

## Seely, Fred Loring <sup>[1]</sup>

### Seely, Fred Loring

by Fred L. Seely, Jr., 1994; Revised by SLNC Government and Heritage Library, June 2023

**22 Dec. 1871–14 Mar. 1942**



Photograph of Fred Loring Seely. Image from the University of North Carolina Asheville.

<sup>[2]</sup>Fred Loring Seely, pharmaceutical manufacturer, newspaperman, architect, and developer, was born in Fort Monmouth, N.J., the son of Colonel Uriah, a Union officer disabled by wounds at the Battle of Shiloh, and Nancy Hopping Seely. Having to support and help educate his brothers and sister, young Seely received only a public school education. At age eighteen he was hired by Parke-Davis and Company of Detroit as one of eight employees making up the first formal pharmaceutical firm in the country. He developed a machine to make pills or tablets and another to count and package them. While in Detroit Seely shared a loft over a boardinghouse stable with Henry Ford <sup>[3]</sup>.

In 1897 Seely joined E. W. Grove <sup>[4]</sup> in St. Louis as secretary-treasurer of Grove's pharmaceutical manufacturing company. One of this firm's leading products was Dr. Grove's Tasteless Chill Tonic <sup>[5]</sup>, made from the bark of the cinchona tree from Peru to treat malaria. Due to poor health, Seely resigned and traveled. When political unrest in Peru threatened the source of quinine, an ingredient of the chill tonic, Seely moved thousands of young cinchona trees to Java, making that country the world's largest producer of quinine.

Returning to the United States, Seely in 1905 bought two Atlanta newspapers, *The Georgian* and the *Atlanta News*. John Temple Graves was his editor, and Grantland Rice and Bill Nye were staff members. Seely was one of the few newspapermen who supported Admiral Robert E. Peary's claim to have been the first to reach the North Pole in 1909. He also waged a campaign to establish Prohibition <sup>[6]</sup> and to eliminate the convict lease <sup>[7]</sup> system in Georgia. Under this system, private individuals could lease convicts for fifty cents a day without being subject to supervision from state penal authorities. Opposition arose from businessmen who benefited from this system; they ceased to advertise in his papers, and his life was threatened. Seely sold the papers to William Randolph Hearst <sup>[8]</sup>, but his campaigns to end the practice and to establish Prohibition succeeded.

With only an eighth-grade education, Seely followed a lifelong ambition and entered the School of Architecture at Princeton University. In Princeton he lived next door to Professor Woodrow Wilson <sup>[9]</sup> and they became lifelong friends. Seely, in fact, became a campaign manager for Wilson in his bid for president of the United States. Seely remained at Princeton only long enough to gain the information he felt necessary for an undertaking he had in mind. In the early stages of World War I <sup>[10]</sup> President Wilson prevailed upon him to take charge of the Ford-financed peace mission to Norway aboard the SS *Oskar II*. Lay and clerical persons of stature met with the leaders of Great Britain and Germany in Norway in an unsuccessful effort to end the war.

Some time earlier, E. W. Grove had been sent to Asheville <sup>[11]</sup> suffering from a pulmonary complication. Asheville, a center for the treatment of tuberculosis, had a number of sanatoriums. Recognizing the potential of the region for development as a tourist attraction, Grove sent for Seely. Together, they located and bought thousands of acres of land for hotel and residential development.

Moving to Asheville in 1912, Seely supervised the building of, and later operated, the Grove Park Inn <sup>[12]</sup>, which, when it opened, was described as the finest resort in the world. It was completed in eleven months with 700 men and 400 mules working 24 hours a day in shifts. The developers also laid out a model city in the heart of Asheville, having spent weeks in Washington to secure authorization for a new Asheville Post Office to serve as a nucleus for this innovative plan. The old Battery Park Hotel was torn down, the mountaintop on which it stood was leveled, and a new Battery Park Hotel and shops were erected.

In 1916 Seely purchased the Biltmore Industries <sup>[13]</sup> from Mrs. George W. Vanderbilt and in English cottage-type buildings expanded the operation where local artisans made and sold pottery, wove cloth, and produced other crafts. As far as possible, he employed Deaf people and people with disabilities in these industries; he was particularly interested in their welfare as he had a sister and a brother who were so afflicted.

Seely was convinced that if Asheville were to flourish, it must have a balanced economy with industry as well as tourism. To that effect, he spent months in Holland and ultimately persuaded Dr. Van Vlissingen, an old friend from his days in Java, to move his huge Enka Rayon Plant from Arnhem to Asheville. Seely was the only non-Dutch member of the Enka board of directors.

Like Grove, his friend, benefactor, and father-in-law, Seely contributed generously but anonymously to numerous causes. He provided surgery and hospital treatment for children, particularly clubfooted mountain children, and as a member of the Masonic order <sup>[14]</sup>, he donated clothing for children in the Masonic Orphanage at Oxford, N.C.

In 1898 Seely married Evelyn Grove, the daughter of E. W. Grove, and they were the parents of Gertrude (Mrs. John Eller, Sr.), Fred L., Jr., John, and Louise. His home, Overlook on a mountain above Asheville, was a Gothic castlelike building to which he frequently made additions. It housed his large collection of manuscripts of the great composers and authors of history and his collection of early printing, including the works of Gutenberg and Caxton. He was a member of the Sons of the American Revolution <sup>[15]</sup> and the Society of the Cincinnati <sup>[16]</sup>. Seely was decorated by the pre-Hitler German Republic for finding and reburying the bodies of twelve crewmen of a German U-Boat who had died in the Veteran's Hospital near Asheville in 1918. A handsome monument was erected at the site. At the time of his death Seely directed operations of the Battery Park Hotel, owned by his wife. An active Episcopalian <sup>[17]</sup>, he was buried in the churchyard of Calvary Church, Arden.

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