

Annette Finnigan: Building an Enlightened Community

By Betty Trapp Chapman



Portrait of Annette Finnigan by John Wells, 1937.

Annette Finnigan—energetic suffrage leader, astute businesswoman, visionary philanthropist—became involved in many aspects of Houston’s development. Her contributions have had a significant impact on its citizens. Yet today few Houstonians are familiar with her name.

Annette was born in 1873 in West Columbia, Texas, to Katherine McRedmond and John Finnigan.¹ John, orphaned as a young boy of fourteen, was forced to leave school to earn his livelihood. A thirst for knowledge and a tireless energy for hard work, however, led him to become a successful merchant dealing in animal hides. Known as a democratic-minded person, John Finnigan believed in the worth of all individuals and in doing what he could to help others, and he instilled these admirable qualities in his daughter, Annette. In 1874, the Finnigan family moved to Houston, where Annette and her sisters, Katherine and Elizabeth, attended the newly-established public schools.²

By 1888, the flourishing family business, John Finnigan Hide Company, had offices in Houston and New York City. To oversee the New York office, and possibly to expand the educational opportunities for his daughters, Finnigan moved his family to the East, although they claimed Texas residency. Annette, who had not yet graduated from the Houston Normal and High School, studied at Tilden Seminary in West Lebanon, New Hampshire, and in the fall of 1888 entered Wellesley College in Massachusetts. Undoubtedly, her years at Wellesley profoundly influenced her. Her curriculum reveals that, while she showed an interest in languages, rhetoric, and art history, she also studied the sciences. She belonged to the campus art society and participated in the Wellesley Bicycle Club, a symbol of “emancipated womanhood.” Wellesley’s unique policy of employing an all-female faculty provided strong role models and affirmed the concept of feminine leadership. Class elections and assemblies educated women in organization, leadership, cooperation, and articulating their views.³ This represented a new experience for females and later proved invaluable to Annette.

The most significant issue during Finnigan’s years at Wellesley was likely woman suffrage. Even though early on women’s colleges did not encourage participation in suffrage activities for fear it jeopardized female education, Annette’s introduction to suffrage occurred during her freshman year

when she heard an eminent suffragist speak in Boston. By Annette's senior year, five hundred Wellesley students and professors declared themselves in favor of woman suffrage.⁴

After graduation in 1894, Annette returned to New York and became involved in the family business. Intent on developing his daughter's capabilities, John Finnigan left her in charge when he traveled outside New York. In a letter to a cousin, Annette stated that "running a business takes an immense amount of experience and the responsibility worries me terribly." However, as she gained experience, more responsibility was entrusted to her. In 1896, while the Finnigans were still in New York, they were approached about selling their Houston home site on San Jacinto Street near the courthouse to make way for a commercial building. Believing that the house had architectural and historical value, Annette advertised and sold the home, which was moved to an outlying area that became Montrose. Today, The Heritage Society operates the 1850 Nichols-Rice-Cherry House as a house museum in Sam Houston Park.⁵ Unknowingly, Annette Finnigan preserved a part of Houston's heritage to enlighten future generations—an endeavor she expanded and refined in later years.

By early 1903, the Finnigan family had returned to Houston where Annette and her sisters initiated the city's suffrage campaign at a meeting in their home. The attendees formed the Houston Equal Suffrage League, the first such organization in Texas since the statewide movement lapsed in 1896. Undaunted by ridicule and a less-than-serious report of the meeting in the *Houston Chronicle*, the organization attempted to have a woman appointed to the Houston School Board. While the effort received attention and many Houstonians approved, the mayor ignored the petitions and appointed three men. Nevertheless, Finnigan saw their efforts as a positive step because they focused attention on the needs of the public schools and "the importance of selecting persons of the highest intelligence, broadest culture and noblest character to guide the education of the city's children."⁶

John Finnigan died in 1909, leaving a sizeable estate. His will specified that because of "her superior business experience and tact," Annette should assume all responsibility for administering his estate. This included the hide business, which had offices in twenty-three Texas locations, and the Houston Packing Company, the largest independent packing house in the South. Her primary responsibility, however, was the Hotel Brazos Company, which she had served as president since 1907. Fronting five hundred feet on the street, the hotel was one of the city's finest and advertised that "every facility of modern hotel life is found at the Brazos and ladies traveling alone are under the special protection of the management."⁷ Finnigan applied the same strength of purpose and efficient manner to her business dealings that she had to her suffrage activities. Undoubtedly, her role as a successful businesswoman proved enlightening to a community, which heretofore was dominated by male business leaders.

In 1912, the Houston suffrage organization was revived as the Women's Political Union under the leadership of Finnigan. Two years later she became president of the Texas Woman Suffrage Association, headquartered at the Hotel

Brazos, and the number of Texas clubs increased from eight to twenty-one. Recognizing that suffrage depended on submitting a proposed constitutional amendment to the electorate, Finnigan led in developing the campaign. In a letter to every legislative candidate, she stated, "It is manifestly unfair and un-American that the political liberties of one-half of our citizens should be denied by the will of an indifferent or adverse legislature." She and her co-workers zealously lobbied the legislators, and Finnigan solicited more female participation by traveling across Texas and conducting meetings, as one newspaper reported, with "determined logic and quiet faith." Proudly she carried the banner of her cause and refused to be intimidated when that cause was ridiculed or refuted. Although the electorate did not vote on the suffrage amendment, Finnigan declared, "We have not been defeated. Victory is only delayed." Although she relinquished the state presidency in 1915, she remained in contact with her successor, offering advice on strategy and organization. Ironically, just as the campaign began to gain momentum, offering excitement and hope, Annette Finnigan suffered a serious stroke.⁸

Although Finnigan became physically impaired, requiring her to sacrifice her roles as businesswoman and activist, she was not deterred. Her interest in suffrage never faltered, and she continued supporting it financially. Further, her vast intellect, deep interest in the enlightenment of others, and love for her hometown led her on a quest that continued for a decade, and the results of which lasted far longer.

Houston's Museum of Fine Arts incorporated in 1925, having occupied its new home a year earlier. The Depression



Grave Stela for a Woman, Greek, mid-4th century BC, marble; upper fragment of a grave monument, revealing two women and an infant in a pose of serenity.

Photo courtesy of The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston;
Gift of Miss Annette Finnigan.

made building a permanent collection difficult when the institution depended on donations. Before travelling abroad in 1931, Finnigan contacted Director James Chillman and asked if she might find antiquities for the young museum. Thus began an ideal collaboration. Chillman recalled, “She would always ask me what I would want ... rather than imposing her ideas on the museum.” Finnigan tirelessly researched and located the desired objects, which she purchased and donated. On Finnigan’s first foray abroad in search of antiquities, she journeyed to Egypt. The extensive assemblage of objects sent to the museum included ceramics, carvings, a gilded mummy mask of a princess, a papyrus sheet from the Book of the Dead, and a dedication stone of the XII Dynasty. An alabaster plate (2665-2155 BC) was a particularly fine example illustrating Egyptian life over 4,000 years. Over the next five years, Finnigan traveled

in search of treasures. She purchased approximately three hundred objects that were unpacked at the Houston museum with great anticipation. They included textiles—tapestries, rugs, and wall hangings—from India, Spain, Greece, and Persia. She acquired a collection of Byzantine crucifixes along with twenty pieces of sixteenth and seventeenth century furniture from Spain. Several pieces were loaned to the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts for a Spanish art exhibit at the State Fair of Texas in 1939, including a 1266 AD memorial stone with crucifix, a carved wood Madonna, altar candlesticks, and, interestingly, dueling pistols.⁹

Although Finnigan acquired Grecian objects on earlier trips, in 1936 she returned to Greece where she assembled her most valuable antiquities collection. When the shipment arrived in Houston, Finnigan noted that the Greek government reclaimed many of the priceless art objects before she got them out of the country. The oldest piece was a small marble statuette dating to 2500 BC, considered the finest product of the Early Bronze Age and typical of the primitive pieces found on the Greek islands before sculpture was recognized as a great independent art. Other objects included animals of terra cotta; gold and ivory jewelry; terra cotta funeral wreaths; religious icons in wood, brass and stone; and lithokoi or oil jars used by the ancient Greeks during funeral rites. An alabaster hydria, originally used to carry spring water and later placed in famous tombs as a ceremonial vase, was excavated near Athens just three years before Finnigan’s visit. Perhaps the acquisition receiving the most public interest was a gold myrtle wreath (c. 330-250 BC). Wreaths made from plants like myrtle, laurel, or ivy were awarded to athletes, soldiers, and royalty to show love and appreciation. By 300 BC, these wreaths were being cut from thin gold sheets. Too fragile to be worn, they were buried with the dead as symbols of life’s victories. When Chillman had asked Finnigan to find a small piece of Grecian marble, her research discovered the upper-portion of a fourth century marble grave stela, believed to be from Athens, where the classical style developed. This beautiful example of serenity became one of the museum’s most prized possessions, according to Chillman.¹⁰

As the museum prepared the artifacts for exhibition, its president George A. Hill, Jr., spoke about Finnigan’s contributions, “The knowledge with which she collects and the spirit in which her presentations are made are the most interesting events in the life of the museum. She is a connoisseur of art and due to her forethought there are many objects in the museum today that might otherwise have been seen in the large museums of Europe.” Finnigan, indeed, had asserted that she wanted Houston’s museum to achieve the excellence of those in cities like Berlin and London. To accomplish this, Finnigan approached her endeavor as an academic one and sought expert assistance. Sir Arthur Evans, the famous restorer and excavator of King



Book of Hours, *Franco-Flemish, 15th century, illuminated manuscript in Latin on vellum.*

Photo courtesy of Annette Finnigan Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.



Model Boat, Egyptian, 2061-1784 BC, painted wood; funerary boats were used in burial practices to hasten the journey of the deceased into the after life.

Photo courtesy of The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Gift of Miss Annette Finnigan.

Minos's Palace at Knossos in Crete, advised her in selecting seventeen Grecian vases from the Archaic period when the Greek civilization was shaping itself and producing extraordinary pottery. In 1937, the noted English painter, John Wells, did a portrait of Finnigan, which was presented to the museum by her sisters. Labeled "The Lady in Green" by museum patrons, it hung there for many years as a testimony to her intelligent and generous giving. Annette Finnigan, donor of approximately six hundred artifacts, established a precedent that others followed, enabling the museum to become a major cultural force in Houston.¹¹

The Houston Public Library also benefited from Finnigan's philanthropy. Her long-standing interest stemmed from her father's generosity in establishing Houston's first public library and from her study of the classics at Wellesley. In 1929, shortly after Houston's new downtown library opened, Finnigan decided to gather a sample of books showing how the art of bookmaking developed. She spent two years visiting the leading book houses in London, Munich, Budapest, and Constantinople, where she assembled sixty-five items dating from the twelfth to seventeenth centuries. They include illuminated manuscripts printed and painted by hand; books printed during the early centuries of machine printing when hand illumination was still employed; scrolls; sheepskin rolls bearing religious messages; and a group of first editions, remarkable for their fine printing and binding. In our age of rapid-fire print production, it is difficult to realize how limited books were before and during the Middle Ages. For more than six centuries, monasteries were primarily responsible for painstakingly producing duplicates of religious and classical literature by hand. As a result, only the wealthy could afford these treasures.¹²

The illuminated manuscripts selected by Finnigan are unbelievably beautiful. In art, the term "illumination" denotes decoration of written or printed text by lettering in gold ink upon a tinted page. Gradually it became customary to enlarge the initial letter of a page or paragraph. In



Funeral Amphora, Greek (Attic), 700 BC, ceramic; jar used for storing wine, grain, or oil and placed in burials as gifts for eternity.

Photo courtesy of The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston;
Gift of Miss Annette Finnigan.



Myrtle Wreath, Greek (Hellenistic), c. 350-250 BC, gold; replica of victory wreaths awarded to athletes or soldiers.

Photo courtesy of The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston;
Gift of Miss Annette Finnigan.


the more ornamental stages, the text is sometimes framed in a wide band showing birds, fruits, and flora upon a golden ground. Despite the difficulty of laying gold leaf on vellum, after many centuries, the gold work is smooth, flat, and brilliant as if it were applied only recently. In addition to gold leaf, lapis-lazuli, camine, and ultramarine make the pages glow with splendor. The Franco-Flemish copy of the *Book of Hours* is, perhaps, the most lavishly illuminated book in the collection. It contains six pages of miniatures within a framework of flowers, fruit, and birds upon a gold ground, in addition to twenty-two smaller paintings characteristic of the Flemish attention to detailing. A Doctor of Laws diploma from Padua University, dated March 30, 1678, features illuminated borders and a portrait painting of the degree's recipient, Vincente de Dominis. Also of particular interest is a fourteenth century Latin Vulgate Bible, written in small Gothic characters on vellum and belonging originally to William of Orange.¹³

Gutenberg's invention of the printing press in 1496 revolutionized bookmaking, but printed books were still illuminated by hand. Although most of the books and manuscripts are religious, as was customary in the Middle Ages, the collection also contains works of Erasmus, Boccaccio, Dante, Homer, Cicero, Petrarch, Caesar, and others. In the edition of Caesar's *Commentaries*, printed in Venice in 1513, the first page of each book is hand-illuminated with floral borders. Homer's *Iliad and Odyssey* is a two-volume edition printed in the same manner with a handsome French binding of red Morocco. The use of composite woodcuts

introduced a new era in printed illustrations for the third edition of Terence's *Comedies*, printed in 1499. At the time Finnigan acquired this valuable piece for the library, the only other known copy was in the British Museum and it lacked the frontispiece illustration of the Houston copy. When Finnigan presented this collection to the Houston Public Library, it was the only one of its kind in Texas.

Finnigan's contributions to her hometown reached beyond her artistic and literary gifts. Her long-standing altruism led her in 1939 to give eighteen acres to the City of Houston for a park for its black citizens. Realizing that the segregated city obviously lacked such recreational facilities, Finnigan sought to remedy this and requested that the park be named for her father. In a letter written eight months before her death, she expressed concern about the grounds being laid out properly. Today John Finnigan Park is a center of community activity for Fifth Ward Houstonians.¹⁴

Annette Finnigan died on July 17, 1940, after a long bout with cancer. Her impact on Houston lived on, however, as she had remembered its citizens in her will, which provided \$25,000 to establish the Annette Finnigan Endowment Fund at the Houston Public Library. She requested that "the income thereof be applied to the purchase of books and maps of special interest, including books and maps relating to the history of Texas, the southwest and Mexico." The initial purchase in 1943 secured two items: A set of twenty-five maps of Hispanic America and the first sixty-eight volumes of the *Lithographic Library of Congress Catalog of Printed Books*. The library acquired the entire 160-volume set over the next two years. Each year, income from this fund continues to enhance the library's historical collections with items that might otherwise be too costly to obtain. In reporting her death, the *Houston Post* remembered Finnigan as "one who served faithfully many noble causes and left her home city and her country better because of her life." A resolution passed by the Board of Trustees of the Museum of Fine Arts of Houston stated that "the Annette Finnigan Collection will rekindle in each successive generation a deep seated gratitude for Miss Finnigan's strong public spirit and self-dedication to the higher form of artistic expression, concrete examples of which will serve as a perpetual monument to her memory."¹⁵

While Annette Finnigan's name may be largely unknown in Houston today, her legacy is a more enlightened community where we find patrons of the arts, scholars in research, citizens at leisure, and females in roles of leadership—all spiritual heirs of a remarkable woman. 

Many of the pieces donated by Annette Finnigan are on display at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, at 1001 Bissonnet. Visit www.mfah.org or call 713-639-7300.

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