Preserving Gardens that Spring from the Soul

By Lucinda Brockway

Nestled into the Berkshire hills not far from the Garden Conservancy headquarters, Naumkeag is one of America’s cultural treasures and one of its most renowned Massachusetts gardens. Here, creators Fletcher Steele and Mabel Choate believed that garden making was a fine art, and pushed the limits of color, line, form, and horticulture as they molded their masterpiece. As biographer Robin Karson wrote, “Fletcher Steele made gardens as playgrounds for people’s imaginations.” Certainly, Naumkeag reflected this lavish garden theater: from the moon gated-wall of the Chinese Temple garden to the birch-bedecked Blue Steps, the magnificent views of the Stockbridge mountains offered a dramatic backdrop to Steele’s stage. Sometimes the magic of a garden, however, is not evident to everyone. When The Trustees was approached to accept Naumkeag as a bequest, one member of the Standing Committee vehemently argued against its acceptance, writing, “It isn’t an old house, it isn’t a beautiful house, and it has one of the most horrendous gardens in the Commonwealth… I really can’t see why The Trustees should take over this white elephant of a house.”

Many years later, long after Naumkeag did, in fact, come to The Trustees, retired president Gordon Abbott, Jr. wrote a history of the organization that included our foray into garden preservation. “Preserving gardens,” he wrote, “presents a special set of problems. Landscape gardens such as those at Naumkeag… derive their character from their design. Given sufficient funds, technical knowledge, labor, and, of course, an understanding of the original design concept and an appreciation for its subtleties, they can be maintained with relative ease.” After having recently restored Naumkeag’s gardens, I might question the “relative ease” part of his statement as we continue to polish this masterpiece and determine the tools necessary to guide stewardship decisions in the future.

As we continue to steward Naumkeag, we are also challenged to rejuvenate two very personal gardens in North Andover and Beverly, MA, where historic records have been uncovered only after hours of diligent research, and the personal development of the gardens had to be understood and translated to master planners and organizational leaders. Abbot recognized these two gardens and their specific challenges as he wrote, “But it is the personal gardens such as those at Long Hill and the Stevens-Coolidge Place, whose poetic charm has come from the special interests, tastes, and sensibilities of an individual, which present the greatest challenge. For these are characteristics that spring from the soul and are not easy to institutionalize.” Certainly, this is the challenge of garden preservation: how to understand, guide, and institutionalize “gardens that spring from the soul” so that their inherent genius of people and place can continue to inspire under the umbrella of their legacy.

Each time the Garden Conservancy accepts a conservation easement on a garden property, it is pledging to ensure the easement’s preservation goals are maintained—in perpetuity. Part of shouldering that responsibility involves establishing a relationship with the garden owner (either...
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