

# Helen Farnsworth Mears Biography

Helen Farnsworth Mears was born in Oshkosh on December 21, 1872. She was the daughter of English-Scottish parents from the Massachusetts area. Her father, John Hall Mears, studied to be a surgeon, but due to financial circumstances, turned to mining. Her mother Elizabeth Farnsworth had come to Wisconsin at the age of six, when the Farnsworth family came to farm near Fond du Lac.

Helen and her two older sisters attended Oshkosh schools and the Oshkosh Normal School, but found the chief spur of creative skills within their home. Their mother Elizabeth had published a book of verse under the name of Nellie Wildwood. Middle sister Mary followed her mother's bent and became a professional writer. Eldest sister Louise, the only one of the three sisters to marry, had a short career as a book illustrator. Helen showed a single-minded drive toward sculpture as her mode of expression. As a girl, she exhibited a head of Apollo at the county fair and made clay portraits of the neighbors that were embarrassingly true to life. She must have had strong innate gifts, for she had no outside instruction except from her father, who guided her knowledge of anatomy and made sure she had the proper tools.

Helen's first major achievement came at the age of twenty. Her clay sketch of a woman and winged eagle, entitled "Genius of Wisconsin," was commissioned for the Columbia Exposition of 1893. She went to Chicago to chisel the design into a nine foot marble piece. The sculpture now stands in the Wisconsin State Capitol. A prize of \$500 from the Milwaukee Woman's Club enabled Helen to go to New York. After study at the Augustus Saint-Gauden Studio, she spent two years in France and Italy where she studied with leading sculptors and won notice in European salons.

In 1899, Helen resumed work in New York, where she completed a number of commissions in bronze and marble. Among these were the portrait of Edward MacDowell, a bust of George Rogers Clark for the Milwaukee Library, a bust of Dr. William Morton for the Smithsonian Institute, and a statue of Frances Willard for Statuary Hall of the U.S. Capitol.



The Portrait of Edward MacDowell  
Metropolitan Museum of Art



The Statue of Frances Willard  
Statuary Hall of the U.S. Capitol

In 1911, Helen experienced a particularly keen disappointment when the commission in charge of Wisconsin's new capitol building rejected her design for a figure to be placed on top of the dome. Meanwhile her work was well underway on what she had understood to be a definite assignment from the architect.

Helen Mears died in February 1916 in New York City. Her death, untimely and without diagnosed illness, was soon translated into "death by starvation." Overwork and exhaustion may well have been contributing factors. The family's financial state might be attested by the fact that her grave in Oshkosh Riverside Cemetery remained unmarked until 1957, when a group from the Campus School provided a gravestone.

For years after her death, her sister Mary worked valiantly, but without success, to raise funds for bronze castings of the clay and plaster pieces that remained in the studio, with special concern for the "Fountain of Life." In 1927, the GFWC-WI Woman's Club honored Helen Mears' memory by inaugurating an annual art competition for school children.



Helen at age 20



Helen working on the "Fountain of Life"