

Name of Property: Camden Amphitheatre and Public Library
City, State: Camden, Maine
Period of Significance: 1928 - 1931
NHL Criteria: 1 and 4
NHL Theme: III Expressing Cultural Values
5. Architecture, landscape architecture and urban design
Previous Recognition: 1989 National Register of Historic Places; High Street Historic District (contributing resource); 2006 (updated documentation)
National Historic Context: *American Landscape Architecture in the Early Twentieth Century*

NHL Significance:

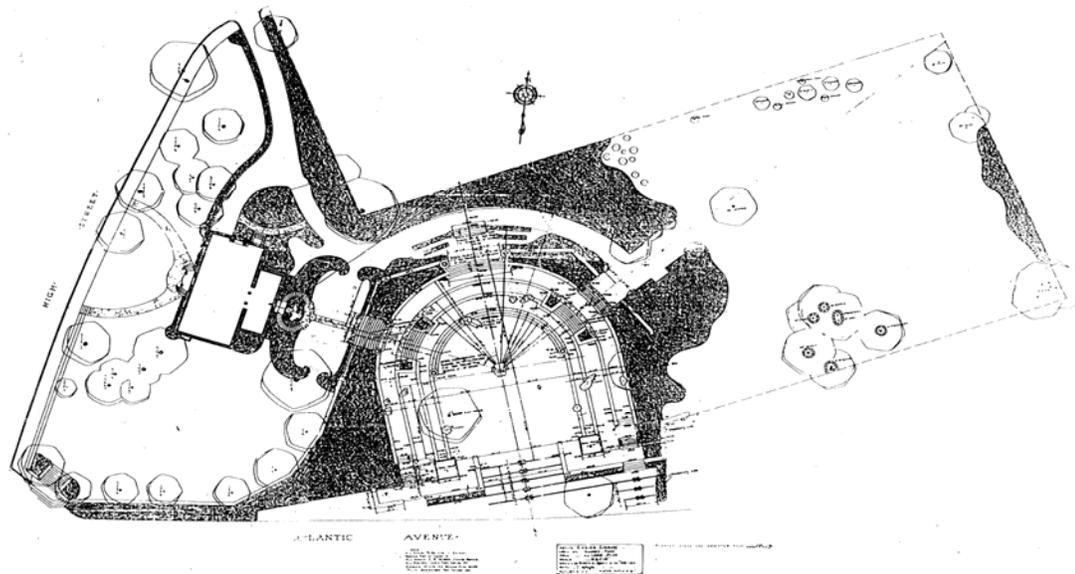
- The amphitheater represents the creative genius of Fletcher Steele, one of the nation's premier practitioners of twentieth-century landscape design.
- A forerunner of American modernism by one of the movement's early and most influential proponents, Steele's design celebrates the use of the bent axis and abstracted forms of vegetation within the framework of the largely traditional architectural form of the outdoor theater.
- One of Steele's few public projects, the amphitheater is a highly successful and outstanding early twentieth-century example of the classical amphitheater form adapted for contemporary popular use at a time when interests in civic improvement, cultural arts, and outdoor recreation were beginning to coalesce nationwide.



- The amphitheater is a tangible representation of Steele’s early experimentation with the modernist principles being explored by his European peers—principles which, promoted in his seminal 1930 *Landscape Architecture* article, “New Pioneering in Garden Design,” influenced the emerging generation of forward-looking practitioners, who by the end of the decade successfully challenged and broke the mold of traditional landscape education in America.
- The amphitheater is an outstanding representation of the contributions made in the early twentieth century by the landscape architecture profession, private benefactors, and national associations to develop public landscapes in the United States that celebrated natural regional beauty, scenic character, and rich cultural history.

Integrity:

- In 1997, the grounds of the Camden Amphitheatre and Public Library were restored to preserve the original Fletcher Steele design as it was carried out between 1928 and 1931. The project included the removal of inappropriate plants and the replacement of missing or dying plant material with species identified in Steele’s planting plan or appropriate substitute materials.
- In 1996, an underground addition was constructed beneath the south lawn of the library building. When the original retaining wall and lawn were reestablished, a street-level entrance and the outdoor Children’s Reading Plaza were added along Atlantic Avenue, and a free-standing glazed pavilion intended to serve as a skylight was placed upon the south lawn. Otherwise, there have been no significant changes to the property. All structures are in excellent condition and receive regular routine maintenance.
- In November 2005, the Camden Public Library was awarded a Lowe’s Charitable and Educational Foundation Preservation Fund grant of \$50,000 from the National Trust for Historic Preservation for the preservation of the Fauns Garden.
- Additional minor changes include the recent construction of a four-car parking area north of the library (most of Steele’s original plantings were retained); the relocation of the State of Maine seal to the Camden Historical Society’s Conway House to ensure its preservation; and the 2007 installation of a stone and bronze compass on the lawn terrace



of the Fauns Garden. Designed by Steele, the compass remained unfinished when Steele’s work for the library trustees ended in 1931; today it lies in one of the two locations originally contemplated by Steele.

Owner of Property: The Town of Camden, Maine

Acreage of Property: 1.63

Origins of Nomination: In 2007, the Camden Public Library applied for and received a Challenge Cost Share Program grant of \$5,000 from the Northeast Regional Office of the NPS for the purpose of researching and preparing an NHL nomination for the Camden Amphitheatre and its associated grounds.

Potential for Positive Public Response or Reflection on NHL Program:

- NHL designation of the amphitheater will promote an appreciation of landscape architecture as a profession, the work of Fletcher Steele, and the philanthropic efforts of Mary Curtis Bok.
- Local people and visitors sense that the Camden Amphitheatre is a special place but many do not know of its historic importance. NHL designation will increase public appreciation and promote a better understanding of the qualities that make the theater a special place.
- The Camden Downtown Master Plan and other less formal marketing plans in town are stressing the importance of heritage tourism. NHL designation of the amphitheater will help that effort enormously, and garner support for future interpretation, maintenance, and preservation activities.



Potential for Negative Public Response or Reflection on NHL Program: None known.

Landmarks Committee Comments:

Landmarks Committee Recommendation: Designation. Dr. Murtagh moved, Dr. Seale seconded; unanimous approval.

Public Comments Favoring Designation (received as of 11/05/12):

Judith Tarbox, President, Camden Garden Club, Camden, Maine

Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr., State Historic Preservation Officer, Maine Historic Preservation Commission, Augusta, Maine

Margaret Barclay, Co-Chair; Mark DeMichele, Co-Chair; Elinor Klivans; Abigail Fitzgerald; Beedy Parker, Judith McGuirk; and Susan Snead, Town of Camden Historic Resources Committee, Maine

Martin Cates, Chair, Select Board; Don White, Vice Chair, Select Board, Camden, Maine (owners)

Patricia M. O'Donnell, FASLA, AICP, ICOMOS, Principal, Heritage Landscapes LLC, Charlotte, Vermont

The Honorable Chellie Pingree, US Congresswoman, 1st District, Maine

Advisory Board Recommendation: