

Mt. Hope: A Civil War Nursery for the World

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Abstract

Mt. Hope Nursery in Rochester, NY was the largest in the world in the late 1800s. Founded by George Ellwanger and Patrick Barry in 1840, the nursery rose to prominence due to the entrepreneurial spirit of the founders, their love of plants, and the emerging transportation infrastructure in western New York State that enabled them to ship plants around the world. They were among the first to recognize the potential of dwarf fruit trees. They established a research farm well before the advent of university farms or state experiment stations. Their nursery catalogs were a source of best management practices for growing fruit. At the behest of the American Pomological Society, Ellwanger and Barry produced an extensive catalog that included 90 fruit-bearing species with hundreds of cultivar descriptions and their regions of adaptation. Although the nursery was sold in the early 1900s, their legacy lives on through the philanthropy of the founders. Many trees propagated by the nursery are still thriving in Rochester and the smaller villages in the region, and land donated by Ellwanger and Barry is now a popular park that hosts more than a million visitors every year.



Photo 1. George Ellwanger, undated photo. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Ellwanger)

Mt. Hope Nursery was founded by George Ellwanger (1816-1906) (Photo 1) and Patrick Barry (1816-1890) (Photo 2) in 1840 when both were 24 years old. Ellwanger was born in Germany to a vineyard manager. He immigrated to the United States in 1835 and took jobs in a seed store and mulberry nursery. It

was thought at the time that silk production would be a burgeoning industry, so mulberry trees were propagated and planted to feed silk worms. This industry never took hold so Ellwanger sought another source of income. He met Barry, an Irish immigrant, who re-



Photo 2. Patrick Barry, undated photo. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patrick_Barry_\(horticulturist\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patrick_Barry_(horticulturist)))



Photo 3. Mt. Hope Nursery in the late 1800s. (<https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/136500#page/12>)

cently worked at Prince's Nursery on Long Island. Ellwanger, in particular, was a plantsman and collector; he would frequently travel to Europe in search of new cultivars for the US market. Together they began propagating fruiting and ornamental plants on 7 acres. In addition to the nursery, they invested in real estate, banking and horse-drawn street cars.

Rochester is located along Lake Ontario and the recently completed Erie Canal (in 1825) gave the nursery access to locations to the north, west and east using boats and barges. In addition, an active railroad line ran through Rochester connecting it with major cities in the Northeast and Midwest, and finally to the West Coast in 1869 with the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad. In addition to access to transportation, Rochester was ideally suited for growing fruit crops because of the moderating effect of Lake Ontario on temperatures, access to an unlimited fresh water supply, and good soils.

Demand for fruit and ornamental plants was high before the Civil War. In 1844 the nursery opened a branch in Toronto and an-

other in Columbus, Ohio in 1854. In 1856 the Rochester location had expanded to 400 acres and then to 650 acres in 1888 when it was considered the largest plant nursery in the world (Photo 3). These expansions were notable because they took place during times of intense fighting just to the south in Pennsylvania. In addition, the nursery suffered two separate fires, destroying buildings and planting stock, forcing the owners to consider bankruptcy. Despite these challenges, the nursery continued to thrive. Plants were sold to growers on the East Coast, the West Coast, and to Korea, Australia and particularly Japan (<https://rbscp.lib.rochester.edu/finding-aids/BBE47>).

Mt. Hope Nursery was among the first to propagate and promote the use of dwarf trees. In 1896, a dozen standard apple trees was \$2.50 and dwarf trees were \$4.00. This is approximately \$10 per dwarf tree in today's dollars - similar to the current wholesale price. Ellwanger and Barry were especially proud of their experimental farm. The Hatch Act was not passed until 1887, so

without experiment stations, nurseries were looked upon as a source of grower information. Both were very critical of the federal government for not helping growers develop new cultivars and improve scientific methods of fruit growing. Barry proclaimed in 1872 that, "Neither our state nor national governments have ever manifested a disposition to favor the rural arts with anything like a liberal patronizing policy. Advanced, wealthy, and powerful as we are, not a single step has been taken, in earnest, to establish model farms or

model gardens, in which experiments might be made, and examples given, that would enlighten cultivators, and elevate and honor their profession. Whatever advance has been made, is due wholly to individual taste, energy, and enterprise; and to these alone are we permitted to look for future progress." (<https://rbscp.lib.rochester.edu/finding-aids/BBE47>)

Their annual nursery catalogs were a blend of production guides and cultivars for sale (<https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/137618>, Photo 4;

Photo 4. Mt.Hope Nursery annual catalog of 1896. (<https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/137618>)

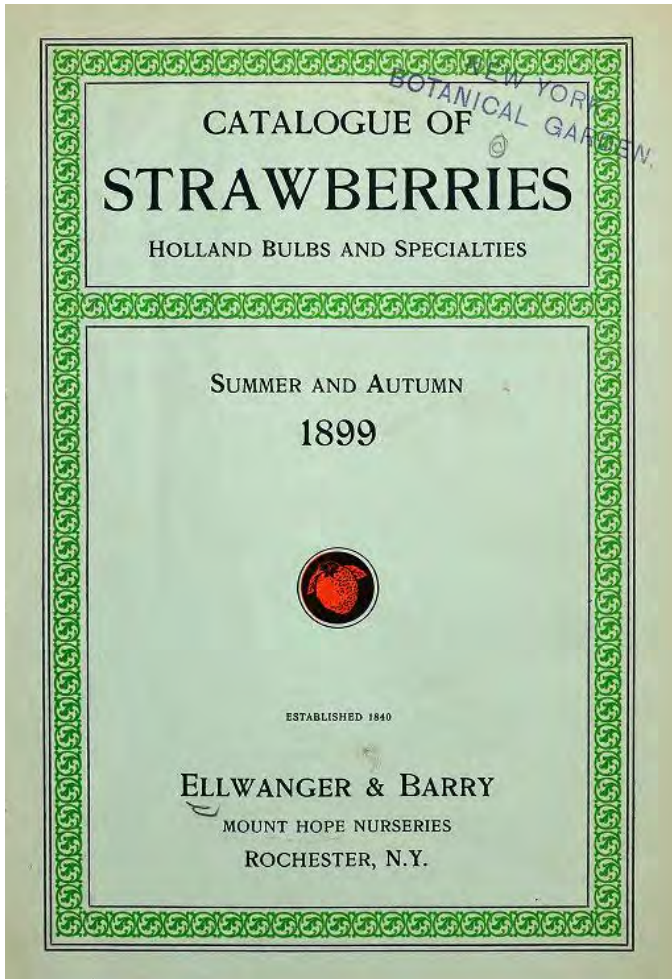


Photo 5. Special edition catalog published in 1899. (<https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/279587>)

www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/136500; <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/136619>; <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/279481>) and they would occasionally produce a special edition catalog for a particular crop such as strawberries (<https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/279587>, Photo 5). The nursery also commissioned a large set of colored horticultural prints (<https://digitalcollections.lib.rochester.edu/ur/ellwanger-and-barry-horticultural-prints>). In addition, each was a prolific writer. Ellwanger wrote a 356-page

book entitled *The Garden's Story* (<https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/74845>). From 1844 to 1852 Barry edited *The Genesee Farmer*, which eventually merged into *The Cultivator and Country Gentleman*. He took over editing *The Gardening Magazine* and wrote a 504-page book entitled *Barry's Fruit Garden* (<https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/70930>). This book contained unabashed commentary about the current state of horticulture. "Americans, if they be not already, must become truly a nation of fruit growers."

“Persons engaged largely in tree growing will frequently ask the most absurd questions.” “The English, notwithstanding their great gardening skill, and their refined and elegant modes of culture, are far behind the French in the management of fruit-trees.”

The crowning scientific achievement of Ellwanger and Barry was the *Catalog of Fruits*, commissioned by the American Pomological Society in 1862 (<https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/136497>). The goal was to describe every known cultivar of fruit available at that time and indicate where it could be grown successfully. This Herculean effort published four years later resulted in a catalog of 90 species including 337 apple, 112 peach, and 117 pear cultivars. Each cultivar was described in terms of size, form, color, quality, use, season and origin. In addition, adaptability to various states and provinces was indicated.

The family continued the business through the next generation, but the third generation was not interested in agriculture so sold off the nursery property after it was closed in

1918. However, the legacy of Ellwanger and Barry was extensive and continues to this day. Highland Park in downtown Rochester was established on 20 acres of land donated by Ellwanger and Barry in 1888. In 1877 they donated land for a school and built an observation pavilion atop the hill near the reservoir in the park. The Children’s Pavilion, also known as the Ellwanger and Barry Memorial Pavilion, was dedicated in 1890 (<https://www.highlandparkconservancy.org/childrens-pavilion>). There is now a separate park in Rochester named after them (<https://www.rochesterparks.org/rochester-city-parks/ellwanger-and-barry-park/>). A neighborhood in Rochester is officially designated as the Ellwanger and Barry district (<https://www.trulia.com/n/ny/rochester/ellwanger-barry/85419/>). An historic marker currently stands at the site of the original nursery (Photo 6).

In the early 1900s, the influence of the nursery was apparent in the species selections planted along city streets in the Northeast and made available to Rochester residents at “low rates” to green the city. These



Photo 6. Historic marker designating the original site of Mt. Hope Nursery in Rochester, NY. (Photo courtesy of Janet D. Anderson)



Photo 7. One of the original beech trees planted on the nursery grounds as it looked in fall, 2020. (Photo courtesy of Janet D. Anderson)

included a wide selection of maples, beech, elms, lindens, larch, horse chestnut, and locust designated as suitable for parks, avenues and

streets. Some of these trees are still growing in nearby towns, in Mt. Hope Cemetery and on the estate grounds of both Ellwanger and Barry (Photo 7).

Helen Cresswell Ellwanger, granddaughter to George Ellwanger, bequeathed the estate to the Landmark Society of Western New York in December 1980 with the understanding that the grounds be used for the promotion of interest in horticulture and that the specimen trees and gardens be preserved in perpetuity (<https://ellwangerestate.com/>, Photo 8). The old nursery office (Photo 9) is currently used by the University of Rochester (http://www.historic-structures.com/ny/rochester/ellwanger_barry_nursery.php) and Barry's house is now the provost's residence (Photo 10). The Barry House is the nation's "most outstanding" example of the Italian style of the Victorian period (https://rocwiki.org/Patrick_Barry_House). Highland Park was redesigned by Frederic Law Olmstead (designer of New York City's Central Park) and is now home to the Lilac Festival that draws more than 500,000 annually. The park contains more than 550 cultivars of lilac.

The contributions of Ellwanger and Barry to pomology are enormous. In addition to



Photo 8. The estate began as a farmhouse in 1837 before being purchased by Ellwanger in 1867. Its current address is 625 Mt. Hope Ave. in Rochester, NY. (Photo courtesy of Janet D. Anderson)



Photo 9. Mt. Hope Nursery office was built in 1854 and is now used by the University of Rochester. It is located at 668 Mt. Hope Ave., Rochester, NY. (Photo courtesy of Janet D. Anderson)



Photo 10. Built in 1855, Patrick Barry's house is an example of Italian architecture from the Victorian Period. It is located at 692 Mt. Hope Ave. in Rochester, NY. (Photo courtesy of Janet D. Anderson)

providing many thousands of fruiting plants for an expanding fruit industry around the world, they recognized the potential in dwarf fruit trees and promoted their use. They introduced many cultivars to the US from other countries. Their nursery catalogs were the most up-to-date source of information on cultural practices for growers at that time. Their *Catalog of Fruits* was the most comprehensive collection of cultivar information ever compiled. Their experimental farm was a predecessor to state agricultural experiment stations. Even though the nursery operation did not survive the transfer across generations, their contributions to the City of Rochester remain. More than 100 years after their deaths, millions of people each year still enjoy the recreational and educational opportunities provided by these two philanthropists and visionaries.

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