

PRIVATE PLEASURES DERIVED FROM TRADITION

The Hunnewell Estates Historic District

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When I set out to select a topic for my independent project in landscape design history, the gardens of Wellesley, Massachusetts, seemed an obvious choice. Having lived in the town for almost twenty years and served as president of one of the local garden clubs, I believed that a historical survey of its gardens would be of use to scholars as well as to the community. I hoped to find examples of landscapes representing a variety of styles, and my initial foray was suc-

cessful. Early in my research, however, it became clear that many of the historically significant gardens in Wellesley belonged to a single, very large family. So after putting aside the preliminary work on other gardens, I focused on the properties of Horatio Hollis Hunnewell and his talented children, who gave so much to the town of Wellesley.

The most familiar image of the famous landscapes built by the Horatio Hollis Hunnewell family shows Italianate topiary casting precise shadows across terraces that rise above the waters of Lake Waban in Wellesley, Massachusetts. This image, however, represents only one of more than a dozen contiguous Hunnewell family estates that the Hunnewells developed in the latter half of the nineteenth century. By 1900 these properties comprised several hundred acres and included not only the estate called Wellesley, with its terraced topiary garden, but also The Cottage, The Oaks, Hill Hurst, The Cedars, the Welles-Richardson Estate, the Welles-Kimball Farm, the Morrill Estate, the Walter Hunnewell Estate, The Pines, the Winn House, and the Souchard House—all of them funded by the great wealth amassed by the Hunnewell family in banking, railroads, copper mines, and other industrial enterprises all over the United States during the years of America's westward expansion after the Civil War.

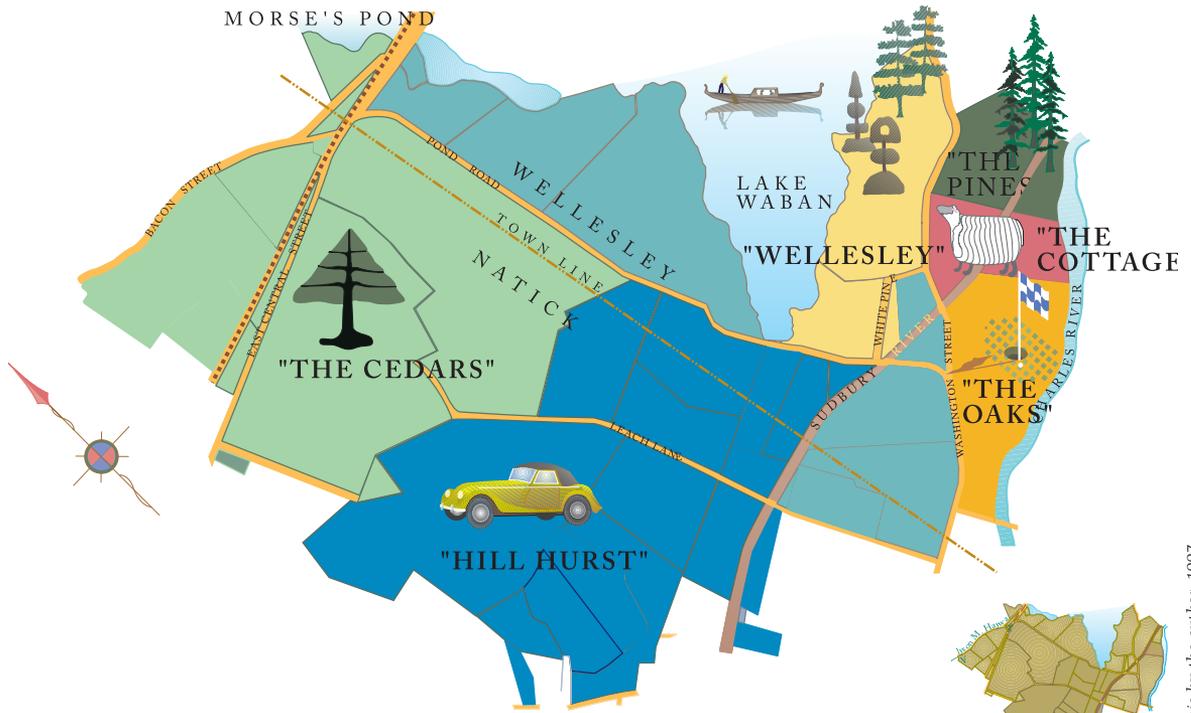
Clockwise from top:

H. H. Hunnewell's Italian Garden and boathouse. The terraces were planted on a three-acre bank, using the space in an interesting manner while leaving the view of the lake uncluttered. Undated photograph courtesy of Wellesley, Hunnewell Family Archives.

When Henry S. Hunnewell was not tending to his own beautiful estate, The Cedars, he could be found at The Oaks playing golf, a game he loved and often wrote about in his journals. Undated photograph courtesy of The Cedars, Henry S. Hunnewell Family Archives.

The Pinetum, a nine-acre collection started in 1866, of more than four hundred conifers from all over the world. Undated photograph from Life, Letters and Diary of Horatio Hollis Hunnewell, courtesy of Wellesley, Hunnewell Family Archives

Horatio Hollis Hunnewell with his secateurs at the end of a workday, enjoying his view of Lake Waban. Undated photograph courtesy of Wellesley, Hunnewell Family Archives.



HUNNEWELL ESTATES HISTORIC DISTRICT

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Today most of these properties make up the Hunnewell Estates Historic District in the southwestern corner of the town of Wellesley, twelve miles west of Boston. The town, like the principal estate in the Hunnewell District, takes its name from Horatio Hollis Hunnewell's wife, Isabella Pratt Welles (1812–1888). Formerly known as West Needham, it was incorporated as Wellesley in 1881. Most of the estates lie on a relatively flat river plain between the Charles River and Lake Waban within the town of Wellesley; those that extend into neighboring Natick enjoy more varied topography, with commanding views of the lake, hills, meadows, and river plain. The Hunnewell Estates Historic District, listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1988, is still largely owned and occupied by members of the Hunnewell family. Only one of the properties—the Pines, now owned by Wellesley College and housing its Women's Research Center—has passed out of family ownership. Four properties are of particular historical interest: Wellesley, the origi-

nal estate and the centerpiece of the District; The Cottage, a property key to the development of the District; The Oaks, with the first documented private golf course in New England; and The Cedars, an extraordinary landscape with rolling lawns and vistas designed by Charles Eliot.

Horatio Hollis Hunnewell

H. H. Hunnewell, the family patriarch, was born in Watertown, Massachusetts, in 1810. At the age of fifteen he was sent to Paris to learn banking in the house of Welles and Company. In 1937, he married Isabella Pratt Welles, the daughter of John Welles, one of the firm's partners. Soon afterwards the couple returned to the United States and purchased a residence on Boston's Beacon Hill.

Like John Claudius Loudon and Andrew Jackson Downing before him, Hunnewell believed that "nature was beneficial for everyone and making a garden was socially valuable." They all agreed, in Hunnewell's words,



Courtesy Wellesley Historical Society

Horatio Hollis Hunnewell lived a full life. A generous man, he believed in family unity, public duty, and horticultural beauty. Undated.

“[that] human behavior was greatly affected by the environment and that gardening was a civilized and healthful activity.” An 1843 note in Hunnewell’s diary reads simply, “Became interested in country life.” In that year he and his wife purchased a large plot of land next to a modest cottage owned by his father-in-law in West Needham. In 1844 Hunnewell initiated the construction of a Renaissance Revival mansion designed by Arthur Gilman, at the same time clearing the land, building stone walls, and laying out the initial plans for his famous gardens. Like other couples of their wealth and status at the time, the Hunnewells drew inspiration for their splendid home from the old-world architecture and landscapes seen on their many trips abroad. These properties were designed to reflect their owners’ place in society, but unlike most of his peers, Horatio Hollis Hunnewell also used his estate to contribute generously to the development of ornamental gardening in New England.

The Hunnewells produced nine children, seven of whom built homes on properties contiguous to their parents’. The estates reflected

not only the values that H. H. Hunnewell instilled in his family, but also the tastes of the emerging leisure class throughout the United States, especially in New England and New York State. Many of the properties, for example, included greenhouses and plantations for horticultural experimentation. H. H. Hunnewell himself gained national recognition for his experiments with trees—especially conifers—and with other woody plants, notably the rhododendrons that he introduced into New England. Nurserymen traveled from as far as England to see his gardens. Through public exhibits mounted by the Massachusetts Horticultural Society, plants from the family’s estates served as an educational resource, and H. H. Hunnewell enjoyed hosting plant hunters and landscape architects as well as nurserymen, inspiring all who took an interest in coniferous and broad-leaved evergreens. The properties themselves, with their innovative facilities for sports and leisure activities, their sophisticated animal husbandry, and their extensive landscape gardening, were often featured in the influential literature of the day, including A. J. Downing’s *Treatise* and the magazine *Garden and Forest*.

Horatio Hollis Hunnewell fostered in his children a sense of community and public spirit, a solid work ethic, and a commitment to wise stewardship of their land, setting a strong example by employing his wealth, his knowledge of horticulture, and his down-to-earth personal style for the benefit of many organizations. He was a supporter of the botanical department of Harvard University, a contributor to the Botanic Garden and Museum in Cambridge, and one of the largest benefactors of the Arnold Arboretum, where the Hunnewell Building still stands. He endowed a chair in the botanical department at Wellesley College, served as a trustee of the Massachusetts Humane Society for twenty-six years, and was a director of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society for more than thirty-four years.

In 1869, on the occasion of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society’s fortieth annual exhibition, he established the Hunnewell Award, consisting of annual prizes of \$40 to \$160 bestowed



Courtesy Alex MacLean, *Landslides*, May 1997

Overview of Wellesley with the Italian Garden and Pavilion in lower left portion of the photograph. The greenhouses and service buildings are located in the upper right.

for “grounds laid out with the most taste, planted most judiciously, and kept in the best order for three successive years.” The awards gave prestige and a lasting stimulus to ornamental horticulture in New England.

Wellesley

In 1852 Horatio and Isabella Hunnewell moved into their new house, which they named Wellesley. Many large and lavish estates were built throughout the United States at this time, but few in New England could compare with Wellesley in taste, grandeur, and the liberal expenditure of money. Spread over forty acres on the eastern shore of Lake Waban, it remains the central component of the Hunnewell Estates Historic District.

Although Hunnewell was his own landscape designer and helped work his own land, he often sought the advice of horticulturally talented friends, including the Arnold Arboretum’s first director, Charles Sprague Sargent, Henry Winthrop Sargent (a cousin of Isabella Hunnewell), and his own principal gardeners, F. L. Harris and T. D. Hatfield. The Wellesley garden, laid out east–west along the southern shore of Lake Waban, comprised a series of separate areas, each with a distinctive design and

its own palette of plants: the Pinetum in the easternmost corner, the Italian Garden along the lakeshore, a formal French parterre extending from the back of the house toward the lake, and an extensive rhododendron and azalea garden tucked away on the outermost edge of The Great Lawn. Near the Pinetum, Hunnewell later added more gardens of rhododendron and azalea, 1876 and 1879, respectively.

The juxtaposition of exotics and native trees, and of natural and constructed forms, reflected the fashions of the time. Rhododendrons imported from China, for example, were planted as a large informal garden along an avenue leading to the Italian Garden, where fancifully clipped conifers were arranged on terraces designed to conform to existing topog-



Courtesy Wellesley, Hunnewell Family Archives

H. H. Hunnewell offering direction and advice to the workmen building terraces for the Italian Garden, c. 1890.

raphy. In the Pinetum native trees mingled with conifers that Hunnewell imported from all over the world, making it internationally famous as one of the most comprehensive collections in the United States prior to the establishment of the Arnold Arboretum in 1872. Fittingly, a cultivar of one of his introductions, *Picea pungens*, was named 'Hunnewelliana'.

Among the outbuildings clustered to the west of the house are numerous greenhouses for propagation and experimentation. The first was built in May of 1852 as a graperly. By 1895 he was experimenting under glass with peaches, hollies, rhododendrons, azaleas, palms, and oranges. A pit house was used to store tender rhododendrons during the winter.

The inspiration for the sumptuous Italian Garden was a visit to Elvaston Castle in Derbyshire, where he saw an English interpretation of the delights and grandeur of the great Italian gardens. Its centerpiece was a topiary collection surrounded by an arboretum of coniferous trees. "It was . . . after a visit to Elvaston Castle, that I conceived the idea of making a collection of evergreen trees for topiary work in imitation of what I witnessed on that celebrated estate," Hunnewell later wrote. In 1850–1851, he began creating his own Italian garden on seven terraces that descended from a ridge seventy-five feet above Lake Waban to its shores, covering about three acres. His choice of trees reflected the harsh New England climate; the English yews so magnificently trained at Elvaston would never survive the cold Massachusetts winters, so instead he used white pine, spruce, hemlock, cedar, and arborvitae.

To add to the illusion of a classic Italian scene, Hunnewell purchased a gondola and constructed a boathouse along the shores of the lake. This idea may have been sparked by a



Hunnewell's gondola on Lake Waban with a view of Italian Garden at Wellesley, undated.

trip to Bellagio, on Lake Como, where he also borrowed ideas from the gardens of Villa Serbelloni and Villa Melzi. Disregarding the unpretentious style favored in New England, Hunnewell entertained his friends and family on Lake Waban, a gondolier skillfully gliding across the waters, guiding the boat to within view of the Italian Garden, just as if he were plying the waters of Lake Como.

To the east of the Italian Garden lies the nine-acre Pinetum with its collection of more than four hundred conifers from throughout the world, the first planted in 1866. The care that has gone into building this privately owned arboretum over the past one hundred and forty years has resulted in many new plant varieties, some widely used throughout the northern United States today. The Pinetum remains the central feature of the Wellesley landscape, increasing in area and number of species with each new Hunnewell generation.

Any discussion of the Hunnewell horticultural legacy would be incomplete without a mention of Theophilus D. Hatfield, the gardener who served the Hunnewell family for thirty-seven years. Hunnewell afforded Hatfield the resources to carry out years of hybridizing and experimentation, while Hatfield provided a broad knowledge of the required nursery practices. Born in England in 1856, Hatfield graduated from Kew College and went on to practice

on private estates. In 1883 he sailed to the United States, where he first worked in a New Jersey nursery. In 1884 he was hired as estate manager by Horatio Hollis Hunnewell's eldest son, Walter, and in 1890 he took charge of Wellesley.

Hatfield and Hunnewell experimented with hybridizing chrysanthemums, begonias, and, especially, azaleas and rhododendrons. Hatfield attributed his introduction to rhododendron to a gift of a *Rhododendron japonicum* from Jackson Thornton Dawson, the Arnold Arboretum's first propagator and a Hunnewell family friend. Hatfield later crossed that plant with *Rhododendron molle*, producing the first authentic crosses between the Japanese and Chinese species. (He named a dark orange variety "Miss Louisa Hunnewell" for H. H. Hunnewell's daughter.)

Hatfield is best known today for a hardy yew cultivar he developed while working for the Hunnewells. Crossing the English yew, *Taxus baccata*, with the Japanese yew, *T. cuspidata*, for the latter's hardiness, he produced *Taxus x media*, meaning "in between." An excellent cultivar, *T. x media* 'Hatfieldii', a dense, pyramidal form with dark green leaves, is used extensively for hedging, screening, and other mass plantings. Hatfield lived on the Hunnewell estate until his death in 1929.

The Cottage

Across the street from Wellesley lies The Cottage, the second estate built by the Hunnewell family. Hunnewell chose the site for its proximity to Wellesley, revealing his desire to keep the family together. On July 25, 1870, he noted in his diary, "Commenced digging cellar. This is for the use of any of the members of the family who, it is hoped, may be tempted to occupy it." The Cottage served as a convenience, a temporary lodging for the Hunnewell children while they were building their own homes nearby. As such, it was key to the development of the District: without this "spare" house located so close to their own new construction, one or more of the children might have chosen to build elsewhere. From its construction in 1870 until Hunnewell's death in 1902, many relatives took up residence on an interim basis.

The original estate consisted of about six acres. Hunnewell employed a friend, the architect John Hubbard Sturgis, to build a Queen Anne-style home of stone, wood, and stucco. In 1923 when Hunnewell's unmarried daughter, Louisa, took up permanent residence, she hired Henry V. Hubbard and Percival Gallagher of the Olmsted Brothers firm to redesign the entrance driveway and plantings and to add a naturalistic pool, new stone, brick, and stucco boundary walls along Washington Street, and various terraces and garden beds around the house and grounds.

The Oaks

In the westernmost section of the Hunnewell Estates Historic District is The Oaks, built for Arthur, the sixth child of H. H. Hunnewell, and his wife, Jane Hubbard Boit. Begun in 1871, the estate originally consisted of forty-one acres of level, river-plain pasture abutted by the Charles River, Washington Street, and the property today known as Elm Bank.

Arthur Hunnewell, an active member of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society, had a passion for



The Cottage, showing the new entry driveway, c. 1934.



Courtesy Wellesley, Hunnewell Family Archives

Arthur Hunnewell, the sixth child of Horatio Hollis Hunnewell, undated photograph from *Life, Letters and Diary of Horatio Hollis Hunnewell*.

hybridizing and exhibiting chrysanthemums; he produced around twenty-five new varieties in his greenhouses. An avid sports enthusiast as well, he combined landscape gardening with his love of athletics by building the first documented private golf course in New England on his property. In 1892 Florence Boit, Jane Hunnewell's niece, spent the summer at the Oaks. Enthusiastic about golf and armed with a set of clubs acquired while on vacation in France, she introduced her uncle Arthur and his friends to the sport. He and his brothers soon set out to construct a six-hole golf course on the grounds of

The Oaks, assisted by Arthur's estate superintendent, Frederick Coles, and supervised by Florence Boit.

The course crisscrossed the property and encircled the one-room schoolhouse built for and used by generations of Hunnewells. Construction was relatively easy: the turf was already there, ready for scything or mowing; the flat terrain accommodated ditches and a brook; and a variety of plants added obstacles and interest.

The Hunnewell course stimulated the development of golf in New England, making this property one of exceptional historical importance. Within six months friends and fellow club members were so quickly and completely won over by the new sport that they recommended that golf be given a trial at The Country Club in Brookline. The proposal was approved in November of 1892, with Arthur Hunnewell and his friends Laurence Curtis and Robert Bacon named to supervise the project. The following year, in March of 1893, a six-hole course was constructed and soon expanded to nine holes. By 1900 twenty-nine clubs had been built within a twelve-mile radius of Boston, and in the ensuing years the sport blossomed throughout New England on courses that still exist today. Private courses, while not common, became one of the pleasures of industrial



Courtesy Wellesley, Hunnewell Family Archives

The Oaks golf course, second hole. From left to right, Gertrude Hunnewell bending over her putt, with Robert Gould Shaw, Arthur Hunnewell, Jane Boit Hunnewell, and Francis Williams Sargent looking on, 1901.



Courtesy The Cedars, Henry S. Hunnewell Family Archives

Henry Sargent Hunnewell sporting his distinctive and ever-present mustache, 1902.

giants of the Country Place era such as Vanderbilt, Rockefeller, and DuPont.

The Cedars

To the north and west of the District, along the Natick town line, lies The Cedars, the summer home of the ninth and youngest child of Horatio Hollis Hunnewell, Henry Sargent Hunnewell. Like his father, Henry was intensely interested in the aesthetic aspects of landscape gardening and estate development and sought to preserve the natural beauty of the rolling hills and woodlands of his property. The original 1888 purchase consisted of about 248 acres along Pond Road and East Central Street in Wellesley and Natick. Within ten years, however, Henry had increased his holdings to more than five hundred acres by systematically acquiring adjacent farms and woodlots.

Charles Eliot, best known for conceiving The Trustees of Reservations and planning the Boston Metropolitan Park System, was the landscape architect for the estate. He died in 1897, before the estate was complete, but had a major influence on the siting of the house and stable and on the location and layout of the main avenue, the vistas, and the garden beds. Until the time of his death, Eliot visited the estate often to provide consultation to Hunnewell. Olmsted himself offered advice on the siting of the main avenue; Charles Sprague Sargent visited the estate often and gave horticultural and design suggestions; and Jackson Dawson supplied many woody plants. In fact, numerous journal entries in the Hunnewell archives document the hundreds of trees that were sent from the Arnold Arboretum to The Cedars and other Hunnewell properties for trial.

The main organizing element in The Cedars' landscape is a series of vistas radiating from the house in four directions. Typical of the large estates of the Country Place era, these vistas form dramatic visual links to the lakes and woods beyond. The primary view is to the south, down the main front lawn.



Courtesy The Cedars, Hunnewell Family Archives

Aerial view of The Cedars, undated. A fine example of the visual links from the main house to the lakes and woodlands of the surrounding landscape.

Hunnewell, working with Charles Eliot, reinforced the vistas using the textural contrast of cedars to define the edges of the maple and swamp oak woods. The “cedars” that formed picturesque-styled belts, important focal points, and triangles that demarcated the vistas included *Cedrus atlantica* (Atlas cedar), *C. libani* (cedar of Lebanon), and *C. deodara* (deodar cedar), but also others not of the genre *Cedrus*: for instance, *Chamaecyparis thyoides* (Atlantic white cedar), *Thuja occidentalis* (American arborvitae or white cedar), and *Juniperus virginiana* (eastern red cedar).

Harriett Risley Foote, a nationally known rosarian during the golden age of American gardens (1890–1940), designed and laid out the estate’s rose garden, which won a Massachusetts Horticultural Society Gold Medal in 1923. The rose garden, like the perennial garden, was not situated near the house but off in the woods, to be enjoyed by visitors while strolling the estate. Expanses of immaculate lawn were outlined by trees or shrubs, with statuary positioned as focal points in the center of the rose garden and at the entrances to the gardens. The liberal use of evergreens, both broad-leaved and coniferous, provided year-round interest. Henry also introduced utilitarian agriculture to the estate—vegetable gardens, an orchard, a few dairy cows, chickens, pigs, and—to support his favorite pastimes of riding and racing—horses.

Postscript

While other wealthy families in the United States were also building domestic empires at this time, none amassed so many large, contiguous estates. The Hunnewell Estates Historic District is a rare example of several contiguous landscapes passing from one generation to the next with each successive owner building on the work of his predecessor. This arrangement is even more unusual in that the land was not originally owned by one family member and then deeded to the sons and daughters. Instead, through a carefully planned sequence of acquisitions, each son or daughter added to his or her own property, thereby

extending the District and wrapping it around the lake.

Horatio Hollis Hunnewell set out in 1843 to create a beautiful estate, but in involving himself in horticulture it became a setting where he shared his knowledge—and his passion for his favorite plants—with the public. When he started the collection of broad-leaved evergreens, it was generally thought that few, if any, choice rhododendrons and azaleas would thrive so far north, but by persisting over many years he demonstrated that hundreds of varieties could grow outdoors in New England. His Pinetum, too, the first comprehensive collection of its kind, became an educational force and an inspiration to all in America with an interest in conifers.

Today, the properties still encircle Lake Waban, presenting a pristine landscape in the midst of metropolitan Boston’s bustle and revealing intriguing layers of New England’s garden history. With their statements about the power that culture and wealth can wield when used for education and social good, the Hunnewell gardens record late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century New England society at its best. A quote from an 1857 historical sketch of the Massachusetts Society for the Promotion of Agriculture (of which H. H. Hunnewell’s youngest son, Henry, was an active supporter) also aptly describes the Hunnewells: “[T]hey were gentlemen of the highest standing in the country, distinguished for their wealth, their learning, and their public and private virtues . . . wealth as well as knowledge is power.”

Facing the long-term care of their properties, the Hunnewells, who have a strong sense of family heritage, are in the process of preserving them for future generations. Hundreds of acres have been placed under conservation restrictions with The Trustees of Reservations and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. H. H. Hunnewell’s Pinetum, the Italian Garden, and the shoreline along Lake Waban have been protected from development. The Italian Garden will remain as open land, not reverting to forest, and the seven-tiered terraces are to be maintained.

References

Horatio Hollis Hunnewell, *Life, Letters and Diary of Horatio Hollis Hunnewell: With A Short History of the Hunnewell and Welles Families and An Account of the Wellesley and Natick Estates*, vols. 1, II, III (Boston: Privately printed, 1906).

The children of Horatio Hollis Hunnewell (1810–1902) and Isabella Pratt Welles Hunnewell (1812–1888) were: Hollis Horatio Hunnewell (1836–1884), Francis Welles Hunnewell (1838–1917), John Welles Hunnewell (1840–1909), Susan Hunnewell (1842–1842), Walter Hunnewell (1844–1921), Arthur Hunnewell (1845–1904), Isabella Pratt Hunnewell Shaw (1849–1934), Jane Welles Hunnewell Sargent (1851–1936), Henry Sargent Hunnewell (1854–1931). Susan died in infancy. John, who spent most of his life in Paris, was the only other offspring of H. H. Hunnewell not to build in the District.

Albert Emerson Benson, *History of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society* (Boston: Massachusetts Horticultural Society, 1929), 158.

Hunnewell's youngest son wrote, "I was named for Henry Sargent, cousin of my mother and a very intimate horticultural friend of my father." Henry S. Hunnewell, *Recollections of Henry Sargent Hunnewell* (Boston: Privately Printed, 1938), 3.

H. H. Hunnewell, *Life, Letters and Diary*, 101.

From Donald Wyman, "The Hunnewell Arboretum, 1852–1952," *Arnoldia* 12(9–12): 61–84, which includes Hatfield's 1928 list of hardy rhododendrons. Wyman also includes "a few" of the Hunnewell Arboretum's woody plants, 1852–1952.

Undated, unsigned document, Hunnewell Family Archives, 1850–1997, Wellesley, MA.

H. H. Hunnewell, *Life, Letters and Diary*, 199–200: "From

1873–75, at different periods, the Cottage was occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Hunnewell, Mr. and Mrs. Hollis Hunnewell and Mr. and Mrs. Francis W. Hunnewell. In 1875 it became the property of Mr. and Mrs. R. G. Shaw . . . In 1882, Mr. and Mrs. F. W. Sargent occupied the house . . . In 1891 Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Hunnewell spent the summer there . . ."

Olmsted Job No. 7215, Francis W. Hunnewell, Wellesley, MA, June 1923–April 1939. National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site, Brookline, MA.

For a more complete history of The Cedars, see Allyson M. Hayward, "A Rather Wild and Picturesque Place: Henry Sargent Hunnewell at The Cedars," *Journal of the New England History Society* 6 (1998): 1–13.

The Henry S. Hunnewell Horticultural Journals and Plant Lists, 1881–1900 (Hunnewell Family Archives, The Cedars, Natick, MA).

Upon earning a certificate in landscape design history in 1997, Allyson received the Outstanding Student Faculty Award in her class. Since then, she has been awarded a Gold Medal from the Massachusetts Horticultural Society for promoting New England's garden history, served as chair of the New England Garden History Society, and is currently a member of the landscape advisory committee for Historic New England (formerly SPNEA) and president of the New England Farm and Garden Association, Inc. She lectures extensively and her book on the life and gardens of British garden designer Norah Lindsay (1873–1948) will be published in 2007. She will soon revisit her initial research on the Hunnewell estates with a book in mind.