

## The House of a Thousand Candles

In 1903, Meredith Nicholson built a Georgian Revival style house at 1500 North Delaware Street. In the first year of residence in his new house, Nicholson wrote his most successful novel, *The House of a Thousand Candles*. Indianapolis residents bestowed the house itself with the same name in honor of Nicholson and his best-selling novel.

When Nicholson built the house, North Delaware was considered a fashionable neighborhood for social, professional and cultural life. Nicholson's home was the first colonial house to be built on Delaware Street. With its gambrel roof, pedimented dormers and classical cornice, it is historically authentic, borrowing from the Georgian and Federal architecture of the early American colonies. The main entrance, with its leaded sidelights and fanlight is one of the home's outstanding features. When it was built, the home overlooked what was known then as the Delaware Street forest.

In honor of the great success of the novel, Nicholson placed lit candles in the home's windows every Christmas season that he lived there.

Because the house was named for the novel, many erroneously assumed that the house had inspired the novel. Nicholson wrote in 1926 that the scene for the novel was Lake Maxincuckee. Nicholson's own words, inscribed in a copy of the novel, for the Indianapolis Public Library should have settled the claim to fame as inspiration for the famous House of a Thousand Candles, but as recently as 1977, Indianapolis newspapers were attributing the novel's inspiration to a Denver house where Nicholson had lived from 1899 to 1903. No one has ever questioned, however, where Nicholson wrote the novel: the house at 1500 North Delaware.

During the years that he lived on North Delaware Street, Nicholson joined the ranks of Indiana's literary lions. Many notable people visited Nicholson, and the Delaware Street house welcomed Dr. Henry Van Dyke; William Watson, an English poet; Ellery Sedgwick, Editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*; Thomas R. Marshall; Booth Tarkington; and James Whitcomb Riley.



In 1929, Nicholson moved from the North Delaware home. In 1933, the Wald Funeral Directors proposed to convert the residence into a funeral home, but so many protests were raised at the Board of Zoning that the petition was withdrawn. The Allen family acquired the property in 1933. John Allen, who lived in the house from 1971 until 1978, became concerned about the preservation of the house. The brick was collapsing, and the original millwork was badly deteriorated. In 1978, the Historic Landmarks Foundation purchased the house and restored the main facade.

Now privately owned, the house will be open to the public during a reception on Sunday, July 28, 1985, at 2:00 p.m. In honor of Meredith Nicholson and his contribution to literature, the Friends of Indiana Literature will place a commemorative plaque on the House of a Thousand Candles.

## The Significance of Nicholson as a Writer

Meredith Nicholson, like many fine Indiana Writers, began his writing career as a journalist. He learned his craft in the twelve years he wrote for the *Indianapolis News*. During his years as a journalist, he published an occasional poem or short story, but had little financial success as an artistic writer. In 1891, his book of poetry, *Short Flights*, was published. It was not until Nicholson left his career in journalism and left his beloved Hoosier state that he produced a second book. He accepted a position as treasurer of a Colorado coal-mining operation and moved to Denver in 1898. He was so homesick for Indiana that he wrote a collection of essays, *The Hoosier*, published in 1900. The publication of that book encouraged Nicholson to quit a job he disliked and become a writer.

Returning to Indianapolis, Nicholson became a serious writer. The publication of *The Main Chance*, in 1903 and *Zelda Dameron*, in 1904 established Nicholson as a romance writer. With the publication of *The House of a Thousand Candles*, Nicholson's national reputation as a novelist was firmly established. The novel, a best-seller, was translated into five languages and adapted for stage and screen. It is still considered his most successful novel. Nicholson was a prolific writer, producing more than a book per year until 1929. Although he attained great success as a writer of romance, he evidently wanted to turn his efforts to what he considered more serious work. In an interview with the *Boston*

*Transcript* in 1910, he announced, "I have written my last of playful romances."

While he did not abandon romances completely, he did turn to realistic novels, with portrayals of emancipated female characters and themes that treated marriage, divorce and adultery. The response to Nicholson's realism was not entirely positive. The *Boston Transcript* review of *Broken Barriers* called the book "literary fodder for adolescents between 16 and 45." Whatever the artistic limitations of Nicholson's attempts at realism, he did portray accurately the social conditions of his day.

By 1929, Nicholson had published his last book, although he continued to publish articles in *The Atlantic Monthly* and in newspapers. Between 1903 and 1929, Nicholson was a prolific writer. His career as journalist/essayist/novelist/diplomat produced nearly thirty books and countless articles. During that era, Indiana was nationally famous for producing famous authors, and Meredith Nicholson was regarded throughout the nation as one of Indiana's literary lions. He was a close friend of James Whitcomb Riley, Booth Tarkington and George Ade. At the height of Nicholson's popularity as a novelist, Charles Scribner's Sons produced a monograph on Meredith Nicholson, describing his position in American Literature: "...his writing is an expression of the great westward movement of the world; in him flows still, with undiminished pulse, the blood of the pioneer; his work discloses not an individual con-



sciousness, but rather the consciousness of a people."

In recognition of his literary accomplishments and his diplomatic career, Nicholson was awarded honorary degrees from Butler University, Wabash College and Indiana University. He was an honorary member of Phi Beta Kappa and a member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters.



# BIOGRAPHICAL CHRONOLOGY

- 1866 Meridith Nicholson was born in Crawfordsville, Indiana, December 9, 1866.  
1872 Meredith Nicholson moved, with his family, to Indianapolis, where he spent nearly all his life.  
1881 At the age of fifteen, Nicholson dropped out of high school and worked at a succession of jobs: as a clerk in a drug store, an apprentice in a print shop, a court reporter, clerk in a law firm. He studied law under William Wallace, brother of Lou Wallace.  
1884 Nicholson became a journalist, joined the staff of the *Indianapolis Sentinel*.  
1885 Nicholson became a member of the editorial staff of the *Indianapolis News*, where he remained until 1897.  
1891 *Short Flights*, Nicholson's volume of poetry, was published.  
1897 Nicholson worked in a stock brokerage.  
1898 Nicholson accepted a position as treasurer and auditor of a coal mining operation, in Denver, Colorado.  
1900 Nicholson's collection of essays on Indiana, *The Hoosiers*, was published.  
1901 Nicholson returned to his beloved Hoosier state to pursue a career in writing.  
1903 *The Main Chance* was published.  
1904 *Zelda Dameron* was published.  
1905 *The House of a Thousand Candles* was published, insuring Nicholson's fame as a writer. From 1905 to 1929, Nicholson published twenty-five books and one play.  
1933 Nicholson was appointed to Paraguay, where he served on the staff of the State Department. In 1935, he was minister to Venezuela, and in 1938, to Nicaragua.  
1941 Nicholson returned to his beloved Indianapolis, where he reigned as the Dean of Indiana Literature. He was a frequent contributor to Indianapolis newspapers in his later years.  
1947 Nicholson died, at the age of 81, on December 22, 1947.

## Honoring Meredith Nicholson July 27, 28, 1985

### Saturday

July 27, 1985

An Afternoon Talk  
2 P.M.

**Meridith Nicholson:  
The Man and His Works**  
by

Dr. Allegra Stewart  
Reception Following  
Auditorium, Indiana State Museum  
202 N. Alabama

An Evening at the Theatre  
8 P.M.

*Honor Bright*

Directed by Daniel Kasle  
Musical Interlude by John Gates  
Hedback Theatre  
1847 N. Alabama

Ticket \$2.50 available at  
State Museum Shop

### Sunday

July 28, 1985

Reception at the  
**Meredith Nicholson Home**  
2 to 4 P.M.

House of a Thousand Candles  
1500 North Delaware Street  
Lee Thieson, Director of the Indiana State  
Museum will present a placque comemorating  
the house to Bob Beckman, owner of  
the Meredith Nicholson home  
Tour of house follows.

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