

# history theatre



## Play Guide

**Book by Jeffrey Hatcher**

**Music and Lyrics by Chan Poling**



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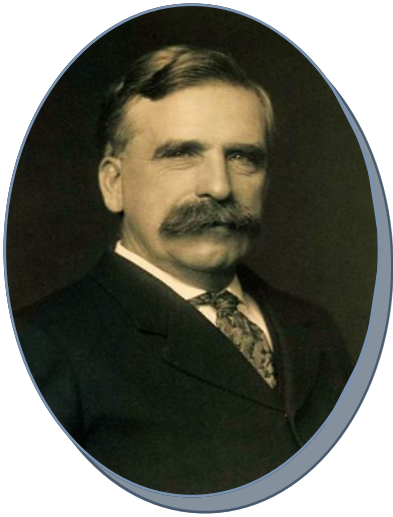
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## Congdon Family



Chester Adgate Congdon  
1853-1916

Chester Adgate Congdon was born on June 12, 1853 in Rochester, New York. At the age of fifteen, he started working in a lumberyard to help support his recently widowed mother and younger brother. He promised his mother that they would not always live in such poverty.

When he entered Syracuse University in 1871, he met San Francisco native Clara Hesperia Bannister. After college, Clara took a job teaching in a women's college in Ontario while Chester went on to study law and after two years he was admitted into practice in New York. After graduation, Chester taught school in New York and then went on to be a school principal in Chippewa Falls,

Wisconsin. He soon realized that he was not going to make enough money in the teaching profession, so he moved to St. Paul, Minnesota to practice law. He was soon working under William Billson, the US District Attorney of the State of Minnesota.

On September 29, 1881, Chester returned to Syracuse and married Clara and brought his bride west to St Paul. Between 1882 and 1891, Clara gave birth to five children: Walter, Edward, Marjorie, Helen and John. During this time, Chester transitioned to private practice.

His practice often had him heading to Duluth, where he would visit his old boss Billson. In 1892, he accepted Billson's offer of a partnership and moved his family to Duluth. Soon after they moved to Duluth, their two year old son John died of scarlet fever. Clara and Chester brought into their family two more children, Elisabeth in 1894 and Robert in 1898. In 1896 Alfred Bannister, Clara's nephew who was recently orphaned, came and lived with the family.

When the American industrialist Henry Oliver came to Duluth to hire Billson to oversee his Minnesota mining holdings, Billson was out of town. Chester took the meeting instead. He and Oliver hit it off and Chester got the job. Oliver Mining would become the largest iron ore producer in the Minnesota Iron Range.



Clara Hesperia Bannister  
1854-1950

While working for the Oliver Mining Company, Chester would purchase company stock. After Oliver was forced to sell most of his company shares to JP Morgan's newly formed United States Steel, Chester's stock in the company raised - which helped make him the second richest man in Minnesota. He then partnered with the Greenway brothers and started to buy up property that was rich in taconite. Once they figured out how to remove the silica in the ore, they sold or leased the property to mining companies. Chester also began to diversify; opening copper mines in Arizona, and various banking and agriculture endeavors.

In 1901, Congdon made plans to build a large home on the shore of Lake Superior in Duluth. The home designed by architect Clarence H. Johnston Sr. was completed in 1909. Clara was a partner in the creation of Glensheen, using her artistic talents while working closely with the architects and supervising the interior design of the house. The Congdon's called it Glensheen. The name derived from the Congdon family's origin in the village of Sheen in Surrey, England, and from the forest surrounding the home. The home had thirty-nine rooms, including fifteen bedrooms. Most of the children were already off to boarding school and college when the estate was finished, but many came back to live in the home after graduation and before they married. The youngest two children were the only ones to spend their childhood in the home.



Livingroom of Glensheen

Congdon was a staunch Republican and capitalist. He was also an outspoken critic of wealthy tycoons such as Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, and J.P. Morgan. He observed that they hoarded money, only to loan it out at exorbitant interest rates. Congdon felt that business leaders had an obligation to support local communities and society in order to ensure a healthy economy.

Congdon also opposed the policies of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. He believed that Roosevelt sold out to corporate interests to fund his presidential campaign. Moreover, he later criticized Wilson for his passivity toward corrupt and illegal business practices among the nation's business elite. Congdon officially entered politics in 1909 and represented the 55<sup>th</sup> district of Minnesota and served until 1913. Congdon also served as the Minnesota representative to the Republican National Convention in 1916. On November 21 that same year, he died of cardiac arrest in the St. Paul Hotel, where he stayed while in St. Paul during legislation. He was sixty-three years old.



Elisabeth Congdon 1912

Following the death of her father, youngest daughter Elisabeth dropped out of Vassar College and returned to Glensheen to help her mother run the estate while Walter and Edward took over the varied business interests and investments. By 1930, all of the Congdon children except Elisabeth were married and had moved out the house. Clara died on July 12, 1950.

Elisabeth pursued the cultivation of social reform, women's rights and suffrage, and a life of service. During World War I, she served as the State Chairman of the Young Women's Safety Auxiliary, a branch of the Minnesota division of the Council of National Defense, which cooperated with the Naval Service, National Surgical Dressings Committee of the Red Cross, and the American Women's Hospital organization. Additionally, along with many other young women, she completed home nursing and first aid training in order to serve as a reserve force in case all of the hospital nurses were called overseas.

Elisabeth never married but did adopt two daughters in the 1930's; Marjorie and Jennifer.

On June 26, 1977, Elisabeth Congdon, who had suffered a severe stroke 12 years prior and required around the clock care, arrived back to Duluth. Elisabeth had spent the weekend at her summer home on the Brule River in Wisconsin, just like she did almost every weekend. She was tired from traveling and went to her room to rest. One of her nurses, Velma Pietila, helped her to bed shortly before 11 p.m., and proceeded to unpack the items from the trip.

Velma was just one of her assistant nurses that took around the clock care of her. Velma Pietila had been a nurse since 1933 and had spent the last seven years working at Glensheen. She had actually retired the month before, but she was asked to fill in for the night nurse, who needed the night off. Pietila agreed since she missed Elisabeth, despite her husband's objections to her working that night. The mansion was quiet that evening, and after Mrs. Congdon fell asleep, nurse Pietila went about her nightly chores.

After settling in to the nurses room, Pietila propped open the window with her thermos and read her book *I Didn't Come Here to Argue* by Peg Bracken. Sometime later, the quiet night was interrupted and Velma was in the fight for her life. Both Velma and Elisabeth lost their lives on June 27, 1977.

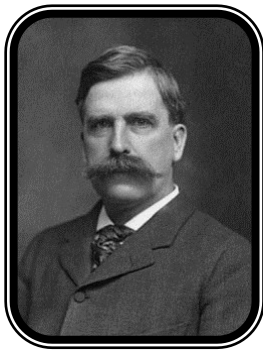
The Congdon family donated the home to the University of Minnesota – Duluth and was opened as a historic house museum in 1979.



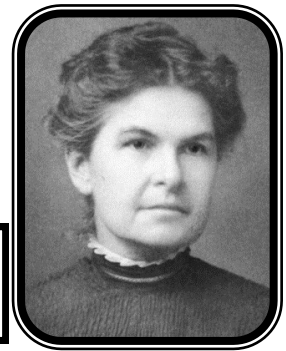
Elisabeth Congdon

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# Congdon Family Tree



Chester Adgate Congdon  
6/12/1853 – 11/12/1916



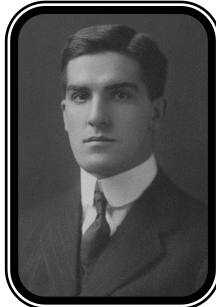
Clara Hesperia Bannister  
4/29/1854 – 7/12/1950

## Children

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Walter Bannister Congdon  
11/05/1882 - 10/20/1949



Edward Chester Congdon  
05/20/1885 - 11/27/1940



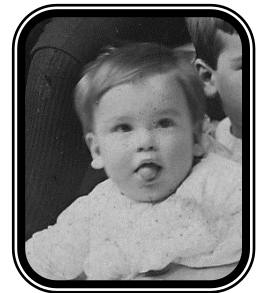
Marjorie Congdon Dudley  
1/12/1887 - 10/11/1971



Helen Congdon d'Autremonte  
2/16/1889 - 5/19/1966



Alfred Edward Bannister  
4/16/1890 - 3/30/1952



John Congdon  
1891 - 1893



Elisabeth Mannering Congdon  
4/22/1894 - 06/27/1977



Robert Congdon  
9/4/1898 - 6/12/1967

Clarence Johnston Sr. 1859 - 1936



# Clarence H. Johnston Sr.

## Glensheen Architect

Clarence Johnston was born in Elysian, Minnesota August 26, 1859. His parents, Alexander and Louise Buckhout Johnston, who were originally from New York State, moved the family to Minnesota in 1858 and then to St. Paul in 1868. When his mother passed away in 1874, Clarence went to work for St. Paul architect Abraham Radcliffe as a training draftsman. In 1878, he went to study architecture at MIT. After graduation, he worked briefly for architects in St. Paul and New York before starting his own practice in St. Paul in 1882.

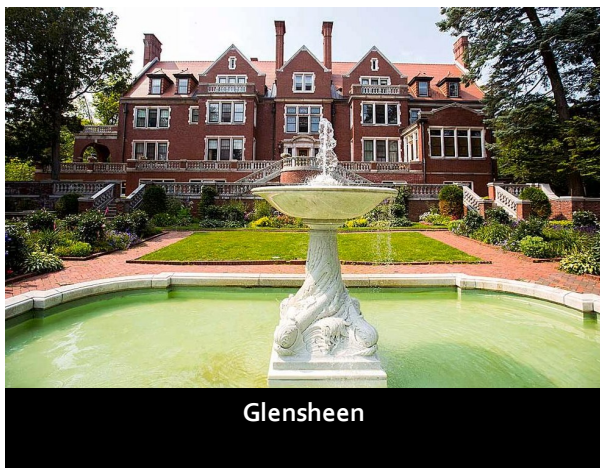
On October 1, 1885, he married Mary Thurston in St. Paul. They would have five children including one son, Clarence Johnston Jr, who would also have a successful career as an architect. Johnston Sr.'s first commission, at age 24, was for future governor William Merriam's mansion that overlooked downtown St. Paul on University and Cedar.



Governor William Merriam's home

Clarence Johnston designed Glensheen, built as the family home of Chester Congdon. The estate sits currently on 7.6 acres of waterfront property on Lake Superior in Duluth, MN. The home has 39 rooms and is built in the Jacobean architectural tradition, inspired by the grand homes in England. The interiors

were designed by William French and the formal terraced garden and English style landscape designed by the Charles Wellford Leavitt firm out of New York. Construction began in 1905, and completed in 1908. The home cost \$854,000 to build. None of Johnston's other houses approached this scope, but he did design many homes along St. Paul's Summit Avenue.



Glensheen

On May 22, 1901, the Minnesota State Board of Control, a body responsible for the construction and operation of all state-funded institutions, appointed Johnston as the state's architect. Within this job he created a diverse amount of buildings including the Stillwater State Prison, thirteen state sanatoriums, twenty two churches, six public schools, the State Fair Grandstand and more than twenty buildings for the University of Minnesota including Williams Arena, Walter Library and Northrop Auditorium.

During the time, he continued his private practice. Johnston slowed down in the early 1930s and died at his home on December 29, 1936.

## June 27, 1977



On the night of June 26th, 1977, an intruder entered the Glensheen Mansion from a billiard room window. The intruder encountered Velma Pietila, night nurse who was on duty, on the staircase. The intruder struggled and murdered Velma. The intruder then found the 83 year old owner of the Glensheen Mansion, Elizabeth Congdon, in bed. Using a pink satin pillow, the intruder suffocated her.

Initially, the police thought the motive was robbery. An empty jewelry box was found on the floor of the Glensheen Mansion's master bedroom, and the house was ransacked. Velma Pietila's car was also stolen from the estate and found at the Minneapolis airport. However, that would soon change as police began investigating family member including Elizabeth's adopted daughter Marjorie Congdon and her husband Roger Caldwell.

Roger Caldwell was soon arrested for the murders. Police said he was trying to speed up his wife's multimillion-dollar inheritance. Caldwell was convicted and ultimately signed a confession; he killed himself in 1988.

After Roger's conviction, Marjorie was arrested and charged with helping plan the murders. After a lengthy trial, she was acquitted.

Marjorie had a long history of money problems and run ins with the law. The timeline gives an outline on these troubles that happened during her life.

### July 14, 1932

Jacqueline Barnes is born in Tarboro, North Carolina.

### October 1932

Elizabeth adopts Jacqueline and renames her Marjorie Mannering Congdon.

### 1935

Elizabeth adopts a second daughter and names her Jennifer.

### 1947-1950

Marjorie attends Dana Hall prep school in Massachusetts. Her letters home indicate she has trouble handling money.

### Summer 1949

Marjorie is sent to the Menninger Clinic in Topeka due to her compulsive lying and irresponsibility with money. She is diagnosed as sociopathic.

### 1951-1970

Marjorie marries Dick LeRoy. The couple has seven children. Marjorie's money problems escalate. Her husband attempts to curb her appetites. Unable to do so effectively, Dick ends the marriage.

### May 23, 1974

Marjorie coerces Elisabeth into co-signing a \$345,000 loan from Marquette National Bank of Minneapolis by duress and false pretenses (admitted by Marjorie during a civil lawsuit, Aug. 6, 1975).





**November 3, 1974**

Elisabeth Congdon becomes mysteriously ill after a visit from Marjorie during which Marjorie fed her homemade marmalade. The family decides not to investigate the incident.

**May 12, 1975**

Marjorie is suspected of setting fire to her home in Marine On St Croix.

**March 20, 1976**

Marjorie marries Roger Caldwell. They now live in Colorado.

**September 29 & 30, 1976**

On both days, fires are set in the First National Bank of Englewood, Colorado after Marjorie was in the bank.

**November 23, 1976**

Marjorie makes false reports of burglary claiming someone had stolen over \$80,000 in property.

**December 1976 & May 1977**

Marjorie writes out bad checks to multiple people for horses and supplies.

**May 1977**

Marjorie writes a letter on stolen National Asthma Center stationery stating that a ranch is needed to take proper care of her son Ricky's asthma. Roger takes the letter to Duluth on May 24 to meet with Congdon trustees to request \$750,000. The request is denied. Roger later admits it is a forgery.

**June 1977**

Marjorie and Roger pass over \$100,000 worth of bad checks in Colorado.

**June 24, 1977**

Marjorie has her hand written will notarized. The document promises Roger 2.5 million dollars of the inheritance upon the death of Elisabeth Congdon.

**June 27, 1977**

Elisabeth Congdon and her night nurse Velma Pietila are found dead at Glensheen. Jewelry and wicker suitcase have also been stolen from the mansion as well as Pietila's car.



Velma Peitila

Bloomington, MN: maintenance personnel at the Minneapolis-St. Paul airport find Pietila's car keys in a trash can outside the terminal. Later in the day, they also find a parking stub in the same trash can stamped 6:35.

Golden, Colorado – When asked about Roger's whereabouts, Marjorie first explains that he went out for some pop. Later, she says that Roger is with her son Ricky in the mountains.

**June 29, 1977**

At 11:30 am, Duluth detectives interview Marjorie and Roger. Roger has an extremely swollen had and a cut on the right side of his upper lip. The funeral for Velma Peitila takes place.

**June 30, 1977**

Funeral for Elisabeth Congdon.

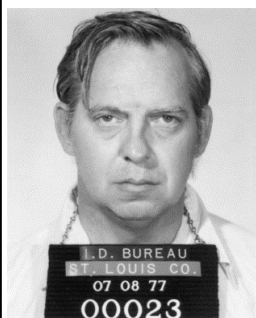
Duluth police search the Duluth Radisson hotel of Marjorie and Roger. During the search, police find a receipt dated June 27, 1977 from a gift shop in the airport. The next day, the police find out that someone fitting the description of Roger purchased a garment bag and carrying a wicker case made the purchase.

**July 2, 1977**

A clerk at the hotel in Golden where Roger and Marjorie were living alerts the police that a Radisson Hotel envelope addressed to Roger and postmarked June 27, 1977 – Duluth was delivered. Obtaining a warrant, the police discover a 1,700 year old Byzantine coin determined to be missing from a memorabilia case in Elisabeth Congdon’s bedroom.

**July 5, 1977**

Gift shop clerks are shown a phot lineup and Roger is identified. He is taken by ambulance from the Holiday Inn in Bloomington to Methodist Hospital after he loses consciousness shortly after having breakfast with Marjorie.



Roger Caldwell

Duluth and Bloomington police obtain a search warrant for Caldwell’s room, at the Holiday Inn in Bloomington. Items including a garment bag, a wicker case (both identical to the ones stolen) are found in the hotel room. They also find a blue plastic panty hose container filled with jewelry; including items later identified as taken from Elisabeth’s bedroom. Marjorie is questioned and she states that they are duplicates made for her. Police decide to arrest Roger.

**August 7, 1977**

Marjorie reports that she was attacked by a man dressed as a cop at her son Stephen’s apartment. She is taken to Mercy Hospital in Coon Rapids, MN. The opinion of the doctor who treated her believes the slash wounds and lacerations on the left side of her face are self-inflicted.

**February 7, 1978**

Roger enters a plea of not guilty.

**May - July 8, 1978**

Caldwell’s trial begins. Attorney DeSanto calls 103 witnesses, the defense calls 6. The jury returns a verdict of guilty of two counts of murder in the first degree to Roger Caldwell.



Prosecutor DeSanto

**July 10, 1978**

Roger is sentenced to two consecutive life terms at Stillwater State prison.

**August 18, 1978**

Marjorie is indicted on two counts of aiding and abetting murder in the first degree and two counts of conspiracy to commit murder.

**April 26 - July 13, 1979**

Testimony is presented during Marjorie's trial. The prosecution calls 112 witnesses, the defense calls 55.

**July 21, 1979**

The jury returns a verdict of not guilty.

**August 16, 1979**

Five of Marjorie's seven children commence a civil lawsuit seeking to disinherit Marjorie from her inheritance on grounds that they can prove by preponderance of the evidence that Marjorie is involved in the murders of Velma Pietila and Elisabeth Congdon.



Marjorie during her trial

**March 26, 1980**

Marjorie visits her friend Helen Hagen at her Twin Birch Nursing Home. Helen was a friend from her days of taking her children to skating lessons. Helen had attended most of Marjorie's trial. Marjorie hand feeds her friend who is found in a coma the next day. Helen dies a few days later.

**August 7, 1981**

Marjorie commits bigamy by marrying Wally Hagen, Helen's widower, in N Dakota without divorcing Roger.

**August 6, 1982**

The Minnesota Supreme Court overturns Roger Caldwell's convictions on two counts of murder in the first degree because of fingerprint evidence.

**September 15, 1982**

Fire destroys Marjorie home in Mound Minnesota. Four months later, Marjorie is arrested for arson of the house.

**July 1, 1983**

Children of Marjorie reach a settlement in the lawsuit to disinherit Marjorie.

**July 5, 1983**

Roger Caldwell pleads guilty to two counts of second-degree murder in a plea deal. He makes a full confession and is released from jail. His confession provides no new information in the case

**January 13, 1984**

Marjorie is found guilty of arson of the Cranberry House in Mound. She is sentenced to 21 months in prison in Shakopee, MN.

**October 19, 1986**

Marjorie is released from prison. She and her husband Wally move to Ajo, Arizona.

**May 18, 1988**

Roger Caldwell commits suicide in his apartment in Latrobe, Pennsylvania.



**March 24 – October 29, 1992**

Marjorie is arrested on arson charges in Ajo. She is convicted and sentenced to fifteen years in prison. The judge allows her one day to put her affairs in order.

**October 30, 1992**

Wally is found dead in his home. Marjorie is arrested and charged with murder the next day. Charges are dropped when it is determined Wally died of drug overdose and his death could have been suicide.

**January 5, 2004**

Marjorie is released from prison. She moves to Tucson, Arizona.

**March 1, 2007**

Roger Sammis, a gentleman Marjorie has befriended, dies and is cremated in Tucson. She has obtained power of attorney over his accounts. Marjorie deposits an \$11,181.04 check that Sammis had received as an inheritance.

**March 22, 2007**

Marjorie is arrested and charged with forgery, theft, tampering with a computer and fraudulent scheme and artifice. With no body or evidence, they cannot charge her in the death of Roger Sammis.

**March 4, 2009**

Marjorie is sentenced to three years of intensive probation in the Sammis fraud case.



## For Further Reading

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### Books

Congdon LeRoy, Suzanne. **Nightingale: A Memoir of Murder, Madness, and the Messenger of Spring.** Kitai Press, 2015.

Dierckins, Tony. **Historic Glensheen 1905-1930: Photographs of the Condon Estate's First 25 Years.** Zenith City Press , 2015.

Feichtinger, Gail. DeSanto, John. Waller, Gary. **Will to Murder: The True Story Behind the Crimes and Trials Surrounding the Glensheen Killings.** Zenith City Press, 2009.

Hendry, Sharon. **Glensheen's Daughter: The Marjorie Congdon Story.** Cable Publishing, 2009.

Hoover, Roy O. **A Lake Superior Lawyer: A Biography of Chester Adgate Congdon.** Superior Partners , 1997.

Kimball, Joe. **Secrets of the Congdon Mansion: The Unofficial Guide to Glensheen and the Congdon Murders.** JayKay Pub, 2002.

### Online

Open Road Adventures Video on the Glensheen Murders:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ilG2mZDG7fs>

To learn more about designs by Clarence Johnston:

Website has an interactive map of buildings designed by Johnston across Minnesota

[https://www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?mid=zMT2dIJyk2E.ko8y-Bfx-l3Q&hl=en\\_US](https://www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?mid=zMT2dIJyk2E.ko8y-Bfx-l3Q&hl=en_US)

In-depth look at the life of Charles Johnston including a walking tour interactive map of his work

<http://www.tpt.org/?a=productions&id=13>

To see pictures of Glensheen:

<https://glensheen.wp.d.umn.edu/>