Charles Sprague Sargent and the Preservation of the Landscape of Mount Vernon or, “If Washington were here himself, he would be on my side”

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The 1999 commemoration of the bicentennial of George Washington’s death presents an excellent occasion to reflect on C. S. Sargent’s strong commitment to preserve the Mount Vernon landscape and, while accepting the inevitability of change, to ensure that Washington’s original intent remained at the core of restoration efforts.

Resolved: That Mr. Sargent be authorized to direct the pruning, thinning and planting of trees so that, as far as possible, Mount Vernon may be restored to the condition in which George Washington planned and kept it. But that no well-shaped beautiful tree or flowering shrub shall be destroyed, except where they are interfering with other growth, which it is more important to retain.

The Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association of the Union, Minutes of the Council, May 1901

In 1901 Charles Sprague Sargent (1841-1927), then director of the Arnold Arboretum, was asked by the Regent of the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association, Justine Van Rensselaer Townsend, to give expert advice on the trees of Mount Vernon, the home of George Washington. Sargent made a site visit, asked for relevant historical documentation (in this case a copy of the list of plants Washington ordered from John Bartram in 1792), and demanded complete control of the plantings of the estate. Mrs. Townsend demurred. Sargent’s peremptory manner, his evident dismay at the condition of the trees, and his bold recommendations for removals and replacements intimidated the Association. In broadening the scope of the Association’s initial request, then narrowly defined as aiding in the care of a few of Washington’s trees, Sargent had clearly threatened their mission. “There was no allusion to the work of beautifying or adornment of any kind,” wrote Mrs. Townsend of her request to Sargent, “for our love of Mount Vernon and its precious trees forbade us to think of any change in the well known grounds of Washington’s home.” Sargent declined the position. He must have a “free hand” or he would take no part in the work.

The Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association and Professor Sargent reconnected ten years later thanks to a new, more flexible Regent, Harriet Comegys, and to a softening of Sargent’s view. Sargent’s participation in the preservation efforts at Mount Vernon, which continued until his death in 1927, has been virtually unrecognized, both in accounts of his career and in histories of Mount Vernon. Preserved in the archives of the Association is the extensive correspondence between Sargent, Harriet Comegys, and Harrison Dodge, the superintendent of Mount Vernon, from 1885 until his death in 1937; these documents make it clear that Sargent’s work was broad in scope and went well beyond arboricultural recommendations.

The letters, notes, memos, and internal reports trace a struggle to overcome conflicts and develop a process to preserve a site of national significance, a struggle remarkably similar to the one the landscape preservation community is undergoing today as it seeks to
develop consensus on guidelines for preserving historic landscape properties. Defining historical appropriateness, balancing the protection of original features against the accommodation of the public, deciding how to replace plants of historic value—all these difficult questions surfaced during Sargent’s work at Mount Vernon. While not always resolved (compromise did not come easily to Sargent), the issues were clearly defined by Sargent’s straightforward proposals for action. The letters in the Mount Vernon archives reveal by their personal tone the personalities of the participants. Sargent, writing from the Arnold Arboretum or from Holm Lea, his estate in Brookline, Massachusetts, was the irascible consultant, impatient with the pace of the process and the ineptitude of the Mount Vernon work force. Harriet Comegys was patient and thorough, an excellent negotiator in spite of suffering all manner of ailments during her tenure as Regent. And finally there was the sycophantic superintendent Dodge, whose need to please the ladies sometimes got in the way of his work on Sargent’s projects.

If Washington had lived all this time he would use the ax, but the ladies believe in having two bad trees instead of one good one, and they have permitted a job lot of kings and princes to stick in blood-leaved Japanese maples and purple beech wherever they wanted to ... the place needs a comprehensive landscape plan and the ax.

Letter from Wilhelm Miller, Editorial Department, Country Life in America, to Charles Sprague Sargent, 28 May 1912

The Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association of the Union was formed in 1853 to preserve and restore the Virginia home of the nation’s first president. Its membership was composed of one woman from each state. The group began by raising funds to purchase Mount Vernon from Washington’s heirs. Regarded by many as the first historic preservation organization in the country, the Association should also be honored...
for its commitment, unusual for the time, to treat the buildings and landscape of Mount Vernon as a single unit; buildings, furniture, garden plants, and agricultural activities were to be equally valued.

Like most preservation groups, the Association was formed around the idea of rescue: the sagging roofs, the lawn waist-high with weeds, the neglected gardens. As if to reassure themselves of the validity of their acquisition, the early histories of the Association and of their ownership of Mount Vernon are filled with the names of the dignitaries that visited—presidents and kings, minor European royalty, religious leaders, heads of exotic nations—and to Sargent's consternation each was encouraged to plant a tree.

By 1911 the Association had outgrown the high emotion of its save-and-rescue stage and realized that further work would require careful thought and professional expertise. At this point the group had not refined its mission beyond striving not to lose anything already in hand. However, the members were serious, highly organized strategists, remarkably adept at raising funds for special projects, and mutually supportive. Enduring friendships were formed among the members; friendships that, because of geographic distance or age differences, might have never otherwise occurred. Like many early women's organizations, the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association adhered to formal rituals and strict protocols that can seem quaintly amusing to us today. But this formal structure may well have developed to deflect any potential criticism that the women of the Association were not capable of handling the serious issues before them as well as protecting them as individual members from intrusive publicity.

You speak about compensation, a retainer, etc. Please dismiss any such subject from your mind. I consider it a great privilege and honor to be allowed to do anything in my power to restore the grounds of Mount Vernon to the condition in which they were when Washington was alive.

Letter from Charles Sprague Sargent to Harriet Comegys, Regent of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union, 2 October 1914

Charles Sprague Sargent became the first director of the Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University in 1872 and held that position until his death fifty-five years later. His “austere purpose” (to use his daughter's phrase) was to develop a collection of all the woody plants, both indigenous and exotic, that could be raised in the open air in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts. The plant collection, begun in the 1870s, was initially gathered from North America and
Harrison Howell Dodge, Superintendent of Mount Vernon from 1885 to 1937.

Europe but by the end of the nineteenth century Sargent’s collection policy had expanded to include the entire North Temperate Zone, with emphasis on China and Japan. The metamorphosis of this small scientific station into one of the world’s leading study centers for woody plants was due to the expansiveness of Sargent’s vision and the single-mindedness with which he pursued it.

Sargent’s publications alone would have secured him a significant place in American landscape history. His fourteen-volume *Silva of North America*, published between 1891 and 1902, raised the study of American species to a new level of scholarship. The second edition of his *Manual of the Trees of North America*, published in 1922, was called “an old friend regenerated” and “the only complete guide to our native trees” by Stephen Hamblin, the plant specialist at Harvard’s Graduate School of Design, in a review in *Landscape Architecture* magazine. Sargent was also a leader in the effort to establish an American forestry policy. His *Catalog of the Forest Trees of North America* for the Tenth Census in 1884 and the plan he submitted to the New York State legislature for preserving the Adirondack forest placed him in the ranks of John Muir, George Engelmann, and Gifford Pinchot. His association with Frederick Law Olmsted resulted in a major contribution to the design of both the Arnold Arboretum and Boston’s Emerald Necklace park system, of which the Arboretum is a part.

In short, by 1911, when the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association of the Union sought advice from him for the second time, Sargent’s own reputation, as well as that of the Arnold Arboretum as an institution of international standing, had been secured. His decision to work with the Association was therefore based not on a desire to enhance his own prestige but rather on patriotism and a deep sense of responsibility to a historic site.

Like most groups seeking help with historic preservation, the Association first defined its needs in the narrowest sense: the trees, many planted by George Washington himself, needed professional care. Typical of Sargent, he redefined his role and from the beginning offered advice on the broader requirements for preservation: inventories of both plants and structures, restoration of specific features, vegetation management, and, most importantly, historic research to inform decision-making.

Washington laid out a sweeping lawn, the Bowling Green, edged by serpentine walkways lined with shade trees: Ohio buckeye (*Aesculus glabra*), white ash (*Fraxinus americana*), southern magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora*), mulberry (*Morus sp.*), poplar (*Populus sp.*). The trees both frame the view of the mansion and provide much-needed shade for the walkways. He planted a wide range of tree species at close
intervals, with thick underplantings of shrubs. Sargent was sympathetic to this dense planting method, but it did force the Association into some difficult decisions by the beginning of the twentieth century, when many of the trees planted by Washington had reached senescence and extraordinary measures were needed to sustain their lives. Moreover, other trees, planted by subsequent owners, were threatening the health of the original plantings, and volunteer trees had to be identified and removed. All of the now-predictable emotional reverberations attached to tree removal surfaced during Sargent’s work with the Association.

Sargent began to visit Mount Vernon at least twice a year, in the fall and the early spring, and a routine soon evolved. Sargent would meet Miss Comegys at Mount Vernon and she, Sargent, and Dodge would walk the grounds and discuss work to be done. Sargent would then go back to Boston and prepare work orders for the season ahead. In the early years he made detailed recommendations both for saving where possible the remaining trees planted by Washington and for removing those that were beyond saving and were beginning to damage other historic plantings. Sargent also used his contacts from the Arnold Arboretum to order a substantial number of plants, primarily for mass plantings: native dogwoods (Cornus florida), yellowwoods (Cladrastis kentukea), and fringetrees (Chionanthus virginicus) were planted to enhance the woodland and park areas. He prepared budget proposals, both long-term and short. He ordered bulbs from Holland and roses from England. He sent plants to Mount Vernon from the Arboretum and from his own garden at Holm Lea. And he offered advice, pithy and to the point: Sargent wrote, when Dodge turned to the U.S.
Department of Agriculture for advice about the boxwoods at Mount Vernon, "I have little confidence in the experts at the Dept. of Agriculture, it is always a good plan to leave well enough alone, especially in the case of old plants and old people."

Sargent was primarily concerned with the woody plants of Mount Vernon and had little interest in the many separate gardens with herbaceous plants. He allowed himself to be drawn into garden projects only with great reluctance. In 1915 he prepared a list of "garden flowers" that would be suitable for Mount Vernon, as Washington's diaries yielded little information about herbaceous plantings. Sargent's advice on the suitability of species was based on his knowledge of plant introductions, enhanced by the extensive library he was creating for the Arnold Arboretum.

The ladies of the Association also diverted his attention from the trees in favor of long and difficult searches for exotic plants to fill the greenhouses and conservatory, putting great pressure on him to locate orange and lemon trees as well as oleander, camellias, agaves, and pomegranates. Eventually Sargent refused further detective work, complaining that his pursuit of conservatory plants detracted from his real goal—saving the specimen trees and woodlands, the features at the heart of Washington's vision for the property.

You certainly would not hang a modern chromo on the walls of Washington's room because some important person gave it to you, and there doesn't seem to be much difference between a chromo on the walls and a purple modern tree in the garden . . . No one more than I do wants to preserve the grounds as Washington left them . . .

Letter from Charles Sprague Sargent to Mrs. John Carter Brown, Vice-Regent from Rhode Island, The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union, 5 June 1912

In embracing the stewardship of the Mount Vernon landscape, the members of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association came to feel that it was their personal garden to add to, embellish, "improve." This misplaced sense of proprietorship is not unusual: indeed, the tendency to "appropriate" historic landscapes is a frequent source of conflict between preservation professionals and committed amateurs. Initially, Sargent, with a certain amount of politeness and reserve, tried to make the Association understand the inappropriateness of some of their embellishments. In 1915 he reacted to the proposal for adding a new cutting garden some distance from the house by writing, "All these detached spots of cultivation more or less remote from the center increase work and are apt to be overlooked and neglected." Later, somewhat less patiently, he characterized as an eyesore the "new" greenhouse that had replaced the original destroyed in a fire, and suggested that using it to grow flowers for sale to the public was somewhat lacking in dignity.

The demand from the public for continual floriferousness (appropriate or not) is a problem at historic sites, and Mount Vernon was no exception. Roses were a continuing subject of debate throughout the sixteen years of correspondence; Association members and others put pressure on Dodge and his garden staff to plant them. Sargent warned that few roses were available during Washington's lifetime and those that were did not bloom more than once a season. He recommended the York and Lancaster roses and warned against 'Harrison's Yellow', which was not available during Washington's time. In 1917 Sargent wrote that he had just discovered a rose brought to this country from England by Abigail Adams and still growing in the garden of the Adams House in Quincy, Massachusetts. He noted that he would have a few plants propagated from that shrub for Mount Vernon since its age would have made it appropriate for Washington's garden.

Sargent had a special interest in restoring the Old Tomb area, using as his guide the writings of Washington and of visitors to the property during his time. At Harriet Comegys' suggestion, he located a copy of Nathaniel Parker Willis' 1840 book, American Scenery, and he used the drawings by W. H. Bartlett to identify the trees existing at that time. He pointed out the unsuitability of the existing sundial and of the post and chains in front of the mansion and helped locate replacements appropriate to Washington's period. But most of all Sargent
George Washington and the Planting of Mount Vernon

Charles Sargent was committed to preserving the trees of Mount Vernon, especially those lining the walkways of the Bowling Green that had been planted by Washington. He was far less interested in the showy floriferousness of the ornamental gardens and was convinced that Washington was of the same mind. Washington redesigned Mount Vernon after he acquired it from his brother's family, and that design has been the subject of much research and speculation.

In preparation for the reconfiguration of the property, Washington enhanced his garden library, acquiring a 1728 edition of Batty Langley's *New Principles of Gardening* with its detailed plans for laying out a bowling green with edges defined by dense tree plantings. Washington planted and replanted the walkways in grove configurations rather than formal allées and underplanted the shade trees with dense "shrubberies" of small ornamental trees and shrubs.

Following are excerpts from letters and diaries of Washington.

19 August 1776. A letter to Lund Washington

Plant trees in the room of all dead ones in proper time this Fall, and as I mean to have groves of Trees at each end of the dwelling House, that at the South end to range in a line from the South East Corner to Colo. Fairfax’s, extending as low as another line from the Stable to the dry Well, and towards the Coach House, . . . Seen from the No. Et. Corner of the other end of the House to range so as to show the Barn, &ca. in the Neck . . . these Trees to be Planted without any order or regularity [but pretty thick, as they can at any time be thin’d] and to consist that at the North end, of locusts altogether. and that at the South, of all the clever kind of Trees (especially flowering ones) that can be got, such as Crab apple, Poplar, Dogwood, Sasafras, Laurel, Willow [especially yellow and Weeping Willow, twigs of which may be got from Philadelphia] and many others which I do not recollect at present; those to be interspersed here and there with ever greens such as Holly, Pine, and Cedar, also Ivy; to these may be added the Wild flowering Shrubs of the larger kind, such as the fringe Trees and several other kinds that might be mentioned.

August 1776. A letter to Lund Washington

I wish that the afore-mentioned shrubs and ornamental and curious trees may be planted at both ends that I may determine hereafter from circumstances and appearances which shall be the grove and which the wilderness. It is easy to extirpate Trees from any spot but time only can bring them to maturity.

23 March 1785

Finding the Trees round the Walks in my wildernesses rather too thin I doubled them by putting [other Pine] trees between each.

Laid off the Walks in my Groves, at each end of the House.

29 March 1785

Transplanted in the groves at the ends of the House the following young trees.
Viz.—9 live oak—11 Yew or Hemlock—10 Aspán—4 Magnolia—2 Elm—2 Papaw—2 Lilacs—3 Fringe—1 Swampberry & 1 H< >.

6 April 1786

Transplanted 46 of the large Magnolio of So. Carolina from the box brought by G. A. Washington last year—viz.—6 at the head of each of the Serpentine Walks next the Circle—26 in the Shrubbery or grove at the South end of the House & 8 in that at the No. end. The ground was so wet, more could not at this time be planted there

Excerpts are from *Keywords in American Landscape Design* by Therese O'Malley, Elizabeth Kryder-Reid, and Anne L. Helmreich, Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts/National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, forthcoming. Sketch is courtesy of Maryland Historical Society and Mac Griswold.
was concerned that the Association's embellishments to both grounds and buildings would unnecessarily exacerbate the problem of long-term maintenance. "The thing to do is to reduce the cost of maintenance by permanent improvement," he wrote to Mrs. John Carter Brown in 1916. To that end he recommended that little-used roads be removed and discouraged unnecessary paths and the proliferation of small outbuildings, each with a limited special use.

That we should have at our command if possible every bit of information obtainable, that could in any way be of use in this important work of today, as well as for the Association's benefit in the future.

The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union, Minutes of the Council, May 1915

It is ironic that Sargent, the botanist-arborist-dendrologist whose far-ranging fieldwork made him famous as an international leader in forest policy and the preservation of scenery, should also have been the strict disciplinarian who demanded that the work of the Association be based on historical scholarship. At his urging, the Boston Athenaeum prepared a bibliography of books and articles relating to George Washington and Mount Vernon based on their own catalog of Washington literature and the holdings of several other libraries including those of Harvard, the American Antiquarian Society, and the Library of Congress. The bibliography took the form of 5,000 handwritten cards housed in a special wooden case that is now in the Mount Vernon archives. (Like many bibliographic endeavors its usefulness quickly diminished because it was not continually updated.)

Elswyth Thane in her 1967 book, Mount Vernon: the Legacy, states that it was partly Sargent's use of Washington's diaries (the Association had obtained typewritten copies of those in the Library of Congress) that motivated the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association to sponsor the diaries' first publication in 1925, edited by the historian, John C. Fitzpatrick. Sargent's correspondence with the Association confirms his enormous interest in the diaries; he continually mined them for bits of information about both the plantings of Mount Vernon and its architectural features. He corresponded with Max Farrand, the Yale historian [and husband of Sargent's former pupil, landscape architect Beatrix Farrand], about the availability of Washington's writings. He prodded the Association to acquire more original documents pertaining to Mount Vernon and through his own acquaintance with antiquarian book dealers acquired several documents himself, which he donated to the Association. His interest in the

The sago palm at Mount Vernon in 1999.
historical documentation of Mount Vernon resulted in a short article for the journal *Rhodora* on André Michaux's 1786 visit to Mount Vernon, which Washington had documented in his diaries.²

"... but no trees planted by man have the human interest of the Mount Vernon trees."

From *The Trees of Mount Vernon* by Charles Sprague Sargent, revised edition, 1926

The reincarnation as souvenirs or talismans of trees that were “witnesses to history” has become a familiar form of “preservation.” Seeds of historic trees are distributed to far-flung locations; dead trees reappear as commemorative bookends, paperweights, sculptures. While this practice gives some in the preservation field a sense of unease, it cannot be disputed that the tree as icon engages the public’s attention, which can then be redirected to the larger issues of preservation. Although Sargent struggled to maintain a dignified context for his work, he did not dismiss the value of this appeal to public sentiment.

A case in point is the so-called “Washington Elm,” which stood on the Cambridge (Massachusetts) Common for centuries and was so named because, as the story goes, George Washington took command of the Continental Army under the tree on July 3, 1775. The tree even bore a plaque to this effect. In October of 1923 the Washington Elm fell (or was accidentally pulled over by a workman trying to remove a dead branch). Given no reason to question the tree’s historical association, Sargent secured a cross section of the tree’s trunk and sent it to a plant anatomist at Harvard’s Bussey Institution who confirmed its age. After complicated negotiations between Sargent and the city of Cambridge, the cross section was then sent to Mount Vernon for display in the kitchen fireplace (a location the Cambridge city fathers thought inappropriate).

Either unknown to Sargent, or perhaps dismissed by him, was detailed research compiled

*Postcard view of the Tomb of Washington, undated, probably 1930s Sargent had a special interest in restoring this area.*

by Samuel Batchelder of Cambridge and published in the Cambridge Tribune in 1923. Mr. Batchelder very convincingly debunked the Washington association, stating that if Washington stood under the tree he did so to get out of the rain. Nevertheless, the cross section of the tree remained at Mount Vernon for many years and was reproduced with an almost religious aura in brochures and postcards for the general public.

A less questionable project was Sargent’s effort to restore to Mount Vernon the famous sago palm (Cycas revoluta) that Washington acquired from Pratt’s Garden in Philadelphia. Washington grew the palm for many years in a small conservatory. A document in the archives of the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association states that it was sold after the death in 1802 of his widow, Martha, to a Mr. Peter De Windt of Fishkill-on-Hudson, New York, where it flourished for many years. In 1841 the palm was acquired by Henry Winthrop Sargent for the large conservatory on his Fishkill estate, Wodenethe, which passed in 1882 to his son Winthrop Sargent.

At the request of Charles Sargent, who located the long-lost plant, Winthrop Sargent’s widow donated it to Mount Vernon. The tree was installed in the Palm House at Mount Vernon, but was quickly found to have outgrown the space during its time away. The roof was raised more than once, but after thriving for several years the tree began to fail. Numerous remedies and therapies were tried but the plant died in 1934—after Sargent’s death, mercifully, as he had invested considerable time in prolonging its life. In 1941 a cutting from a still-thriving tree at Tudor Place in Washington, DC—acquired from Pratt’s Garden at the same time as Washington’s—was given to Mount Vernon where it has continued to grow. This is the palm we see there today.

By 1922, Sargent, then 81, was dismayed that work on the grounds of Mount Vernon had not progressed more quickly and complained that decision-making was needlessly slow. In November 1922 he wrote to Harriet Comegys, “It is a great regret that having devoted ten or twelve years of my best thoughts and attention to Mount Vernon I have been unable to secure the confidence of the Council to the extent of letting me carry out my planting plans. Tree removals are needed. I wish the Council had more imagination and more power to look into the future. The thing which I feel sure about in this matter is that if Washington were here himself he would be on my side.”

Sargent made his last visit to Mount Vernon in 1923. In June of 1924 a major storm at Mount Vernon seriously damaged a tulip tree (Liriodendron tulipifera), a sugar maple (Acer saccharum), and an Ohio buckeye (Aesculus glabra), all planted by Washington. Sargent gave Dodge stern advice to use only the best arborist available to repair the damage. He wrote to Harriet Comegys that he might have growing in the Arnold Arboretum nursery some small cuttings from a Mount Vernon buckeye and he would send one of them if it matched the one lost. By that time, however, Sargent’s health
was frail, and although he still went to his office at the Arboretum everyday, as the year progressed he admitted that he could not make the trip to assess the storm damage. Instead he sent the Arnold Arboretum's young superintendent of grounds, Christian Van der Voet, a horticulturist from Holland who had trained at Kew. Van der Voet made several trips to Mount Vernon in Sargent's stead.

Sargent remained involved through correspondence with the work at Mount Vernon until his death in March of 1927. Harriet Comegys died a few months later. Thus ended a friendship based on mutual respect and commitment to the preservation of the Mount Vernon landscape. The only publication of Sargent's sixteen-year relationship with Mount Vernon was his inventory and condition assessment of the trees of the Bowling Green and around the mansion. *The Trees at Mount Vernon* was first published in 1917 as part of the annual report of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association. It was updated and reprinted in 1926 as a separate document and was offered for sale at the Mansion for many years. The report includes an introduction, a description and condition assessment of each tree, a scaled plan with all of the trees located and numbered, and appendices that include a list of the trees planted by Washington that had since disappeared.

Several of Washington's original trees remain at Mount Vernon—a great white ash, a tulip poplar—nurtured by Sargent and subsequent generations of consultants and gardeners. Washington's original trees are surrounded by many replacement plants and by the lush, restored ornamental gardens, a significant concern of the present generation of curators and sponsors. But the original trees reflect Sargent's admonition that "no care should be spared to preserve them, and as they pass away they should be replaced with trees of the same kinds, that Mount Vernon may be kept for all time as near as possible in the same condition in which Washington left it."4

Notes
Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are from material in the Archives of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, Mount Vernon, Virginia.

1 *Landscape Architecture*, vol. 12 (July 1922), 298–299
4 *Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union, Annual Report* (Mount Vernon, VA 1917), 46

Acknowledgments
Current landscape preservation practice can be greatly enhanced by understanding the actions, as well as the intentions, of the past. In addition to the landscape itself, archives are a vital source of information about these actions. The author wishes to acknowledge the valuable assistance of Barbara McMillan, Librarian of Mount Vernon, and Sheila Connor, Horticultural Research Archivist of the Arnold Arboretum.

Additional Reading

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