

The story behind the gardens at Maudslay

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Newburyport —

In 1898, as 27-year-old Martha Brookes Hutcheson looked around at the then boring and barren grounds of New York's Bellevue Hospital, she made a decision about her future. She wanted to create landscapes. But Hutcheson didn't want to simply tend garden, she wanted to plan outdoor spaces that would elevate the tastes and standards of those who experienced them.

Landscape architecture was a bold choice for a woman at the turn of the century, however, and Hutcheson knew she had a tough row to hoe. She first studied landscape architecture at MIT, but found the flagship program lacking and went on to study at the Arnold Arboretum. Hutcheson pursued her education privately as well — visiting local nurseries and touring gardens abroad in Italy, France and England. Before long, she set up shop in Boston and in 1902 she was commissioned by Frederick S. Moseley to design the gardens at his Newburyport estate, Maudesleigh, now known as Maudslay State Park. The Moseley family made their home on Beacon Street, but spent spring and fall at Maudslay where they could enjoy scenic views of the Merrimack River and experience the best of the New England's seasons. At the time, however, much of the grounds consisted of open fields — except for three greenhouses and an unsightly water tower. Hutcheson planned to make significant changes; and Moseley was prepared to follow her orders.

The resulting landscape and gardens, though not all in existence today, were a great accomplishment and received recognition from the Massachusetts Horticultural Society. Hutcheson even featured the gardens in her book, "The Spirit of the Garden." These days, Park Interpreter Donna Sudak shares the story of the gardens on free-to-the-public history walks.

"I think it's about showing people Martha's design," says Sudak, who is in her ninth season at Maudslay. "It was the woman's touch — her creativity and addressing the garden as an outdoor world." Sudak has committed much of the story to memory, and as she leads the walk she points out the secrets and strategies of Hutcheson's design.

One of Hutcheson's areas of focus, Sudak says, was the entrance to the estate — a project she began in 1906. At the time she was commissioned, the main drive was barren and circled around to the side of the home. Hutcheson, a proponent of surprise, decided to shape the main drive so that guests were first greeted by a stonewall, built by Italian mason, and an intricately-designed wrought iron gate. The path itself was flanked on both sides by flowering hedging. It was Hutcheson's hope, Sudak says, that as guests made their way down the drive in springtime, they would be entranced by the white dogwood, pink and flame azaleas, and hybrid rhododendrons. Then, as the path subtly curved, the view would open on the vast 40-room mansion (no longer in existence). Views of the river, therefore, were reserved as a special treat for those invited to the back patio.

"Part of the house was actually demolished to meet Martha's design," Sudak explains, noting that Moseley must have trusted Hutcheson a great deal to change the architecture of his home. Today, the stonewall and gate remain in tact and the plantings have grown deep and lush. Even when the spring flowers are not in bloom, summer breezes carry the scent of sweet pepper bush over the path.

“It’s quite a sight in the spring,” Sudak says. “And in the fall, the foliage is just as beautiful.”

Formal gardens

The entrance, however, was only the beginning of Hutcheson’s plan. She also faced the challenge of creating formal gardens set away from the home where they’d compete for attention with the greenhouses and water tower. In the introduction to Hutcheson’s book, “The Spirit of the Garden,” Rebecca Warren Davidson explains:

“Hutcheson’s solution was to design a long, curving path from the entrance to the house, which straightened as it approached and again as it left the garden, providing the illusion of axial connection, but also an aura of mystery and surprise as it eventually led to ‘a natural wooded walk of great beauty beyond.’”

The formal garden, reminiscent of the *Italianate* style Hutcheson had seen in her travels, was enclosed by a brick wall and featured roses, perennials, pergolas, and a number of sculptures including a fountain that was brought in from a monastery. The garden had multiple levels — a signature of Hutcheson’s work that allowed her to create what she called “a place apart.” In her book she writes: “You have changed your level of approach; you have gone down two slight steps ... and you have entered another place. You are in the garden!”

Sandee Liversidge, who chairs the Garden Committee for the Maudslay State Park Association, was part of the group that resurrected the formal gardens in 2002.

“When I first saw the garden it was a collection of perennials planted by park employees and the brick walls were falling down,” she says. “Since then the Commonwealth restored the brick walls and hired an historical landscape architect to create a rehabilitation plan which was implemented.” The Garden Committee also recently paid for an irrigation system to be installed to ensure sufficient water, especially for the roses.

Orchards and vegetable gardens

At the north edge of the formal gardens, Hutcheson planted a long row of American Beech trees, which she hoped would hide the greenhouses that lay just beyond the wall. Today, those beech trees are over 30 feet tall. The greenhouses have been removed, and their crumbling foundations are now home to wild Goldenrod, Queen Anne’s lace and Bull Thistle — a favorite of the bumblebees. The stone potting shed, however, remains in tact and is full of terra cotta pots dating back to the days when Hutcheson and the staff worked tirelessly on the grounds.

Hutcheson’s landscape also included an apple orchard and kitchen vegetable garden, which provided all the vegetables for the Moseley family and their workers. The vegetable garden, now maintained by park ranger Liann Graf, is a popular site for weddings — five in August alone. In 2005, Eagle Scout Luke Frash resurrected the grape arbor, which is now thriving. Asparagus is the only vegetable that still grows in the garden. The white spruce that Hutcheson planted there are now 40-foot tall.

Even though many of Hutcheson’s plantings in the formal garden have been replaced and her pathway plantings are overgrown, the grounds remain beautiful. Liversidge calls Maudslay a “horticultural treasure.” Part of its beauty comes from the history behind the gardens.

Like Sudak, Liversidge credits Hutcheson. “The importance of the gardens is that they were designed by one of the first professionally trained female landscape designers who went on to be recognized as one of the best,” she says. “Martha took a site that was virtually barren and turned it into a destination that offered something for all the senses.”

Liversidge and Sudak hope that visitors to the garden will be inspired to contribute to the revitalization of the grounds. Although the state directs some funds for maintaining the grounds, they do not have the budget to recreate and maintain all that was once there. To get involved, contact Donna Sudak at Maudslay State Park at 978-465-7223.