

# A Park and Garden in Vermont: Olmsted and the Webbs at Shelburne Farms

*Alan Emmet*

**With the Adirondacks as a backdrop across Lake Champlain, the W. S. Webbs, with guidance from Frederick Law Olmsted, entirely transformed their property to accord with their own vision. Owing to a continuity of ownership and planning, the landscape of the Webbs has lasted now for over a century.**

Anyone who walks through the woods in New England can hardly miss the stone fences. Lichen-covered, often half-buried in pine needles, they thread their way up hill and down, now and then meeting each other at odd sharp angles. These fences are such an obvious sign of a drastically altered land use that you begin to wonder how the land once looked. And then you marvel at the sheer strength and determination of the region's first farmers.

The terrain at Shelburne Farms is different. Here, beside Lake Champlain in northern Vermont, you could walk through a thousand acres of woods and pastureland without encountering even a remnant of the typical old stone fences. The landscape is idyllically pastoral, with Brown Swiss cows browsing in verdant rolling meadows. This bucolic setting, unique now in the rapidly developing periphery of Burlington, Vermont's largest city, has long been an anomaly. The truth is that Shelburne Farms was deliberately made to look different from the surrounding countryside. The boundary walls of the old agricultural order were removed, stone by stone, in the 1880s, and the terrain was reshaped on a new and grand scale.

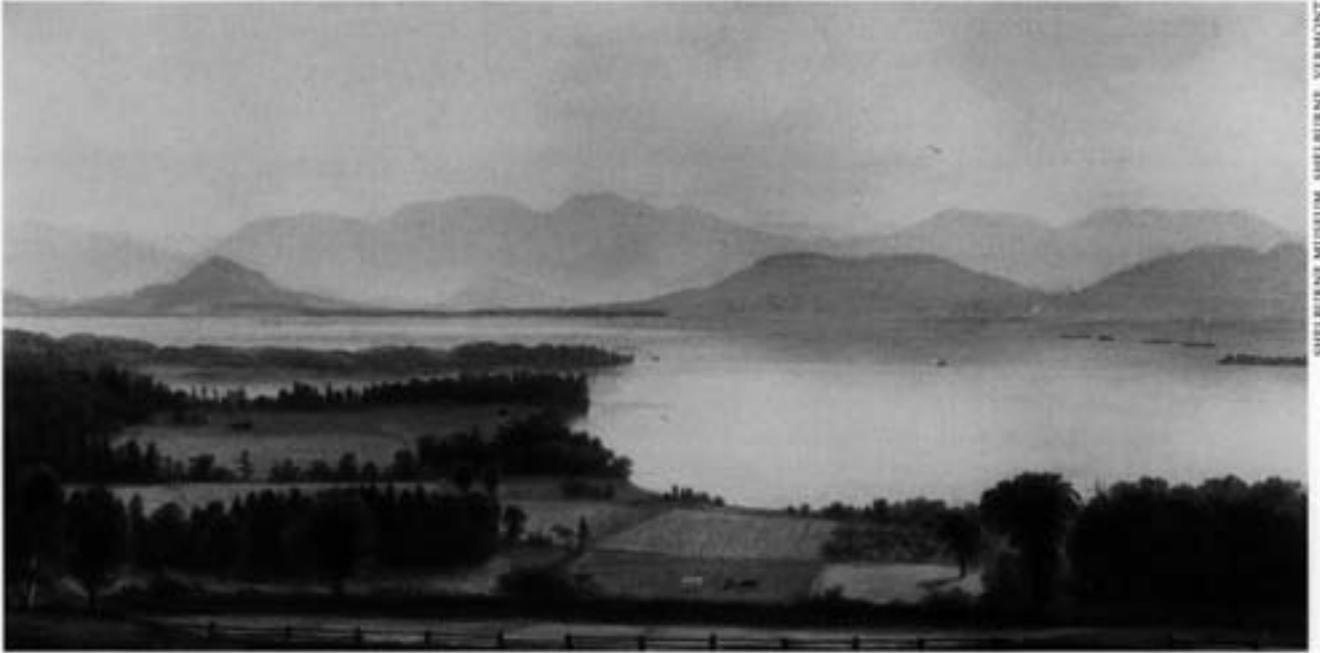
William Seward Webb (1851–1926) had grown up in New York City, where his father was the “pugnacious” editor of a New York paper.<sup>1</sup> Seward Webb studied medicine in Europe and at Columbia. He practiced for only three or four years before turning to finance on Wall Street, where he established his own brokerage house. Before long he became involved in railroad busi-

ness with William Henry Vanderbilt, oldest son and chief heir of “Commodore” Cornelius Vanderbilt.<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Webb travelled to Vermont in 1880 to look at the Rutland railroad with an eye to annexing it to the Vanderbilt empire. Although he did not favor acquisition of the railroad, he liked what he saw of Burlington and the Champlain Valley. He also liked the Vanderbilts. In 1881, Seward Webb married Lila Vanderbilt, the next-youngest of William Henry's eight children. Not long after his marriage, Dr. Webb was named president of the Wagner Palace Car Company, suppliers of sleeping cars to the Vanderbilt-controlled New York Central Railroad.

For a wedding present, Lila's father gave her a house on Fifth Avenue at 54th Street, just a block from his own mansion and those of other family members. Their Fifth Avenue house was to be the Webbs' primary residence for thirty years. As the location for their requisite country house, they promptly settled upon the remote and unfashionable part of Vermont that had appealed to Dr. Webb.

On the shores of Lake Champlain at Burlington, the Webbs built a rustic summer cottage called Oakledge.<sup>3</sup> This was all very well for a young couple, but the Webbs had something grander in mind. Scouting out the area, Seward Webb decided the most desirable land lay along the lake in Shelburne. The farms there may have been worn out, but the topography and the scenery were special. The shoreline was irregular, with rocky promontories and curving



Steamer off Shelburne Point, oil by Charles Lewis Hyde. This midcentury painting illustrates the view that Olmsted admired in 1845. The typical agrarian Vermont landscape in the foreground later became part of William S. Webb's Shelburne Farms and was subjected to a grand reordering.

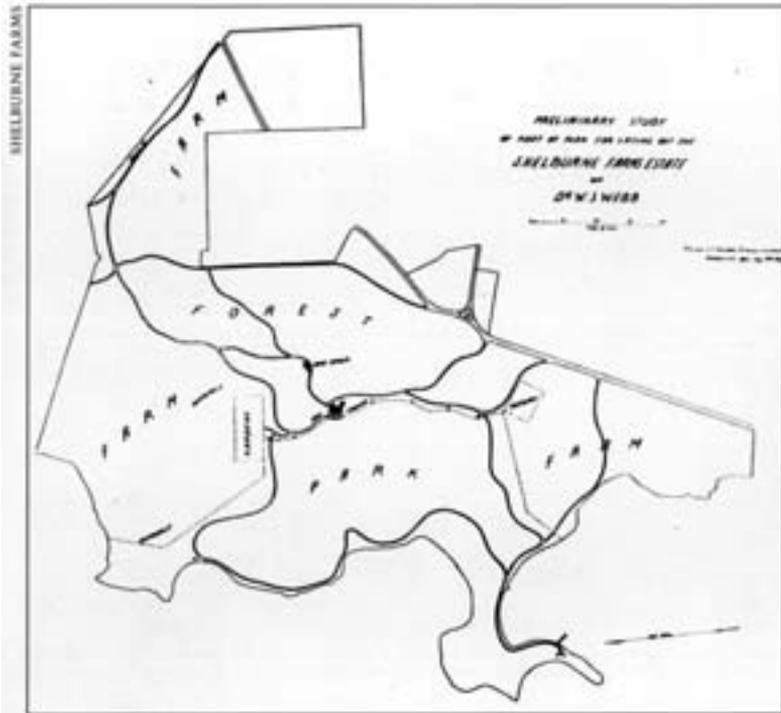
bays. From any point along that stretch of shore, one had the extraordinary view of the blue Adirondack mountains, rising tier on tier, on the far side of the lake. From Lone Tree Hill in Shelburne, three hundred feet above the water, the view to the west was even more impressive.

Webb began negotiating in 1885 to buy up parcels of land in Shelburne. In December of that year, his father-in-law William Henry Vanderbilt died, having doubled the fortune that *his* father, Cornelius, had bequeathed to him a mere eight years earlier.<sup>4</sup> Lila's inheritance was only a small fraction of her father's \$200-million estate, but added to Seward Webb's own rapidly growing fortune, the couple's means seemed limitless. The Webbs could have almost anything they wanted. Dr. Webb enlarged the scope of his plans for Shelburne and accelerated the pace of his land purchases. Through an agent, he negotiated with local farmers, many of them impoverished, but not all of whom were pleased to learn that they had granted sales options to the same mysterious buyer.<sup>5</sup> By 1891, Webb had purchased all or portions of twenty-nine farms, covering 2,800 acres. The prices Webb paid varied widely, but the average was less than \$150 per acre over a six-year period. Existing

farm buildings added little if any value; Webb was interested only in land.<sup>6</sup> Still he continued to buy. Eventually he owned almost 4,000 contiguous acres.

Dr. Webb intended all along to reshape the separate farms he was buying into one great unified whole. His first move was to hire an architect to design a suitable house and major farm buildings. His choice of R. H. Robertson was a happy one for both men. Robertson was known to Webb as a designer of railroad stations and as architect of the Gothic Revival Church of Saint James in Manhattan. He worked for Webb for years. With Webb as his patron, Robertson's major work was done at Shelburne.

One of Dr. Webb's first directives to Robertson was to ask Frederick Law Olmsted, then the nation's preeminent landscape architect, to come as soon as possible to Shelburne to confer in regard to the "landscape department."<sup>7</sup> In his June 1886 letter to Olmsted conveying Webb's invitation, Robertson wrote that he had been retained to design "a most important Country house, stock barns—stables etc." for the 1,700 acres that Webb had by that time purchased along the lake. To make sure that



Preliminary Study for Part of Plan for Laying Out the Shelburne Farms Estate for Dr. W. S. Webb, by F. L. and J. C. Olmsted, 1887. The lake shore is at the lower edge of this plan; the house, shown at the center, with its "home grounds" and "home stables" on top of Lone Tree Hill, was actually built close to the lake, contrary to Olmsted's advice. The plan indicates Olmsted's division of the estate into separate areas of farm, park, and forest.

Olmsted realized the significance of the project, Robertson wrote that "if justice is done to the situation and conditions it will without doubt be one of the most important and beautiful country places in America and in view of this fact I hope you can undertake the problem." Olmsted wrote to Dr. Webb immediately, arranging to make an inspection trip to Shelburne the very next week, adding that his charge for a preliminary visit would be \$100 and traveling expenses.<sup>8</sup> Within a month after his first visit, Olmsted had formulated the basis for his proposal, which, as he outlined it to his colleague, Charles Eliot, was to be "a perfectly simple park, or pasture-field, a mile long on the lake, half a mile deep, the house looking down over it."<sup>9</sup>

Olmsted was at the peak of his career when he agreed to advise Dr. Webb. Ten years earlier, having completed his work on the New York City parks, he had moved his office to Brookline, Massachusetts. Since then, his prac-

tice had taken him all over the country. He continued to design public parks for cities, including Boston, Detroit, and Washington, DC. He advised on campus plans, ranging from Groton School to Stanford University. He collaborated with prominent architects such as H. H. Richardson on designs for private estates. At about the same time that he took on Dr. Webb as a client, he was working for other members of the extended Vanderbilt family in Newport, Lenox, and Bar Harbor. Biltmore, by far his largest undertaking for a private client, was still ahead. Olmsted's connection with the Vanderbilts had even included laying out the grounds for the family mausoleum on Staten Island.<sup>10</sup>

Staten Island, as it happened, had been the site of Olmsted's first contact with the Vanderbilts. In 1848, aged twenty-six and unsure of his life work, Olmsted had attempted to run a farm bought for him by his father. He lasted only two years on Staten Island but did get to know a neighboring farmer,

William Henry Vanderbilt (the father, much later, of Lila Webb).<sup>11</sup> Vanderbilt was exactly the same age as Olmsted. He had been rusticated to farming by his father, Cornelius, who at the time considered him "an improvident dolt."<sup>12</sup> Dolt or not, Vanderbilt's farm, unlike Olmsted's, was quite prosperous.

Throughout his career as a landscape architect, one of Olmsted's primary goals was to improve the environment of the burgeoning cities where more and more people spent their lives. At the same time, he perceived the importance of planning to preserve wilderness areas and places of particular natural beauty. Olmsted worked to protect Yosemite and Niagara Falls, places he deemed to be national treasures, the birthright of all Americans. His work for rich private clients was just as firmly grounded in his belief in the necessity for conserving natural resources.

Wherever he worked, Olmsted was keenly aware of the character and scenery of the locale.

This, to him, was what the word "landscape" meant. He realized that this concern set him apart from others in his field. Most designers, he observed, were unfortunately attuned only to elements, incidents, and features, rather than the landscape itself. This he held to be the direct result of their training as gardeners. "A training which is innocently assumed to be a training in landscape gardening is a training in fact away from it."<sup>13</sup>

At a time when there were no academic programs in landscape design and planning, Olmsted's own education had depended on his remarkable powers of observation. Even as a young man, he had been keenly aware of scenery and well able to describe what he saw. In an 1845 letter to his father, he had by chance described the actual setting of what, forty years later, was to become Shelburne Farms. Exploring that part of Vermont on a horse, he had observed the marginal state of the region's agriculture. He rode past burnt stumps, patches of mullein, and so little grass that "I should think the poor sheep would find it hard work enough to live, without troubling themselves with growing wool." South of Burlington, standing probably on Lone Tree Hill, the highest point at Shelburne Farms, Olmsted encountered one of the finest views he had ever seen. He admired Lake Champlain with its bays and islands, but the "chief charm" was the mountain backdrop across the lake.

I never saw mountains rise more beautifully one above another the larger ones seeming to cluster round and protect the smaller, nor did the summer veil of haze ever sit on them more sweetly. Back of all rose some magnificent thunderheads and they rose fast too, compelling me at 5 o'clock to take refuge and toast and eggs in a little road-side inn.<sup>14</sup>

The setting was certainly no less impressive in 1886, when Olmsted responded to Dr. Webb's summons.

Relations between Webb and Olmsted were unfailingly polite, but not entirely harmonious. Both were men of strong character, with firmly held convictions. Despite disagreements, however, their respect for each other never wavered. Dr. Webb, the client, always sought and de-

manded the best of everything. He employed Olmsted because Olmsted was unquestionably the foremost landscape architect in the country. Olmsted, in turn, was impressed by the breadth of Webb's vision, the grand scope of his scheme, and, doubtless, the apparently unlimited extent of Webb's resources for carrying out an idea. When he first embarked on the project for Webb, Olmsted, like Robertson, was convinced that, when completed, the design of Shelburne Farms "would be the most interesting and publicly valuable private work of the time on the American continent."<sup>15</sup>

One of Olmsted's proposals for Shelburne farms, the one that he most ardently promoted, was that the estate include an arboretum of all the trees and shrubs native to Vermont. The arboretum was to accord with the guidelines established by Harvard professor Charles Sprague Sargent in planning the Arnold Arboretum. To stock this "Arboretum Vermontii," Olmsted urged Webb to take advantage of the distinguished nursery of Pringle and Horsford, located just six miles south of Shelburne.<sup>16</sup> After discussing the idea with his superintendent, Arthur Taylor, who would be responsible for planting and care, Webb agreed to proceed with the arboretum.<sup>17</sup>

As envisioned by Olmsted, the arboretum was to follow the curving roadways he had laid out, being set back from the road on both sides. Such a scheme meant that the arboretum would be an integral and very visible part of Shelburne Farms, which was exactly Olmsted's intent. He placed orders with nurseries all across the country for species that Pringle and Horsford were unable to supply in sufficient quantity. Thousands of trees and shrubs were planted under Taylor's supervision, beginning in 1887. For the sake of economy, a vast number were grown to planting-out size in an extensive nursery established on the Shelburne property.

As was his custom, Olmsted had recommended native and hardy plants, based on his analysis of the site. His plant lists included most of the northeastern native trees: ashes, basswood, birches, elms, hickories, oaks, and willows, as well as the American chestnut and the American elm.<sup>18</sup> Balsam fir, hemlock, and various native pines were ordered in quantity.

Olmsted expected Pringle and Horsford to collect many shrub species by the hundred from the wild: alders, swamp azalea, blueberry, buttonbush, elderberry, pussy willows, black and red raspberries, wild roses, viburnums, witch hazel, and others. He also ordered native vines, including bittersweet, clematis, and wild grape. Olmsted asked for wildflowers, such as twin-flower (*Linnea borealis*) and trailing arbutus (*Epigaea repens*). The plants ordered for Shelburne Farms were certainly far different from the typical ornamentals with which gardeners and estate managers were decorating most other country places at the time. Olmsted's ultimate aim seemed to be to reproduce the plant diversity that the region might have supported a century or two earlier, before the land was cleared for farming. The only alien plants he ordered were western evergreens from P. Douglass & Sons: Colorado spruce (*Picea pungens*) and Douglas-fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*).

Webb's ideas for planting began to diverge from Olmsted's as soon as he fully understood what Olmsted was proposing. Webb *wanted* to include ornamental varieties; the greenery indigenous to Vermont seemed too stark for the Shelburne Farms he envisioned. He began to request tender and exotic species, such as rhododendrons, weeping willows, tea roses, and gardenias. Olmsted pointed out that these would not survive at Shelburne and would be entirely out of character with the landscape.<sup>19</sup> He refused to involve himself with the growing of tropical flowers under glass, if that were Webb's desire.

A great deal of planting was done according to Olmsted's recommendation, but the Vermont Arboretum was never completed. This may have been Olmsted's greatest frustration at Shelburne. He had believed strongly that Shelburne Farms, although privately owned, would have a public purpose. As he wrote when he submitted his preliminary plan to Webb in July, 1887,

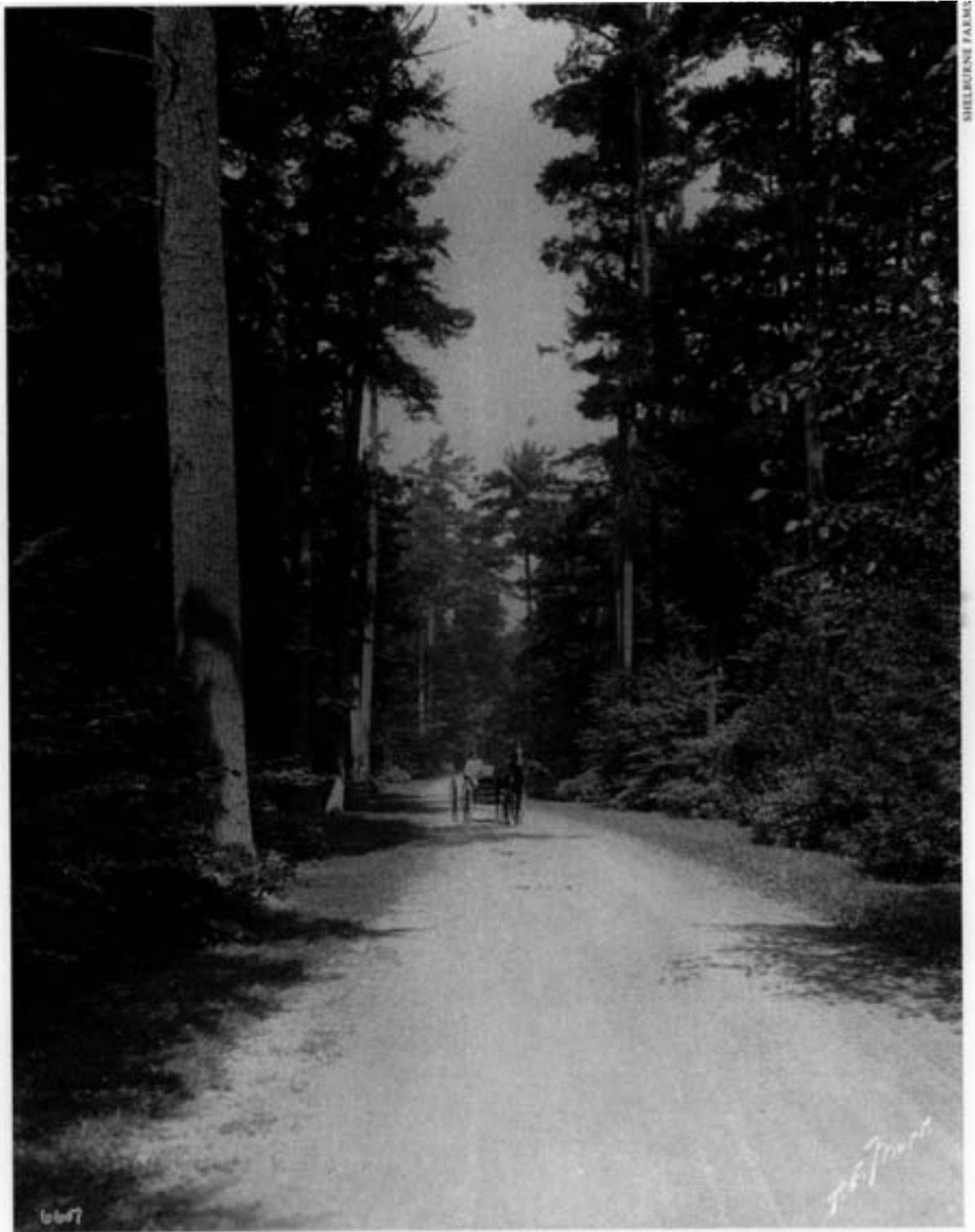
I have satisfied myself by personal examination of the feasibility of such an arrangement and that a beautiful, interesting, instructive and publicly important arboretum can be so obtained, the present natural woods forming an appropriate and harmonious background for it and adding directly to its scientific value.<sup>20</sup>

Olmsted lost his enthusiasm for Shelburne Farms when he realized that Webb did not share his belief in the educational and scientific importance to the public of the work they might have accomplished there together. After the summer of 1888, Olmsted's sons and associates attended to the work at Shelburne. The senior Olmsted, meanwhile, was becoming deeply involved with an even larger private project, and a much more sympathetic patron. At Biltmore in the North Carolina mountains, George W. Vanderbilt, Lila Webb's brother, granted Olmsted the trust and the latitude that he had not received from the Webbs.

Much of Olmsted's preliminary plan was implemented, as were his carefully articulated principles of design and the separation of conflicting uses. Olmsted divided the property into three areas: "1st Tillage and pasture lands in rotation; 2nd Park or permanent pasture lands; 3rd Forest Arboretum Vermontii."<sup>21</sup> He insisted that cattle should be kept from the home grounds, the main roads, and the forest, but without the continual nuisance of gates. To this end, Olmsted proposed the use of sunk fences with retaining walls, like the unobtrusive ha-has of the English landscape school, to confine the livestock. Fences, particularly near the house, were to be as inconspicuous as possible. Even the main entrance gates to the estate could generally be left open, under Olmsted's plan. The existing "straight and graceless" roads were to be changed in course and character to suit the terrain and the lush farmland through which they would run.

The new trees and shrubs were to be set back from the roads, with here and there a grouping brought forward in an apparently random way. "Fine specimen trees of the old spontaneous growth are to be preserved," Olmsted wrote.<sup>22</sup> Groups of trees and the undergrowth were to look as natural as possible.

Olmsted emphasized to Webb the importance of having a definite plan before proceeding. Ongoing land purchases made this difficult, if not impossible. In 1889 after purchasing five pasture farms to the south of his original tract, Webb finally agreed to plant the hilly northern part of the estate in trees, as Olmsted had recommended all along.<sup>23</sup>



*A stretch of one of the new roads, here passing between old-growth forest trees interspersed with recent planting. Photo by T. E. Marr, ca. 1900.*



*The Webbs' house at Shelburne Farms, designed by R. H. Robertson, photo by T. E. Marr, Boston, ca 1900. The rooms on this western side face Lake Champlain and the Adirondack Mountains.*

The English parks that Olmsted had so admired on his first trip abroad as a young man in 1850 were the chief source of his inspiration throughout his long career. The design principles on which he based his public and private work came from his interpretation of English landscape styles. The idyllic pastoral landscape of Shelburne Farms is typically Olmstedian. The main road rolls through broad meadowland, then up a gentle rise into a stretch of deep woods. Upon emerging again into the open, one glimpses at a distance the lake, or, at another point, the great house. Then the road bends away, and the distant vision is hidden once again. The views that seem so accidental were arranged with care. Transitions from forest to pasture to lawn and flower garden are smooth and gradual. There is a sense of fitness and inevitability about this landscape.

Webb devoted much attention to agriculture at Shelburne Farms, using the latest scientific techniques, which he hoped would set an example for Vermont farmers. Close to the manor house, the Webbs had an ornamental flower garden. There is no indication that the Olmsted office was involved in its design. The earliest

garden was laid out in geometrically patterned beds, reportedly modelled after the garden at Hampton Court.<sup>24</sup> The beds were planted each year with massed annuals that had been raised in the estate's greenhouses. By 1911, Lila Webb was taking more interest in the garden. She was dissatisfied with what she had. Apparently, she herself planned the Italianate garden on which work began in 1912.<sup>25</sup> The new garden ran the entire length of the house, between it and the lake. Long, low brick walls divided the gentle declivity into shallow terraces. At one end of the upper level, a pergola curved around an oval basin. On the lowest terrace, between the arms of a balustraded double stairway, was a lily pool. The garden ended at a parapet, bowed out above the cliff at the lake's edge. Each season, tubbed bay trees were put out along the balustrade. The scene looked for all the world like Isola Bella at Lake Maggiore or like the Italian-inspired garden of 1850 at Bantry House in Ireland that overlooked a bay of the sea, with mountains all around. In northern Vermont such a garden was definitely unusual.

A garden of this style and magnitude was not uncommon, however, on the estates of the rich in pre-World War I America, when formality

was fashionable and European prototypes were valued. The Webbs, on their frequent trips abroad, had statuary and a sundial shipped home. Stanford White allegedly brought them an antique fountain sculpture from Italy.<sup>26</sup> The Webbs had a mason who worked full-time to maintain the walls and stonework while a troop of gardeners managed the flower beds. There were peony beds, a rose garden, and deep perennial borders backed by majestic spires of delphiniums that echoed the shades of blue in the mountains across the lake.

Lila Webb amassed a comprehensive garden library as her interest grew. Her 1847 copy of (Samuel B.) *Parsons on the Rose* is inscribed "Lila from Seward, 1912." She had English books, already classics, by John Sedding and Gertrude Jekyll, as well as the recent works of Helena Rutherford Ely, Louise Beebe Wilder, and Mrs. Francis King, among others. Her books included at least three on Italian gardens, those by Charles Platt, Edith Wharton, and George S. Elgood. A tiny 1914 diary by Lila Webb reads as if it were intended to be a calendar of practical hints to other gardeners. If she had filled it with authoritative "dos and don'ts" for each month or week of the year, her book could have followed a time-honored tradition: "Plant Sweet Peas as soon as the frost is out of the ground." Unfortunately, Lila Webb's literary efforts petered out not long after the frost would have been out of the Shelburne ground that year.

Seward Webb died at Shelburne Farms in 1926. The following year, by act of God or as an indi-

cator of the insidious onset of neglect, all the potted bay trees along the parapet were killed by an early frost.<sup>27</sup> The glory days were over. Shelburne Farms had been built up very quickly. In typically American fashion, it flourished as long as did its creator. Its decline was precipi-



*From the flower garden, steps descended to a lily pool and a curved parapet overlooking Lake Champlain. Bay trees in Italian pots were set out each summer along the balustrade. Photo by A. A. McAllister, 1916.*



*The Webb family in the flower garden, ca. 1916. Dr. and Mrs. Webb flank their grandchildren in the front row. The delphinium display was a feature of the perennial borders. In the background is a long, curved pergola. Photo by A. A. McAllister.*

tous—to a point. The survival and rebirth of Shelburne Farms could be a case study in preservation. Dr. Webb's descendants have shown as much determination, and as much devotion to Shelburne Farms, as their progenitor.

#### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Seward Webb Dead in Vermont," *New York Times*, 30 Oct. 1926.
- <sup>2</sup> Wayne Andrews, *The Vanderbilt Legend* (NY: Harcourt Brace, 1941), 147.
- <sup>3</sup> Joe Sherman, *The House at Shelburne Farms* (Middlebury, VT: Paul S. Eriksson, 1986), 9–11.
- <sup>4</sup> John Tebbel, *The Inheritors: A Study of America's Great Fortunes and What Happened to Them* (NY: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1962), 30.
- <sup>5</sup> Sherman, *The House at Shelburne Farms*, 16.
- <sup>6</sup> Land records of the Town of Shelburne; William C. Lipke, ed., *Shelburne Farms. The History of an Agricultural Estate* (Burlington, VT: Robert Hull Fleming Museum, University of Vermont, 1974), 16.
- <sup>7</sup> R. H. Robertson to Frederick Law Olmsted, 17 June 1886, Job File 1031, Box B-74, Frederick Law Olmsted Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.
- <sup>8</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted to William Seward Webb, 18 June 1886, Olmsted Papers.
- <sup>9</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted to Charles Eliot, 20 July 1886, quoted by Joan Wiecek, "Shelburne Farms," Master's Degree Project, Dept. of Landscape Architecture, University of Massachusetts, 1984, 21.
- <sup>10</sup> Albert Fein, *Frederick Law Olmsted and the American Environmental Tradition* (NY: Braziller, 1972), 166–69.
- <sup>11</sup> Laura Wood Roper, *FLO: A Biography of Frederick Law Olmsted* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 55–66.
- <sup>12</sup> Andrews, *Vanderbilt Legend*, 25.
- <sup>13</sup> Quoted in Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., & Theodora Kimball, *Frederick Law Olmsted, Landscape Architect, 1822–1903* (NY: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1922), 128.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 64–65.
- <sup>15</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted to William Seward Webb, 11 April 1888, Olmsted Papers.
- <sup>16</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted to William Seward Webb, 17 March 1887, Reel A1:68, Olmsted Papers.
- <sup>17</sup> William Seward Webb to Frederick Law Olmsted, 26 March 1887, Olmsted Papers.
- <sup>18</sup> The Olmsted firm placed orders with Pringle & Horsford and nine other nurseries in the spring of 1887. See Olmsted Papers and "List of Trees and Shrubs Proposed to be ordered for Dr. W. S. Webb," 22 April 1887, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site, Brookline, MA.
- <sup>19</sup> F. L. Olmsted & J. C. Olmsted to William Seward Webb, 24 Jan. 1889, Reel A3:140; Frederick Law Olmsted to William Seward Webb, 7 March 1888, Reel A2:249, Olmsted Papers.
- <sup>20</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted to William Seward Webb, 12 July 1887, Reel A1:887, Olmsted Papers.
- <sup>21</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted to William Seward Webb, 12 July 1887, Olmsted Papers.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>23</sup> William Seward Webb to Frederick Law Olmsted, 20 Feb. 1889, Olmsted Papers.
- <sup>24</sup> Wiecek, "Shelburne Farms," 44
- <sup>25</sup> Susan Cady Hayward, "Gardens of a Gilded Age," *Vermont Life* 42 (Summer 1988): 6.
- <sup>26</sup> Isabell H. Hardie, "The Garden of Mrs. W. Seward Webb," *Country Life in America* 32 (Oct. 1917):62–63; "The Garden at Shelburne Farms," *Arts and Decoration* 11 (June 1919):66–67.
- <sup>27</sup> Sherman, *The House at Shelburne Farms*, 76.

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This article is excerpted from the chapter on Shelburne Farms in Alan Emmet's *So Fine a Prospect. Historic New England Gardens*, newly published by the University Press of New England. Her article on the Boott family's garden in Boston, a subject she returned to in her new book, appeared in *Arnoldia* 47(4). The author is a consultant in garden history as well as a writer. Her book is reviewed on page 26.