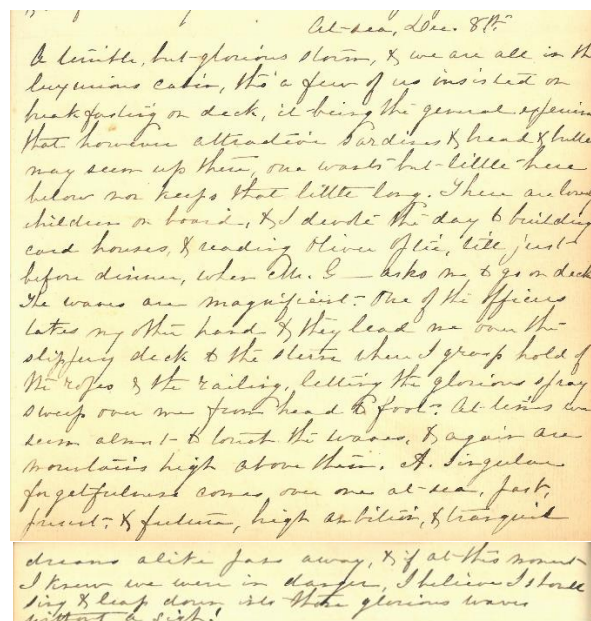


Alice Wellington Rollins and the Imagining of Bronxville

By Ray Geselbracht

In November 1869, Alice Wellington, intent on completing her education with a year's study in Europe, boarded the German liner *Silesia*, bound for Le Havre and Hamburg, in New York City. On December 8, only a few days out from its arrival in Europe, the ship experienced what Wellington called in her travel journal, "a terrible but glorious storm." With the help of one of the other passengers and a member of the crew, she made her way to the ship's stern, where she grasped tightly the railing, "letting the glorious spray sweep over me from head to foot." The ship was pitching and rolling in the rough sea. "At times we seem almost to touch the waves, & again are mountains high above them." She was a brave young woman, filled with a youthful romanticism. "A singular forgetfulness comes over me at sea," she recorded in her journal. "Past, present, & future, high ambition & tranquil dreams alike pass away, & if at this moment I knew we were in danger, I believe I should sing & leap down into those glorious waves without a sigh!"



At sea, Dec. 8th
A terrible, but glorious storm, & we are all in the
luxurious cabin, tho' a few of us insist on
breakfasting on deck, it being the general opinion
that howlour attraction Sardines & bread & butter
may seem up there, one wants but little here
below so keeps that little long. There are lovely
children on board, & I devote the day to building
card houses, & reading Oliver Twist, like just
before dinner, when Mr. E. asks me to go on deck.
The waves are magnificent. One of the officers
takes my other hand & they lead me over the
slipping deck to the stern where I grasp hold of
the ropes & the railing, letting the glorious spray
sweep over me from head to foot. At times we
seem almost to touch the waves, & again are
mountains high above them. A singular
forgetfulness comes over me at sea, past,
present, & future, high ambition, & tranquil
dreams alike pass away, & if at this moment
I knew we were in danger, I believe I should
sing & leap down into those glorious waves
without a sigh!

Entry from Rollin's Travel Journal, December 8, 1869

Alice Wellington did not leap into the stormy sea that day. Instead she completed her education in Dresden, Paris, Berlin and elsewhere and returned to the United States. She married Daniel Rollins, had a son, became a writer and was widely published in the leading periodicals of the day, and also published books of fiction and poetry. She was an established literary figure when, in 1893, apparently influenced by financial reverses suffered in the economic recession that began that year, she and her

family moved to William Van Duzer Lawrence's new community in Bronxville, called Lawrence Park.



She moved into one of the first three houses Lawrence built in the park, at 6 Sunset Avenue. She discovered a wonderful den, high up in a small tower, a hexagonal room with tiny square windows all along the top. This was a room where she could, as she wrote, “draw and paint, write sonnets, compose music, loll and read and gossip.”

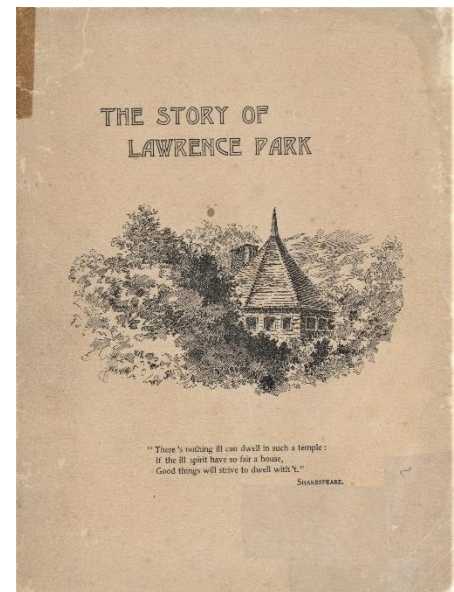
Rollins became one of a growing number of creative people that would help give Lawrence Park—and Bronxville—a sense of identity. One of her contributions to

the new community was to take a leading role in founding in 1896 the Nondescript Club, a club for women interested in exploring the arts, literature, and current affairs. Rollins named the club when, exasperated by long discussions about what was its purpose and what its name should be, she said impatiently that the new club was really quite nondescript. One imagines that at that point the discussion stopped, everyone looked at Rollins, and the club now had its name, which it retains to this day.

Rollins also made a lasting contribution to giving Bronxville a sense of itself by writing in about 1895, a highly literate and well-illustrated promotional booklet, *The Story of Lawrence Park*. She wrote lovingly of the beautiful green, forested landscape, natural and almost pristine despite the growing presence of houses and roads. There was no unpleasant “newness” about this new creation called Lawrence Park, she wrote. Everything one saw—trees, flowers, brooks, massive rock outcroppings; houses, roads—“all look as if they had always been there and meant to stay.” And there were no fences, no large lawns, no rectangular gardens; everything seemed to belong to everyone.

The people in Lawrence Park, she wrote, are cultured and intellectual and they are happy to form together their own special society. “We all know each other, and you cannot come to our Park anyway unless some of us know and like you. You must be either a Genius or a Delightful Person to be eligible at all for such privileges as we extend.”

Rollins persuaded a close friend of hers in New York City to come to Lawrence Park to pass the winters of 1893-94 and 1894-95. She was Kate Douglas Wiggin, a writer



who was already famous, and would become much more so some years later when she published her children's classic, *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*. Despite her brief stay in Bronxville, Wiggin is remembered in Bronxville and as someone who helped set its emerging character.

On July 7, 1894, many of the residents of Lawrence Park gathered in front of an artist's house on Prescott Avenue to witness the laying of the cornerstone of the community's first artist's studio. One of the people present that day prepared a poem for the occasion. "We who are not richly gifted can rejoice that in this park/ We mingle freely with women and men of mark," its final verse went. "We can shine by reflected light and feel ourselves quite big, in/ Hob-nobbing with Mrs. A. W. Rollins and Mrs. K. D. Wiggin!"

Rollins died three years later. She was only fifty years old and had lived in Bronxville only four years. She certainly had much more to give her adopted village, but it was not to be. In the little time she had, though, she did much to conceptualize the idea of a village of exceptional beauty where artists, writers, and other creative people lived and worked, and where everyone was "a Genius or a Delightful person." This imagining is still influential in creating Bronxville's sense of itself, in much the same way as the Puritan idea of "a city upon a hill" continues to influence Americans' sense of their country.



Alice Wellington Rollins