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THE LIFE AND GARDENS OF BEATRIX FARRAND

Karyl Evans

OVER THE COURSE OF A CAREER SPANNING HALF A CENTURY AND ENCOMPASSING HUNDREDS OF COMMISSIONED GARDENS, BEATRIX FARRAND (1872-1959) ESTABLISHED A LEGACY AS ONE OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY'S MOST SIGNIFICANT LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS. COUNTED AMONG HER WORKS ARE SOME OF THE MOST CELEBRATED AMERICAN GARDENS: DUMBARTON OAKS IN WASHINGTON, DC, THE PEGGY ROCKEFELLER ROSE GARDEN AT THE NEW YORK BOTANICAL GARDEN, AND THE ABBY ALDRICH ROCKEFELLER GARDEN IN SEAL HARBOR, MAINE. FARRAND'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE LANDSCAPE ARTS DID NOT GO UNRECOGNIZED IN HER LIFETIME; IN 1958, THE AMERICAN PUBLIC GARDENS ASSOCIATION CONFERRED ON HER ITS FIRST HONORARY LIFE MEMBER AWARD, CITING HER "UNCOMMON DEVOTION TO THE FIELD OF PUBLIC HORTICULTURE."

More than a century after Farrand embarked upon her pioneering career, gardens she designed continue to be replanted, studied, and meticulously restored because of the classic nature of her work and their association with one of the nation's most highly regarded landscape architects.

A niece of Edith Wharton who was raised among the New York City elite, Beatrix Jones spent childhood summers in Bar Harbor, Maine. Family connections led to over fifty commissions in the state during her lifetime, among them her family's estate Reef Point. Her surviving Maine gardens include the breathtaking Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Garden in Seal Harbor, resplendent with its expansive perennial beds surrounded by faded pink stucco walls capped with yellow-glazed tiles from the fortifications of Beijing. Adding to this stunning garden are the bottle gate, the moon gate, a moss-covered stone path climbing a gentle rise to the Buddha shrine, and the Spirit Path, lined with statuary collected by the family on their travels to China. Although still privately held by the Rockefeller family, this garden is graciously kept open to the public on a limited schedule.

Two other privately owned Farrand-designed gardens are still lovingly maintained on Mount Desert Island by the descendants of the families who commissioned them: Mildred McCormick's The Farm property and the Kennedy

family's grand Kenarden Lodge. Beatrix Farrand also consulted on the planting plans for John D. Rockefeller's extensive Carriage Roads, today part of Acadia National Park, where visitors can experience them on horse-drawn carriage rides.

Farrand kept close ties with the Bar Harbor community throughout her lifetime and helped develop plans for the Bar Harbor Village Green as well as Seal Harbor's Village Green, which can still be seen today. Traces also remain of gardens Beatrix Farrand designed as part of two estates that were eventually incorporated into the campus of the College of the Atlantic, also on Mount Desert Island.

Still, the place in which one can most feel the spirit of Beatrix Farrand is her last home and garden at the Garland Farm property in Bar Harbor, purchased in 2003 and restored by what came to be the Beatrix Farrand Society. Today the residence has been transformed into a small study center, and her gardens there have been meticulously restored. Both are open to the public on a limited basis.

Alongside her groundbreaking projects, Farrand's legacy in the landscape arts is secured by having been the first woman to create a successful landscape architecture practice. Trained at Harvard's Arnold Arboretum and

Beatrix Farrand portrait

Sketch by Jeanne Ciravolo



Left: The Mount entry drive, Lenox, Massachusetts. Beatrix Farrand designed and site engineered the entry drive at The Mount, the estate of Farrand's aunt Edith Wharton. The entry to the estate, which would have been reached by carriage, was designed to bring visual interest and a certain mystery in the approach to the house. Photo: Karyl Evans

Right: Six-time Emmy Award-winning documentary filmmaker Karyl Evans. Photo: Harold Shapiro

Columbia University, and fresh from absorbing classic garden design on a grand tour of Europe, Farrand ran a professional office in New York City starting at the age of twenty-three. Just four years later, she was among eleven professional landscape architects who founded the American Society of Landscape Architects.

As Beatrix Farrand's reputation as a classically trained landscape architect grew, her aunt the novelist Edith Wharton put her niece in charge of the site engineering for the entry drive of The Mount, the home Wharton had just built in Lenox, Massachusetts. These gardens have been beautifully restored and are open to the public.

It was in this early part of her career that Farrand designed the gardens at Bellefield in Hyde Park, New York, heightening the sense of depth in the backyard by reducing the dimensions of the receding "rooms" in the garden. The house and gardens were donated to the National Park Service in 1976, becoming part of the Franklin Delano Roosevelt National Historic Site. In 1994, the National Park Service chartered the Beatrix Farrand Garden Association, which, under the direction of a head gardener, has revived this historic garden.

In 1912 Beatrix Farrand was commissioned to work on the design of a university campus by Princeton University. She was the first woman to have ever been hired as a landscape consultant for a college campus and is credited by scholars with landscaping about 90 percent of the Princeton campus.

While consulting at Princeton, Farrand met Ellen Wilson, the wife of the university's president, Woodrow Wilson. When Wilson won the United States presidency, the First Lady hired Farrand to design the East Garden at the White House, which featured a lily pond ringed by Irish yews.

In 1913 Beatrix Farrand relocated to New Haven, Connecticut, following her marriage to Yale professor Max Farrand. In 1922, she was hired by Yale to be the university's landscape consultant with the title of "Professor." Her work included the planting plans for most of the residential college courtyards as well as Marsh

Botanical Garden, where she designed extensive display gardens that attracted tens of thousands of visitors each year. When she left in 1945, some of the Marsh Botanic Garden plants were dispersed to the nearby Connecticut College Arboretum. Very little remains of her work on the Yale campus today, but a small group of Beatrix Farrand enthusiasts are working toward restoring some of her gardens. Farrand also consulted on landscape plans for the University of Chicago as well as Hamilton, Oberlin, and Vassar Colleges.

In 1915 Beatrix Farrand was commissioned to create the Rose Garden for The New York Botanical Garden. Her asymmetrical triangular plan included 138 beds with over six thousand rose plants enclosed by a climbing rose-adorned iron lattice fence. Today, with over six hundred varieties, the renamed Peggy Rockefeller Rose Garden is considered to be an encyclopedia of historic and modern roses.

Beatrix Farrand's fourteen years in New Haven saw her complete three remarkable garden designs for Connecticut estates, all of which have been restored. In 1918, she began designing gardens for the Harkness estate, now part of the Harkness Memorial State Park in Waterford, which included a sunken garden and an informal alpine rock garden, allowing the formal gardens to fall off into a more rustic planting plan. This was to become one of Farrand's signature design concepts.

In 1921 in Bridgewater, Connecticut, Farrand designed a small walled garden, traces of which had all but vanished by the 1980s when a major book on Beatrix Farrand's work by Diana Balmori and two other authors was published, leading to the rediscovery and subsequent restoration of the gardens on the Three Rivers Farm property.

In the 1920s architect Theodate Pope Riddle commissioned Farrand to redesign an existing sunken garden for the family's estate in Farmington, Connecticut. The sophisticated geometric design was not implemented until 1984, when two local garden clubs rediscovered Beatrix Farrand's plan and helped restore the gardens for the Hill-Stead Museum, which is open to the public.



Above: Moon Gate, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Garden, Seal Harbor, Maine. The use of a moon gate to transition between formal and informal gardens was a masterstroke by Beatrix Farrand at the Rockefeller Garden. Very little has changed at this spectacular garden today since the private garden remains in the Rockefeller family. Photo: Karyl Evans

Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, DC, remains one of Beatrix Farrand's most important landscape designs. She began work on the fifty-three acres of wide-ranging hilly topography at the Dumbarton Oaks estate in 1921. Farrand's genius was allowing the natural land contours to dictate her design, accommodating a series of formal garden rooms close to the house as well as a terraced swimming pool area, a rose garden, a large kitchen garden, and English perennial flower borders. Farrand also designed most of the architectural features including terraces, steps, stucco retaining walls, wrought-iron gates, seating, and sculptures. Today the site is owned by Harvard University and is open to the public.

In 1927 Beatrix Farrand's career took an unexpected turn when her husband accepted the position of Director of the Huntington Library, necessitating a move to San Marino, California. Her first significant commission in California was for the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena, where she designed Dabney Courtyard, a semi-enclosed space planted with olive trees that endures today. Farrand designed the majestic walkway at Occidental College with its long allée of trees. She also designed and implemented gardens for the Director's House at the Huntington Library. But likely her greatest California legacy is her design work for the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden.

When Max Farrand retired in 1941, the couple returned to Mount Desert Island in Maine, transforming her family's

summer home at Reef Point into an impressive study center for New England flora. When Beatrix in turn retired in 1955, she regretfully closed the Center and donated her impressive archive to the Department of Landscape Architecture at the University of California at Berkeley by virtue of its recognized school of Landscape Arts and Architecture and botanic gardens. She also relocated a number of her historic shrubs and trees to Asticou Azalea Garden and Thuya Garden, which are part of the Land and Garden Preserve of Mount Desert Island.

Today, the enthusiasm for restoring Beatrix Farrand-designed gardens is a testament to the timeless beauty of her work and the interest in preserving her important legacy. Beatrix Farrand had the fortitude, intelligence, and talent to transform ordinary landscapes into places of extraordinary beauty. 🌸

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The film explores more than fifty Beatrix Farrand-related sites around the country.