

GEORGE M. HOUSTON GARDENS

A Legacy of Learning

BY AUDREY BLACKWELL

When George M. Houston moved to Greeley in the late 1800s, he settled on a great expanse of land just west of what is now 23rd Avenue and 4th Street. A farmer and gardener at heart, the late George Houston (pronounced Howston) would be pleased today that the community he helped build continues his dreams.

The George M. Houston Memorial Gardens, located at 415 23rd Ave., serve two important concerns - they facilitate learning for students in botanical and environmental studies, and they recognize the Union Colonists' contributions in establishing a solid water foundation for irrigation and domestic uses in the northern Colorado plains. In addition, they provide a valued tourist attraction for the community-at-large through guided and self-guided tours of the scaled-down Colorado landscape.

Houston Gardens feature two sections: the acreage south of the Houston home is devoted to a community garden where individuals and groups cultivate flowers and vegetables. The landscape north of the home is committed to the garden park that serves as a showcase of Colorado land history.

The north gardens reflect four of the five Colorado life zones, which are based on altitude and weather. (1) *Plains Life Zone* (elevation 3,500-6,000 ft.) exemplifies the area surrounding Greeley, (2) *Foothills Life Zone* (elevation 6,000-8,000 ft.) exemplifies the area west of Loveland, including the Estes Park entrance of Rocky Mountain National Park, (3) *Montane Life Zone* (elevation 8,000-10,000 ft.) re-

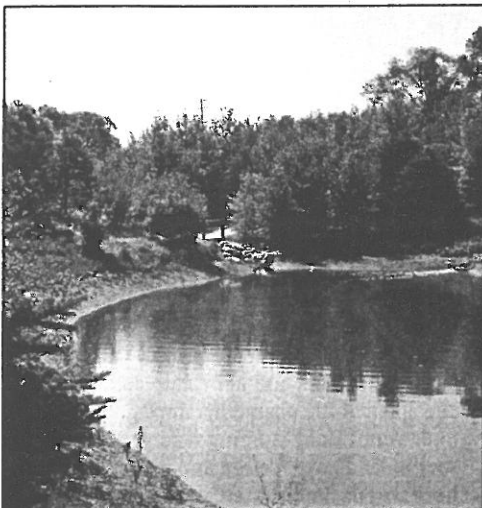


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sembles the lower slopes of Rocky Mountain National Park or around Allenspark, and (4) *Subalpine Life Zone* (elevation 10,000-11,500 ft.) is similar to the Poudre Lake area at the Continental Divide in Rocky Mountain National Park. The fifth zone, *Alpine Life Zone* (above 11,500 ft.), cannot be represented at Greeley's altitude.

Since 1982, the Assistance League of Greeley has conducted nature tours from April through October for students, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts and senior citizen groups. Curriculum offerings at Houston Gardens include a history of Greeley and Weld County. Topics include how the Indians and colonists used native plants and the importance of irrigation to the area, the interdependence of plants and life forms, geography, erosion, pollution, geology, other life forms (insects, etc.), directions (compass), weather and climate, and, of course, plants in nature.

Much of the credit for the development and maintenance of Houston Gardens goes to the late Phylabe Houston, daughter and only child of George and Gladys
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The George M. Houston Gardens at 23rd Avenue and 4th Street is a popular destination for outdoor enthusiasts of all ages. A paved path takes walkers past an array of native Colorado landscapes, top photo; an area is set aside as a community garden, where flowers and vegetables are grown in small plots, middle photo; and Thelma Butler of the Assistance League, bottom photo, leads a group of students on a tour of the gardens.



Phylabe Houston

Photo from Hazel E. Johnston collection

Sanborn Houston, and the Assistance League of Greeley.

As the story goes, Phylabe shared her father's dream of developing botanic gardens on four and a half acres of their farm. After George died April 19, 1968, Phylabe donated funds and property to the city, which are held in trust by the Greeley Area Foundation. She sold the water rights to the City of Greeley with the stipulation that as long as the Assistance League runs the gardens, it has a right to the water to irrigate the gardens.

In the early 1970s, Phylabe collaborated with the Assistance League of Greeley to develop the natural area depicting native trees, shrubs, wildflowers and grasses. Today, the Assistance League is responsible for the operation of the gardens. Money received at the League's Bargain Box Thrift Shop and other fund-raising activities is used to finance the gardens and other philanthropic projects

in the area.

Although the group does not solicit contributions for projects, donations are accepted. Houston Gardens has received gifts in kind in the form of memorial trees, a redwood ramada and other honorariums, as well as some cash donations.

Assistance League of Greeley - Philanthropy Unbound

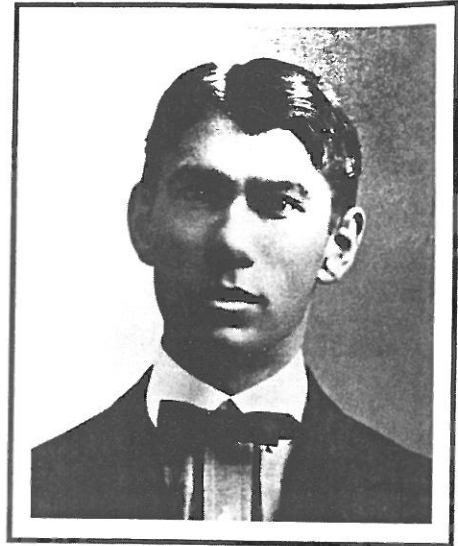
Assistance League of Greeley is dedicated to the betterment of Greeley as a community; it is a non-profit, non-sectarian and non-political volunteer organization.

The Assistance League of Greeley began in 1970 as a local chapter of the National Assistance League. In order to gain recognition by the national group, the Assistance League of Greeley spearheaded the construction of the George M. Houston Memorial Gardens. In October 1973, Assistance League of Greeley was chartered as the 54th Chapter of National Assistance League as a result of its success with the gardens.

Initial financing of the project came from Phylabe Houston, and her estate continues to fund some of the operations through the trust fund. Additional funding and most of the labor in landscape, design and maintenance of the gardens is credited to the Assistance League of Greeley, according to Patti Watson, chairperson of the Leagues' development and maintenance committee.

The league hired local landscape architects and engineers Nelson, Haley, Patterson & Quirk, to design the gardens.

Thelma Butler, retired teacher and Assistance League volunteer who organizes the educational tours through School District 6, says architect Jim Sell drew the plans and began the development of the gardens. "He made plant lists, planning what types of trees, shrubs, flowers and grasses to grow to reflect



George M. Houston

Photo from Hazel E. Johnston collection

their own ecosystem."

For example, Ponderosa pine trees grow on a south facing hill in the gardens, as they do in the mountains. On a north facing hill, blue spruce and white fir trees thrive with greater amounts of water and indirect sunlight.

Two lakes in the midst of the gardens hold the irrigation water. These lakes were carved out and contoured by machinery hired by the Assistance League. However, much of the labor of placing plastic in the water beds, preparing the grounds for tours each spring and operating the tours was and continues to be performed by Assistance League volunteers.

Other community groups have also lent a helping hand. Members of the Boy Scouts and Boys Club built bridges and helped move rocks, some of which came from the East (sandstone) and some that were brought down

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from the mountains. Others built wheel-chair-accessible walkways leading to the aggregate sidewalk that follows the tour route in ribbon-like fashion. Credit is continually given to these groups as well as to the Morning Garden Club, high school and university groups, and a multitude of private citizens for their donations of time and money to the preservation of the Houston Gardens.

George M. Houston - A Prominent Pioneer Citizen

George M. Houston was born in Troy (Miami County), Ohio. As a boy, he moved with his family to homestead in Otis, Colo. George came to Greeley to attend school and was the second enrollee in Greeley Normal School, now University of Northern Colorado. According to his friend and long-time Greeley resident Burgess Joyner, "Chivalry was very much alive in George; he would've been the first student in Normal School, but he stepped back to allow a lady to go first."

Shortly before his death, George Houston was interviewed by the *Greeley Tribune*. In that story, he told of arriving in Greeley Sunday, March 22, 1890, in a wagon drawn by a team of horses named Simon and Peter. George went to church and after discussing his need for a job, went to work as a gardener for Rosene Meeker Skewes, daughter of Nathan C. Meeker, the founder of Greeley. Greeley's population at that time was 2,300.

George left her employ after one month having secured a similar position with Burton Sanborn. After graduating from Normal School in June 1893, George returned to Otis and taught school for one year. He was called back to Greeley by Burton Sanborn, who offered George a partnership in his real estate, surveying and land development firm. Seventeen years later, George married Burton's daughter, Gladys, and they had one child,

Phylabe. Nine years hence, Gladys died, and George later married Maud Hartsburg who lived only a few years after the marriage. George never remarried, but lived his remaining years with his daughter in the home he built on the property at 415 23rd Ave.

During his lengthy residence in Greeley (nearly 78 years), George Houston served as mayor (1909-1910), as trustee for Colorado State College (UNC), and as Democratic state senator from 1935-1939.

In addition to his expertise as a farmer and gardener, George became an expert in irrigation principles and land development. He and Burton Sanborn are credited with the development and assistance with such projects as the Northern Colorado Irrigation Project, including Fossil Creek Reservoir, with laying out the town of Wellington, and for developing a pipeline system that allowed him to draw water from the No. 3 ditch - one of the first irrigation systems built by the pioneers of Greeley. At the time, Houston owned 360 acres that spanned from 23rd Avenue and 4th Street to beyond 35th Avenue and south to Sanborn Park.

George Houston had also served as secretary for the Mountain States Beet Growers Association, and in his later years kept busy with his interests of shop work and gardening. Inspired by a visit to Butchart Gardens on Vancouver Island, B.C., George and his daughter planned to dedicate their gardens to the city of Greeley. They wanted a memorial to their ancestors and the pioneers who built the city, leaving this legacy to all who live here.

Tours of Houston Gardens can be scheduled between April 13 and Oct. 31, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. weekdays. For further information, call 353-2226.

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