Weir Farm

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

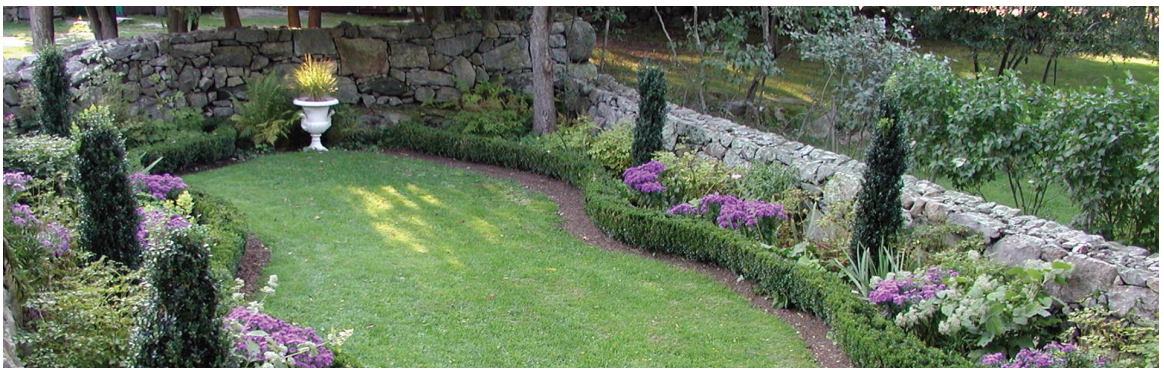
Weir Farm
National Historic Site

The Gardens

For many affluent New Yorkers of the 1880's, there was a strong desire for a tranquil retreat away from the noise and heat of the city. J. Alden Weir was no exception. He acquired his Branchville property in 1882, and soon developed a deep affection for the landscape of his new country home. Over the years, the gardens became a significant and endearing part of this rural landscape.

Late 19th century landscape architects sought to create something uniquely American that would also express a distinct personal style. They drew inspiration from the native countryside and vegetation, while blending emerging European and Japanese aesthetic traditions with American colonial ideals inspired by the nation's 1876 Centennial. By the early 1900's, the simple Cottage Garden, or Grandmother's Garden style had been fondly embraced by professional as well as amateur gardeners.

The Sunken Garden



In 1907, J. Alden Weir purchased the Webb Farm, which lay just across Pelham Lane from his summer home at Weir Farm. After his death in 1919, the property fell into disrepair. When Cora Weir Burlingham, his youngest daughter, took possession of the farm in 1931, she found it to be a "shambles," and immediately initiated ambitious renovations and additions to the house, and had several new gardens designed and installed.

Work was begun on the Sunken Garden in 1932, and was completed in 1940. Although no drawings of the plan have survived, the garden was fashioned in the popular Colonial Revival style. The small, intimate space, defined by stone retaining walls on all four sides, was laid out with curving flowerbeds backed by tall arborvitae and edged with dwarf boxwood, a characteristic feature of colonial-style gardens.

Cora also had a stone terrace, potting shed and small greenhouse built on the south side of the Burlingham House. During construction, she added many simple highlights, including the pink thyme still growing between the patio stones. The open terrace, linked by two sets of stone stairs, flows naturally down into the enclosed space of the sunken garden and nicely compliments the surrounding structures. Unfortunately, after Cora's death, maintenance of the garden ceased and the area once again became overgrown.

The National Park Service at Weir Farm National Historic Site preserves this significant cultural landscape due to its direct link with the development of American Impressionism. The site is being preserved and restored to appear today just as it did to Weir and the other artists who made the farm their home. In 1995, a project was begun to inventory, map and photograph the existing plants in the Sunken Garden. The rehabilitation project, carried out with the help of the Wilton Garden Club, was based upon the site's Cultural Landscape Report, as well as the many historic photographs that documented the garden during Cora's tenure.

The Terraced Gardens

The landscape of Weir Farm features several terraced lawns which were once the site of numerous vegetable gardens. During World War II, Cora maintained a large Victory Garden north of the Burlingham House where she grew a wide variety of produce. In the years following the war, this garden was phased out, and she had the terraced gardens south of the house constructed. This area was used primarily for growing raspberries, strawberries and rhubarb, some of Cora's favorites. Remnants of a wire trellis system used to support raspberry plants are still visible. The small meadow surrounding the terraces held plantings of asparagus, a grape trellis and pear trees. It is likely that turf covered most of the area, and plantings were restricted to the edges. Near the Weir House, Dorothy Weir Young maintained an apple orchard and also several vegetable gardens where parsnips, corn and other produce was grown.

The National Park Service has not restored these gardens, but rather worked to maintain and recapture the effect of the gardens in a manner compatible with the overall historic character of the site. Cora's family photos were used to identify plant types and locations. New plantings incorporated existing plant remnants, such as peony, yucca, spring and summer bulbs and other hardy herbs.

Cora Weir Burlingham in her terraced gardens in 1952.

The Secret Garden

It is likely that the current location of the Secret Garden had been some sort of farm garden prior to Weir's arrival. It is also probable that Anna Baker Weir chose this spot for her first flower garden. In 1905, Weir executed a series of four paintings or sketches depicting a small, simple flower garden on this spot north of his studio. Photos of the same garden taken in 1915, showed an enlarged area with new structures and plantings of perennials, vines and hedges. A fountain, sundial and two rustic gates, which were sometimes covered with chicken wire, also appeared in the photos.

A woman enjoys the company of her dog next to the fountain in the Secret Garden, circa 1915.

Most of the construction during Weir's time was of a more Adirondack style, in keeping with his disregarded plans to build a hunting lodge in the Adirondacks of northern New York. The formal garden was unlike anything previously built on the farm. The arrangement, more formally laid out on the eastern end and less structured on the western end, was typical of a Grandmother's Garden. Weir's three daughters may have been influential in the design and choice of plants, and surely helped with its upkeep. In her reminiscences Lest We Forget, Caroline Weir Ely later wrote: "My first garden twenty years ago at my father's is still full of the plants I put in…."

Photos and drawings created during the 1930's and 1940's, while Dorothy Weir Young and sculptor Mahonri Young were living here, indicate that the garden had became very overgrown, and it was probably during this time that it became known as the "Secret Garden." This may have been a reference to Frances Hodgson Burnett's children's story of the same name, or to the fact that the garden was hidden by vegetation.

The Secret Garden Restoration Project

When Weir Farm became a National Historic Site in 1990, the Secret Garden was completely overgrown with trees and weeds. Only the degraded sundial and fountain, and some stone edging around the beds, remained. The boxwood hedge, though five feet high, was still in place, and a few perennials could be found as well. In 1992, investigations for restoration of the Weir Garden commenced. Photos taken in 1915 were used to identify plant materials and establish the general layout and character of the garden. At the same time, archaeologists dug pits to locate the placement of fence posts and gates, and to determine how the fountain worked. Based on this research, members of the Olmstead Center for Landscape Preservation produced construction drawings for the restoration of the garden.

During the summer of 1995, with assistance from the Ridgefield Garden Club, the restoration project was begun. A new fountain and sundial, as well as fencing and plantings, were installed, and 23 non-historic trees were removed. Whenever possible the same heirloom varieties of flowers and plants were used, but in certain cases, as with the phlox, new varieties were chosen because they were more resistant to disease.