GLEN SHEEN

The North Shore Story
A self-guided tour

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Welcome to Glensheen! As a visitor here in 1910 your carriage driver would have driven through West Gate and dropped you off at the front doors, where you just came through. The butler would have greeted you, taken your calling card, and sat you here in the reception room while he searches the mansion to find who you are here to see.

Many affluent people from Duluth would have been calling here at Glensheen back in 1910, from business partners of Chester’s to friends and socialites here to visit and chat with Clara. In 1910, Duluth was called “The Zenith City” and was a bustling hub for shipping, business, and industry.

Feel free to take a look around Glensheen today, Chester and Clara have given you access to their 39 room estate. This booklet will be your guide for Chester’s story in 1910, highlighting many rooms throughout your self-guided tour to tell “The North Shore Story” of Glensheen and the Congdon family. If you have any questions feel free to ask any tour guide along the way.
Room #2 - The Smoking Room

The smoking room was Chester’s office and “the room where it happened.” No doubt it saw many business deals and many influential men from Minnesota in the eight years Chester lived here, often accompanied by a cigar or two.

Wealth

Chester made the majority of his wealth on the Iron Range, which he invested in years prior to the creation of Glensheen. He purchased shares of the range while working with Henry Oliver of the Oliver Mining Co., investing along other large names – notably Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller. When J.P. Morgan purchased the range to create U.S. Steel he purchased Chester’s shares along with Carnegie, Rockefeller, and Oliver.

If a tour guide is by you can ask them to show you some pictures of Rockefeller, Carnegie, Oliver, and Morgan as well as some samples of iron and taconite.

Now a savvy business man, Chester began purchasing more stocks in other companies and also traveled heavily to research and do business around the world.

John Bradstreet

Chester’s office was one of the few rooms in the home designed by John Bradstreet, a local interior designer from Minneapolis and known for his craftsman design furniture. Take a look at the wood in this room – it is a jin-di-sugi wood that you will see in another iconic room in the mansion later on in your tour – the breakfast room.

Chester and youngest son, Robert
Room #3 – The Library

The library is a great showcase of the love for knowledge that Clara and Chester both had. Within the 3,000 book collection of the mansion were a vast assortment of books, from fiction to nonfiction, all loved by the Congdon family. Chester in particular loved history, economics, and business. Take a look at some of the titles of the books in the library to see if any peak your interest.

Education

Chester and Clara both met in their freshman math class at Syracuse University in New York and were both members of the first graduating class. After graduating they both went on to become teachers for a while until Chester passed the bar exam, allowing him to become a lawyer in the state of Minnesota. Chester practiced law in St. Paul before moving the family up to Duluth.

A love for knowledge

Reading was a favorite pastime of many family members, whether they read in the comfort of the library, on the shores of Lake Superior, or whilst traveling around the world. By 1916 family members have enjoyed trips to Europe, Asia, and South America.

A talented family

Another favorite pastime enjoyed much of the family was painting and drawing. The painting above the fireplace is actually Clara’s replica of Peter Paul Reuben’s “King David Playing the Harp”.

Clara wasn’t the only one with talent, though. Chester was also very good at drawing and Elizabeth later enjoyed painting as well.

Look to the paintings on either side of the fireplace – those are portraits of Clara’s paternal grandparents painted by her father. Both Chester and Clara came from Methodist middle class families, and the Congdon’s encompass the 20th century middle class dream of rising to wealth through hard work and determination.
Room #4 – Chester’s Bedroom

In Chester’s room you will see a few of his personal items – a few of his many suits alongside a top hat and stylish cane.

On his dresser you will see a seating chart for the House Representatives from 1909. Chester was a member of the House for two terms. While in office one of his many voiced opinions was his vote against prohibition – twice. Look at the seating chart to see if you can find where Chester would have been!

Traveling the world

While living at Glensheen, Chester was extremely busy. He was often traveling around the world for business, one of his most notable trips being his Pacific Panorama trip which lasted about three months. On that trip Chester purchased many “souvenirs” from art to decorative pieces, to presents for the family, arriving home with many boxes and crates in tow. A few are still around the house today.

The W.A. French influence

Chester at this time had shares in many stocks and different companies. Probably the most important at this time was the William A French Furniture Company, which Chester had majority stock of. This is the reason that William A French does the interior design throughout almost the whole home, with the exception of a few rooms subcontracted out to John Bradstreet. French and Bradstreet were the most renowned interior designers in the state of Minnesota at that time.
Room #5 – Helen’s Room

All of the Congdon children were well-educated and well-traveled young adults, often enjoying traveling with their parents in the summer or after they finished school. In 1908 Marjorie had just completed finishing school in Italy, while Helen was attending Vassar College in New York. Young Elizabeth was attending Dana Hall, a boarding school in Massachusetts and would later attend Vassar as well.

Social life

All three girls would become very social ladies in the Duluth scene, often mentioned in the local paper for attending or organizing social gatherings at church or the Kitchi Gammi Club. In April of 1917 it is also noted in the local paper that Marjorie, Helen, and son Robert were all active members of the Red Cross in Duluth.

Community influence

Both Helen and Marjorie would go on to marry well known men in the community – Marjorie to Harry Dudley and Helen to Hubert d’Autremont and work heavily in charitable organizations for the rest of their lives.

Marjorie gave funding for the arts in Duluth and the University of Minnesota Duluth today has the Dudley Experimental black box theatre named in honor of her. Helen eventually moved with her family to Arizona in the later 1920’s and volunteered with the YWCA, donated to low income housing, and volunteered for a variety of committees and boards. She was inducted into the Arizona Women’s Hall of Fame in 1986 for her charitable acts.
Room #6 - Breakfast Room and Formal Dining

When not enjoying a formal dinner, either a breakfast, lunch, or early dinner the family had the option of dining in the breakfast room. This room was designed by John Bradstreet, notice the jin-di-sugi wood used within the room and the dining table. This room combines Bradstreet’s love for the jin-di-sugi technique alongside a few of his other favorite companies and products. The tiling in here is made by the Rookwood Company, at one point an all-female owned tile and pottery company who made their tiles all individually – notice the difference between color and glazing on all of the tiles. The art glass in this room, both the chandelier and the windows, is done by the Minneapolis Handicraft guild.

Dinner – a formal occasion

When the Congdon’s move into Glensheen in 1908 they will enjoy a formal dinner here in the dining room every night. The dinners were always large bountiful and there was a dress code – you had to be dressed formal, suit and tie for men or a gown for the women. The table expanded with different leaves to fit as many as 20 people, perfect for larger family dinners with guests or business partners visiting.

Walk over to the window and take a look at the lovely view of Lake Superior available in this room, another great addition to the overall design and flow of the breakfast room.
Room #7 - Juliet Balcony and Chester’s Porch

Your North Shore Story tour isn’t over quite yet! Once you exit the basement head to the Juliet balcony overlooking the formal gardens.

On the balcony you have a great view of the landscaping and formal gardens of Glensheen, which originally sat on 22-acres of land (today about 12-acres). The landscaping was done by Charles W. Leavitt Jr., who worked with Chester on what varieties of plants the Congdons wanted on their estate, and how they wanted their land to flow with the natural landscape. Take a look at the fountain in the formal gardens – it was carved by Duluth’s master stone carver George Thrana.

The balcony also gives a lovely view of the lake side of the home. The house is a Jacobean style mansion designed by famous Minnesotan architect Clarence Johnston.

Chester’s porch

Walk to the west side of the home to see Chester’s porch, where Chester often sat to enjoy his coffee and some reading in the spring and summertime. It has a lovely view of Tischer Creek flowing into Lake Superior.

The Minnesota Influence

Chester and Clara chose this location for Glensheen very purposefully. They wanted a more secluded area right on the shores of Lake Superior that showcased the land and beauty of Duluth. When designing their dream home they used the best of Minnesota designers to build a design a home that was one with the land and the lake. From W.A. French and John Bradstreet, to Clarence Johnston, to George Thrana, Glensheen is a love letter to Minnesota and Duluth.
The original landscaping plan from 1907
Room #8 – Boathouse and Pier

The boat house originally housed the family yacht, the Hesperia, from 1910-1916. Sailed by Alfred Bannister, their adopted son, it was one of the first private boats to sail through the Great Lakes and one of the first diesel engines of its kind on Lake Superior. The boat house was also used to dock visitor’s boats on the pier, a common way their affluent guests visited the Congdons at Glensheen.

The pier

If it’s a nice day, take a walk onto the pier. Much of it has fallen into the lake due to Lake Superior’s relentless waves. In its heyday though, the pier and boathouse were the life of the summer backyard party. They often had bands playing on top of the boat house as the socialite guests enjoyed the music and the lake view down below.

The North Shore Scenic Drive

Walk to the end of the pier and take a look up the North Shore. Chester had a vision for what is today the North Shore Scenic Drive, a vision that wasn’t fully realized until after his death. He contributed ideas, funds, and land that created what was considered “the most remarkable road in the country.”

Today, the North Shore Scenic Drive, or Highway 61, connects Duluth to the rest of the north shore all the way up to Grand Portage and the border to Canada. Without Chester’s contributions we wouldn’t have such access to the north shore and such scenic views available to us.
Bibliography

*Duluth News-Tribune* (MN). "Range Towns Send in Members Red Cross." April 24, 1917, 7.


Congdon, Chester Adgate. Letter to Clara Hisperia Bannister, October 19, 1876. Congdon Letters. Kathryn A Martin Library Special Collections and Archives, Duluth, MN.

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