

A park where past and future also play

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Once an estate alongside the Merrimack, Maudslay State Park is getting help to age beautifully

By Stuart Deane, Globe Correspondent | September 14, 2008

In 1986 when Governor Michael S. Dukakis opened Maudslay State Park, he called the site of the former Moseley Estate in Newburyport "one of the most beautiful spots on earth."

From formal Italian gardens and flowering ornamental shrubs to rolling pastureland and woods, the park has much to offer, a fact not lost on the estimated 140,000 visitors each year.

"We have such a rich diversity of resources within one small area," said Rob Kovacs, park supervisor. "We have so much to offer - from the formal side with gardens and former house sites to the natural side with such features as the kettle hole and river views.

"We also offer a diversity of programming, from the Theater in the Open to the Maudslay Art Center to the interpretive programs.

"There's a little bit for everyone, from the jogger to the nature lover. You might see deer, wild turkeys, owls, coyotes, foxes, red-tailed hawks, bluebirds, eagles. . . . Then there's the horticultural aspect for garden enthusiasts," he said.

The status of the Theater in the Open, based at the coachman's property, is in limbo with the pending transfer of the coachman's house and barn in a long-term lease to a curator who will restore and preserve it in return for the right to live there rent free. There are two events still scheduled for this season. The original drama, "The Woman With the Red Kerchief," is slated for Saturdays and Sundays at 2 p.m. through Sept. 28 and a Halloween walk, Maudslay Is Haunted, will be held Oct. 18 and 19 from 2-4 p.m.

Even with the potential transfer, the theater might still operate out of its office in the old gatehouse.

The Arts Center hosts July and August concerts, ranging from jazz to country to big band, on Saturday evenings and Sunday afternoons on an open-air stage in an amphitheater. In inclement weather, performances are moved into the concert barn.

"We wanted a cultural component [to the park]," said Nick Costello Jr., son of one of the center's founders and now its executive director. It "has been in business for 15 years. We've maintained the facility to the best of our ability as a private nonprofit organization. . . . Turnout is way up. You can't beat Maudslay. It's one of the crown jewels in the state park system."

Interpretive programs at the park include the evening stroll, history walks to the house sites, gardens, and farm sites, story and craft time, wildlife talks, and a junior ranger program.

"All are welcome," said Donna Sukak, park interpreter. "We have something for everyone - historically, naturally, and culturally. It's about enjoying what the state parks have to offer."

The rolling hills of the park form a western bookend to Newburyport from the better-known Parker River National Wildlife Refuge on Plum Island to the east. Located within a bend of the Merrimack River as it winds to the sea, the park, which covers about 480 acres, includes eight miles of gravel roadways, formal gardens, arched stone bridges, old farmhouses, and outbuildings.

The topography includes thickets of rhododendron, mountain laurel, and azalea, as well as stands of hardwood and pine and vast pasturelands. The rhododendrons and azaleas bloom in May, the laurels in June. Shaded pathways offer respite from the heat in summer. The park is resplendent with color in fall. Winter offers quiet getaways for cross-country skiers and snowshoers.

From 1849 to 1870, the Laurel Grounds overlooking the Merrimack were the scene of an annual literary party, with such guests as the poet John Greenleaf Whittier. In earlier times, a nearby site was the landing spot for the Amesbury-Newburyport ferry, visited in 1789 by George Washington.

The park lures walkers, runners, bicyclists, cross-country skiers, and horseback riders. Picnickers are welcome as well. Several vistas have been the settings for family reunions or weddings, with receptions held at the nearby Arts Center complex.

"The park is a very peaceful place to walk," said resident Kieran Joyce. "It's nice to imagine what it might have looked like a century ago."

The reception for his daughter Beth's wedding was held at the Arts Center. "We wanted to keep it simple," he said. "It can also be done formally if anyone so wishes, with a caterer and an orchestra, but that was not what we were after. We wanted a clambake and a small band. And the price was very reasonable."

What attracted the couple in the first place was that both Beth and husband Derek Dorval are runners who train in the park.

Don Hennigar, Newburyport High School cross-country coach, said, "It's as fine a cross-country course as there is in Massachusetts, perhaps even in New England, in terms of both beauty and terrain. It's an absolute delight to run there."

Or to ride.

"I love riding along the river, looking at the boats," said Susanne Meyer of Newburyport, who transports her horse Pacino from a barn 10 miles away. "It's rare to be able to ride along the water. It's so relaxing, like therapy."

Even with the 1950s demolition of the original 80-room mansion and the 1970s fire that razed the house of the last Moseley resident, the property still suggests the glory days of the turn-of-the-20th-century wealth of Frederick S. Moseley, the Boston broker whose estate it was.

"It's lovely now," said Marion Bothwell of Newburyport, whose father, James Bothwell, was once the dairyman at the farm. He lived in a house across the street from the headquarters building that is now in the curatorship program, "but most people don't know how exquisite the gardens were then. I wish people could have seen how beautiful they were."

That house is now home to Jim and Christine Haley, who have lived there for 10 years as curators of the property. "It's been a lot of work, but it's coupled with the opportunity to raise a family in a fantastic environment. The park is right outside our door. It's our backyard. I'm in the park every day with the dog and the three children," Christine Haley said. "At the same time, there's a certain sense of responsibility to maintain its historical significance. We have to respect that."

Sandee Liversidge, as chairwoman of Maudslay State Park Association's garden committee, is on a mission to restore the gardens to their original condition.

"The gardens are in the early stages of looking vaguely like what they may have looked like in, perhaps, the 1920s. A tremendous amount of work still has to be done. A lot of money is needed for what is called 'hardscape' in landscape design terms - such as replacing Italianate iron gates, restoring the pergolas in both the main and rose gardens, and then [dealing with] the two small buildings," Liversidge said.

Despite that, do the gardens still have an appeal for the visitor?

"They're really magical," Liversidge said. "You have to find your way to the gardens, through a courtyard on one side or up a little pathway from the other side. Then it's, 'Wow, there they are!' The homes are gone, but the gardens are the best example of what the place must have looked like."

Maintaining the trails and the views is a never-ending task. "We've been busy," said Kovacs, "It's a lot of work to keep this place up, to bring it back to the height of its beauty as much as that's possible, but we're proud to be stewards of this beautiful place."

And the Moseleys are proud to have passed on the heritage.

Said Frederick S. Moseley III of Hamilton, "I tell you, I've done a few things in my life, but I don't think I've done anything that's meant more to me, or would have to my grandparents, than to have facilitated the transfer of Maudslay to the state as a park. To be able to provide such a beautiful setting for the city of Newburyport's enjoyment is very meaningful as far as the family is concerned."