History
of the Leslie Science & Nature Center
Acknowledgments

Text for this booklet has been adapted from Dr. Leslie’s autobiography and the Leslie Laboratories Master Plan, compiled by the City of Ann Arbor’s Department of Parks and Recreation with special thanks to Marjorie Barritt.

All historic photographs are from the Eugene H. Leslie photographic collection deposited at the Michigan Historical Collections in the University of Michigan’s Bentley Historical Library, as well as the Leslies’ private slide collection, digitalized by the Ann Arbor Public Library.

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Introduction

Dr. Eugene Leslie was a man of many and varied talents. As an inventor and nationally recognized leader in the chemical engineering field as well as the petroleum refining industry, Dr. Leslie’s entrepreneurial spirit also led him into the areas of synthetic rubber, soybean processing, grain and hay drying, and gravel processing. Leslie Laboratories on Traver Road operated as the research center for much of this pioneering work.

As the City limits of Ann Arbor slowly expanded and the surrounding farmlands began to fill with housing developments, Dr. and Mrs. Leslie decided that, to preserve the beauty of their property for all time, they would convey the land to the City of Ann Arbor to be used for park purposes. As a consequence, Leslie Golf Course, Leslie Park, Leslie Woods, and Leslie Laboratories – 229.5 total acres – have been reserved for the enjoyment of citizens of Ann Arbor and its surrounding communities.

A debt of gratitude is owed to Dr. and Mrs. Leslie for their thoughtful and generous gifts. Today, the Leslie Science & Nature Center exists to honor their wishes in a way that not only fulfills the spirit of Dr. Leslie’s last Will and Testament, but also to provide facilities and programs that stand as a fitting tribute to the inventive, creative and entrepreneurial spirit of Dr. Leslie.
Eugene and Emily’s lives first crossed during graduate school at Columbia University in New York City. Emily spent a year studying Home Economics, while Eugene continued his career in the sciences. He received his Ph.D. in Chemical Engineering in 1916, graduating with an offer to work as Chief Chemist at the General Petroleum Corporation in Los Angeles. Together, Eugene and Emily packed up their bags and moved to the Golden State where they were married one year later on November 10, 1917.

During his career in California, he created Toluene, a key ingredient used in TNT explosives. His invention played a critical role in the war effort, marking the first of many ground-breaking discoveries that Dr. Leslie would contribute to the chemical engineering and petroleum processing fields.

Two years later, they returned to New York City when Dr. Leslie accepted a position as assistant to the president of the U.S. Industrial Alcohol Company. There, he worked on the production of acetone, another war material.
Growing tired of city life, Dr. Leslie described his grievances in an autobiography: “My daily routine consisted of going from an apartment...through a rat-hole (the subway), to our office...just off Wall Street. At night it was the reverse procedure, and after nearly two years of this highly artificial experience I was ready for a nervous breakdown.” As a result, Dr. and Mrs. Leslie moved to Ann Arbor in 1919, after Dr. Leslie’s appointment to Associate Professor of Chemical Engineering at the University of Michigan. The transition wholly embodied Dr. Leslie’s hopes for a new life, which he described to his boss in New York as the opportunity to teach where he would “have a quieter life, and time to think, and work on some of the problems that so obviously needed solution in the petroleum industry.”

Throughout his tenure at the University of Michigan, Dr. Leslie was promoted to a full professor, and he established the University’s chemical engineering graduate program. In addition to his university related research and publications, including a book titled *Motor Fuels*, he continued working in the petroleum industry. This included designing pilot equipment for the E.B. Badger and Sons Company of Boston.

While Dr. Leslie was busy teaching, Emily established herself as a valuable, committed citizen to the community of Ann Arbor. She served as an active member of the Women’s Faculty Club at the University for ten years from 1919 until 1929. She was also involved in the National Farm and Garden Association, as well as the Ann Arbor Garden Club where she served as president for three years.
In the late 1920s, Dr. Leslie left the University to pursue his own research and business interests. Continuing to develop and invent new technologies, he became one of the best known consultants in the country’s oil industry. A Traver Road resident since 1923, Dr. Leslie established his research facilities – Leslie Laboratories – near his and Emily’s homestead. After their initial purchase of just over 4 acres, the Leslies expanded their parcel of land to 229.5 acres, accumulated through a sequence of purchases over a twenty-year period.

In addition to Leslie Laboratories, the Leslies operated a 200-acre farm, located on what we know today as the Leslie Golf Course. They planted and sold a variety of crops, including apples, peaches, cherries, pears, raspberries, blueberries, currents, and strawberries. In addition, they raised Hereford cattle, hogs, and feed for the livestock. They also kept bee hives and built a Honey House, which today serves as the Critter House. Dr. Leslie liked to use the agricultural enterprise as an outlet for his inventive mind, creating numerous types of farm equipment, including a hay drier and a gravel separation machine.
1949: Dr. Leslie’s hay drier invention.

1944: Southwest view from the Leslies’ home, with the City of Ann Arbor seen in the distance. Cars fill up the Leslies’ meadow, much like they do for large events today.

1949: Chicken coops seen on the Leslies’ farm.

1944: The Leslies’ garage, now the Leslie Science & Nature Center’s Office.
Throughout the fifty years that the Leslies spent living in their home on Traver Road, the couple happily permitted neighborhood children to play on the homestead. Kids loved to hold ball games and fly model air planes in their fields and build forts in the hedgerows. The Leslies even welcomed a neighbor couple to conduct hot-air balloon ascensions from the meadow.

The Leslies feared that with their death, the open space which they had carefully assembled would be lost. In Dr. Leslie’s words, he wanted to “keep those Detroit developers from bothering [him].” Ultimately, the Leslies decided that the land, which they had freely shared with their neighbors, should be given to the City of Ann Arbor. In an interview, Dr. Leslie spoke of the double purpose of the gift: He said that he hoped the property would be preserved as “an open space for all time,” adding, “There are an awful lot of youngsters in this area who need a playground.” He also expressed that he wanted the buildings to be used for city-sponsored meetings. Exploring multiple uses was characteristic of Dr. Leslie’s approach to ideas, institutions, and to the land.

The Leslies deeded the land to the City, and the City took control of the property upon the Leslies’ deaths in 1976. Dr. and Mrs. Leslie also left the Eugene H. Leslie Trust. The interest is used to support the maintenance and preservation of the existing buildings.

The Leslie Science Center opened its doors to the public in June of 1986, following a major renovation project and development of a Master Plan by the Ann Arbor Parks and Recreation Department in 1983.

The decision for the Center’s focus on environmental education resulted from several considerations including: the Leslies’ desire to maintain the open spaces, Dr. Leslie's innovative work in science, an appreciation for the Center’s natural assets, the addition of the Black Pond Woods in 1991 by the Parks Department, and an awareness of the tremendous need for such a center by this community.

1944: Aerial view of the Leslies’ orchard.

1949: Neighbors and friends picnicking on the Leslies’ land.
The Evolution of the Leslie Science Center

In 2000, the Nature House was built to demonstrate efficient use of resources through innovative, energy conserving features. In addition to providing much needed teaching space for our environmental education programs, the building showcases energy systems, building techniques, and recycled materials that enable us to live in harmony with the environment. It stands today on the same footprint as Dr. Leslie’s original laboratory building as a testament to LSNC’s mission and the Leslies’ dedication to living lightly on the land.

Six years later, fourteen raptors from the River Raisin Raptor Center made Leslie their permanent home. All of the birds have suffered permanent injuries that prevent them from being released into the wild, and many are used today in our educational programming.

In July of 2007, the Leslie Science Center made two major changes. The Center evolved from a City run entity to a 510(c)3 non-profit organization, overseen by a board of directors. This change was made because the new operational structure represented the best option for a sustainable future in the face of dwindling municipal dollars. The City continues to own the buildings and grounds and provide maintenance support.

We also changed our name from “Leslie Science Center” to “Leslie Science & Nature Center.” Prior to the change, many people had assumed that we were an indoor science museum. By adding “and Nature,” we were able to more fully reflect the scope of our programs, providing opportunities to experience nature on and off-site.

The Leslie Science & Nature Center has continued to progress and expand its impact. From just 174 program participants in 1989, we have grown to reach over 55,000 participants in 2011. Today, the Center stands as a beloved resource for both environmental education and outdoor fun, enjoyed by students, teachers, families, and other citizens across southeast Michigan. The continued support from our community and donors is a testament to our success, and we are proud to continue the legacy left to us by Dr. and Mrs. Leslie.
Our Mission

The Leslie Science & Nature Center is a nonprofit organization that provides environmental education and experiences for children, families, and other individuals to honor and perpetuate the legacy of Dr. and Mrs. Eugene Leslie by fostering understanding, appreciation, stewardship and respect for the natural world.