Battell married Frederic Peet Terry (Yale, 1869), a wealthy tea importer. Thirteen months later, on March 3, 1874 they had a son, Frederic Battell Terry. Just two months and nine days later, Frederick Peet Terry died suddenly of a rare malignant infection leaving Ellen, at the age of twenty-three to raise the boy her own; albeit with much support from her father and Aunt Anna.

Frederic grew up to be a handsome, athletic young man with a gift for writing he inherited from his mother. At fifteen, while enrolled at Black Hall School in Lyme, CT he wrote a precocious, well-received book of stories. Here is snippet of his writing promise:

The cold moon was calmly shining over the quiet city, and as it rose higher, was beginning to bathe the silent streets in a flood of silver light, dimming the flickering gas-lights and buzzing arc lamps, and turning a face of pitying disdain upon the more plebeian portions of the city, where the population of the slums was engaged in its regular nocturnal merry-making.

A Curious Christmas Eve - 1889
Paragraph 1, by Frederic Battell Terry



Frederic Battell Terry
William Kurtz Photograph, Madison Square - 1890

A year later, bound for college, Frederic Battell Terry died from an accident playing baseball at the tender age of sixteen. By age thirty-eight, Ellen Battell Terry had prematurely lost her mother, her husband and her only child; and just five years later her father would die.

The year before her son died, Ellen had engaged noted Hartford architect, William Brocklesby, to build a house on a knoll above Greenwoods Road for herself and Frederic, perhaps seeking a bit of distance from her father's long shadow.

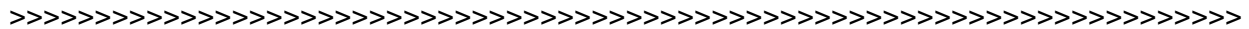
Frederic died just before the house was finished and the bereaved Ellen never moved into **Knolly Brook**. For one dollar she sold it to Frederic's nurse Julia Wessman, who lived at **Rose Cottage** on Maple Avenue and had become Ellen's faithful companion. After a time as home to Dr. Edward Quintard, Mark Twain's personal physician, Knolly Brook was donated to the diocese of Hartford and for many years served as a retreat for nuns. Currently, it is for sale.



Knolly Brook (1890)



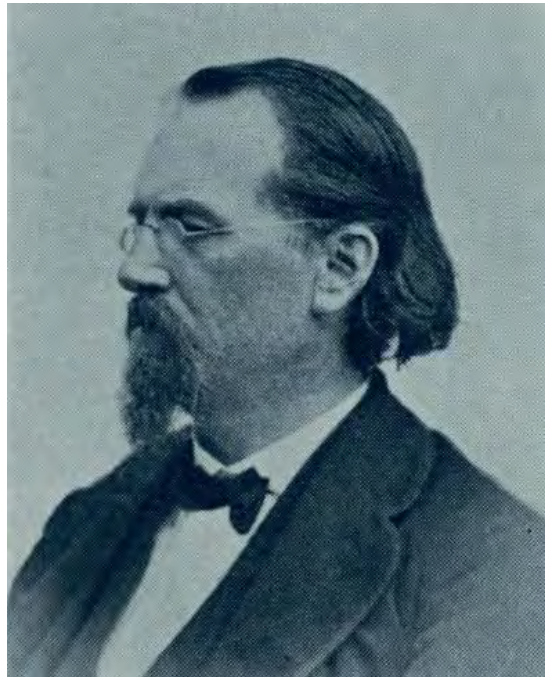
**Julia Wessman
Rose Cottage (1920s)**



Stoeckel

Music maestro **Gustave Jacob Stoeckel** immigrated to the United States in 1848 fleeing revolutionary unrest in his homeland of Bavaria, Germany. His only currency was a letter of introduction to William Larned, professor of Rhetoric and English at Yale. Larned's wife Irene happened to be Robbins Battell's sister who shared his love of music. Irene had a beautiful singing voice and had begun playing the organ at the church on the Green when she was eleven years old. Impressed by Gustave Stoeckel's musical talents, Irene took him under her wing, paving the way for him to become Yale's first music professor and eventually leading to the beginning of Yale's prestigious School of Music which this year is celebrating its 125th anniversary.

Fortuitously, Irene introduced Stoeckel to her brother Robbins. Both born in 1819 and bonded by their mutual passion for music (though they were from dramatically different social realms) Stoeckel and Robbins Battell became lifelong friends, admirers and collaborators. Gustave and his wife Matilda named one of their sons Robbins and later retired to Norfolk in a house on Litchfield Road called *Elmslea* which no longer stands. Ultimately, the Battell Stoeckel name would become synonymous with classical music in Norfolk.



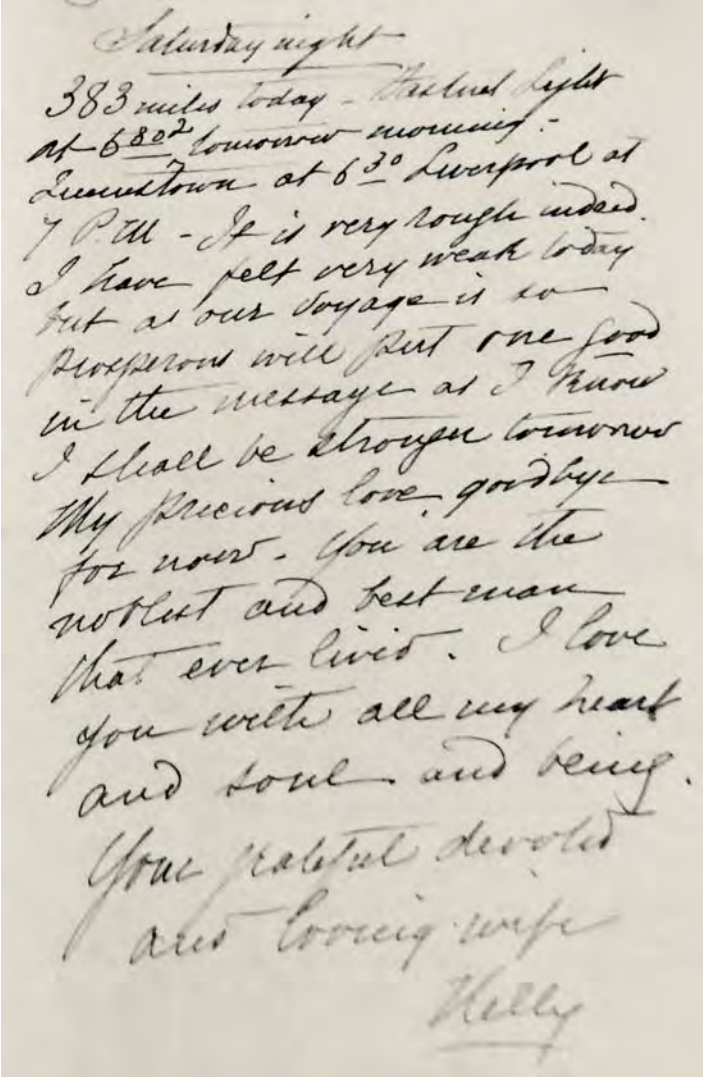
Gustave Jacob Stoeckel (1819-1907)

Carl Stoeckel, Gustave's son, was not blessed with his father's musical gifts but did share his love of music and keen ambition. With his father's influence, Carl became Robbins Battell's personal secretary, thereby overseeing Battell business interests from Whitehouse, particularly when Robbins was at his office on Wall Street in New York.

A Delicate Romance

Not long after Carl Stoeckel began working for Robbins Battell, he and Ellen (seven years his senior) became enamored of one another and carried on a not-so-secret romance that was verboten to her father. As much as Robbins may have liked Gustave and Carl Stoeckel, from his rigid patrician perspective, he could not conceive of his cherished daughter marrying the son of a German émigré. How much *Sturm* and *Drang* there may have been behind closed Whitehouse doors over the budding romance (take a look at Robbins' stern visage in the above portrait), might be presumed from the circumstance that, only three months after her father died on January 25, 1895, Ellen and Carl eloped, esoterically sailing on separate ships to rendezvous in England. Ellen's emotional letters to Carl before he left Norfolk to join her were

fraught with depictions of the rough passage she and her companion Julia Wessman were experiencing and with ardent expressions of her love for Carl.



Saturday night -
383 miles today - the last night
at 6³⁰ tomorrow morning -
Lancaster at 6³⁰ Liverpool at
7 P.M. - It is very rough indeed.
I have felt very weak today
but as our voyage is so
prosperous will put one word
in the message as I know
I shall be strong tomorrow
My precious love, goodbye
for now. You are the
nicest and best man
that ever lived. I love
you with all my heart
and soul and being.
Your grateful devoted
and loving wife
Ellen

Ellen Battell Letter to Carl Stoeckel from Aboard the S.S. *Servia* - 1895

On May 6, 1895, Ellen Battell and Carl Stoeckel were married on the Isle of Wight in the thirteenth-century Whitwell Church by Vicar Reverend Robert Bennett Oliver, of Trinity College, Cambridge, U.K.

Thirteenth-Century Whitwell Church - Isle of Wight



Upon their return to Norfolk after their romantic wedding on the Isle of Wight, Ellen and Carl wasted no time establishing their own lasting cultural identity in Norfolk.



Apotheosis:
Ellen and Carl Stoeckel Resplendent At Home After Their Wedding

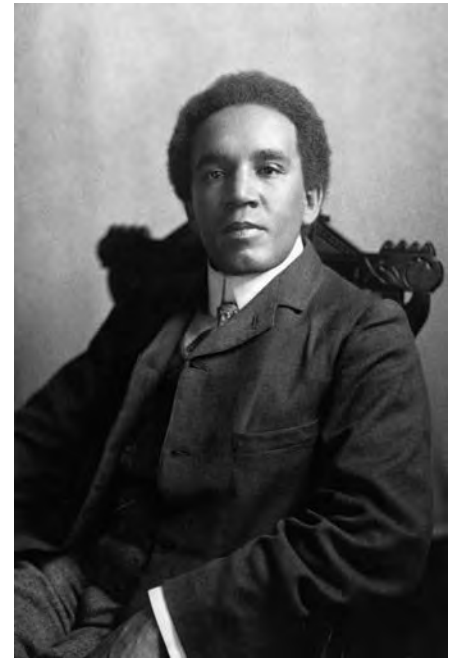
In 1896, concerned that graduates of liberal colleges living in Litchfield County were too isolated to gather and socialize, the Stoeckels founded the *Litchfield County University Club*, whereby 200 select county college men paid dues of \$1 a year for the privilege of congregating to “promote social intercourse and good fellowship and advance the interests of higher education”. Sumptuous dinners were given by the Stoeckels in the horse and carriage barn (now the studios for the Yale Summer School of Art) where college songs were sung and guests were regaled by distinguished speakers, sometimes ten in one evening. In 1914, former President, William Howard Taft was the guest of honor and spoke for four and a half hours.

Music Takes Center Stage

In 1897, the Stoeckels began hosting informal evenings of glee singing at Whitehouse. The following year they convened the *Norfolk Glee Club* with Ellen herself conducting the initial concert. To honor Ellen’s father, they founded the *Litchfield County Choral Union* in 1899 with the express purpose of bringing choral and orchestral music to a larger audience. After first testing acoustics in a temporary hall built behind Whitehouse, they hired noted Washington, CT

architect **Ehrick Rossiter** to design a rustic music hall constructed of cedar and lined with California redwood at the bottom of the steep hill behind Whitehouse. Reflective of their personal modesty, the Stoeckels dubbed it ***The Music Shed*** which proved to have superlative acoustics.

The Music Shed - Ehrick Rossiter - 1900

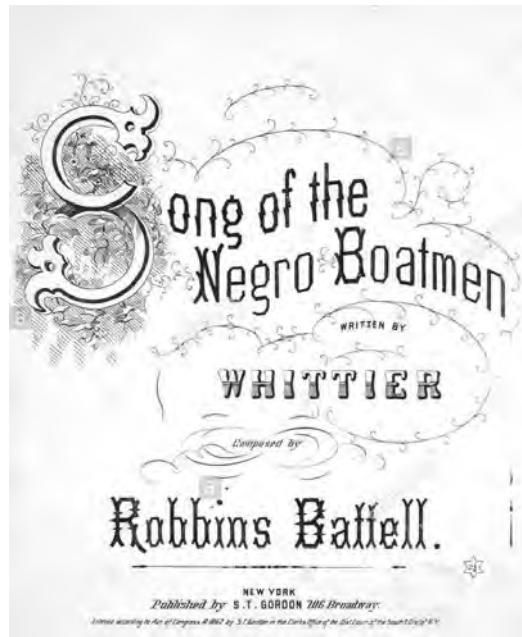


Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875-1912)

Extraordinarily generous, the Stoeckels were said to have spent up to \$40,000 a year (\$1 million today) on concerts and festivities. For one week every June, *The Norfolk Festival* was the internationally-known epicenter of classical music. The Stoeckels brought in world famous musicians and composers such as **Sergei Rachmaninoff** from Russia, **Jean Sibelius** from Finland, tenor **Enrico Caruso** from Italy and **Samuel Coleridge-Taylor** (the 'Black Mahler') from London. Lucullan dinners in the carriage barn were catered by an entire staff of chefs and waiters brought up by train from Delmonico's in New York. On those 'ambrosial' nights, after fabulous banquets in the carriage barn, George Franks Fanfare Band led euphoric guests down a serpentine, torch-lined path to sensational concerts at the Music Shed. Tickets to these coveted fêtes were free but you had to be invited personally by the Stoeckels.

One Family's Commitment to Social Justice

A dedicated abolitionist, Robbins Battell was a delegate to the 1861 Peace Conference in Washington, the final failed attempt to avert the Civil War. With his sister Anna, Robbins attended Lincoln's March 4, 1861 presidential inauguration and later became one of Lincoln's trusted advisors. Predisposed by his devout religious beliefs, Robbins Battell was moved by the simple beauty of negro spirituals and wrote his own 'negro melodies', such as: *Keep Me From Sinking Down* (1868), *Freedman's Quickstep*, written for military bands (1863) and *Song of the Negro Boatmen* (1862) with words by Quaker abolitionist and poet **John Greenleaf Whittier**.



Sheet Music - S.T. Gordon, New York - 1862

Sympathizer to the cause of radical abolitionist martyr, **John Brown** of Harpers Ferry, VA infamy, who was born in Torrington, CT, Battell commissioned Irish-American artist, **John Hovenden**, to paint the monumental work, *The Last Moments of John Brown* in 1884. This sentimental painting was at Whitehouse until the Stoeckels donated it in 1897 to the Metropolitan Museum in New York, where it hangs to this day.

Battell's lifetime commitment to education and civil rights is exemplified by his \$3000 donation in 1886 to **Booker T. Washington** to help purchase an abandoned plantation in Alabama for the establishment of Tuskegee University. Battell became a Trustee of the University for many years.



The Last Moments of John Brown
John Hovenden - 1884

In 1799, Owen Brown, a tanner, moved his family 15 miles, from Norfolk to Torrington, CT where his son, John Brown was born on May 9, 1800. John Brown presumably got his fierce abolitionist views from his father who, in 1798, took part in the forcible rescue of slaves claimed by a Virginia clergyman in Canaan, CT. After the Civil War, John Brown's Torrington birthplace became a shrine to the abolitionist cause. In 1901, the Stoeckels purchased the birthplace to preserve it and later deeded it to the John Brown Association. Unfortunately, the house burned to the ground in 1918.



John Brown's Birthplace, Torrington, CT - 1785

Two more emblems of Battell Stoeckel dedication to Civil Rights can be found not far from Norfolk. Just off the Green in Litchfield, CT is a bronze medallion set in granite. Designed by English sculptor **Henry Alfred Pegram**, the medallion commemorates **Harriet Beecher Stowe**, who wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and her brother, the abolitionist preacher Henry Lyman Stowe who were born in Litchfield. The Stoeckels donated the medallion in 1908 and, before being installed in Litchfield, it was on display at Whitehouse.

In 1900, the Stoeckels funded a battle monument designed by **George Keller** (architect of the Norfolk Library) in Cornwall Hollow, CT to honor Civil War hero Major General John Sedgwick who was killed by a Confederate sharpshooter on May 9, 1864 in Spotsylvania, VA. A crowd of over 3000 people attended the monument's dedication on May 30, 1900.



**Beecher Medallion, Litchfield, CT
Henry Alfred Pegram - 1908**



**Sedgwick Battle Monument
Cornwall Hollow, CT George
Keller - 1900**

A Lasting Cultural Legacy

In 1925, Carl Stoeckel became ill and was confined to Whitehouse. That summer the family hired a nurse to care for him by the name of **Ida Ten Eyck O'Keeffe**, sister of famed artist Georgia O'Keeffe. Ida was also an artist but not having the patronage of someone such as photographer Albert Steiglitz as did her sister, Ida had to make a living as a nurse while working on her art in her free time. Caring for Carl Stoeckel at Whitehouse that summer, Ida O'Keeffe had an epiphany.

Inspired by paintings in the Stoeckel library and the pastoral, natural setting of the estate, Ida began painting in oils for the first time. Starting with still lifes of flowers on the Stoeckel property, O'Keeffe later developed a distinct modernist style as shown in a series of paintings she did in the early 1930s of the Highland Lighthouse on Cape Cod. This past summer The Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, MA mounted a comprehensive exhibit of Ida O'Keeffe's rediscovered, long-neglected work.

White Lillies



1926

Variations on a Lighthouse Theme, IV



1931

Ida Ten Eyck O'Keeffe

The lavish Norfolk music festivals came to an end after Carl Stoeckel died in 1925, but Ellen continued to hold smaller, more intimate concerts at Whitehouse. Intrinsicly humble and kind-hearted, Ellen always considered the people of Norfolk to be part of her family. In addition to donating the five windows in Battell Chapel designed by her friend **Louis Comfort Tiffany**, she

hired Ehrick Rossiter to design the Haystack Mountain tower in memory of her father, maintained the picturesque country fence on Mountain Road and financed a much-needed addition to the West Norfolk schoolhouse. She was known for her many kindnesses in the Norfolk community. Eighty-nine year old Norfolk native, **Pete Mulville** remembers that, when he and his siblings had scarlet fever as children in the 1930s, Ellen Battell Stoeckel would often pull up in her chauffeured limousine to their Alfredo Taylor house on Mountain Road with gifts and candy for the sick children.

After years of declining health, Ellen Battell Stoeckel died on May 5, 1939 at the age of 88. Having no heirs, she left her 60-acre Norfolk estate and \$2 million dollars “for the benefit and development of the School of Music of Yale University, and for extending said university’s courses in music, art and literature”. In 1941, the Yale Summer School of Music was established followed by the Yale Summer Art School in 1946. For twelve glorious weeks from May to August thanks to Ellen Battell Stoeckel, Norfolk comes alive with young, energized art and music students and is blessed to have at its core, The Music Shed with its multiplicity of illustrious, uplifting musical performances by some of the best chamber music ensembles in the world.

Ellen Battell and Carl Stoeckel are entombed overlooking their beloved Music Shed in a cave-like sepulcher beneath a mélange of massive boulders.



Inscrutable: Ellen Battell and Carl Stoeckel Gravesite Adjacent to The Music Shed

Michael Cummings Kelly, Club Historian
October 9, 2019

A sincere thank you to **Ann Havemeyer, Ph.D.** and NCC member **Robert Alan Dance** whose 2006 book, *The Magnificent Battells*, was a great help in researching this profile; and to NCC member **Barry Charles Webber**, Director of the *Norfolk Historical Society*, for his help filling in the blanks.

