

Ellen Biddle Shipman's New England Gardens

Judith B. Tankard

This pioneering landscape architect, distinguished for her innovative planting designs, described her use of plants as “painting pictures as an artist would.”

Ellen Biddle Shipman (1869–1950) was one of the most important landscape architects during the 1910s and 1920s, the great years of estate building across the United States. Shipman's approach to garden design was steeped in the traditionalism of the Northeast, especially the Colonial Revival style. She owed her great success in the design and planting of small gardens to early years of gardening at her New Hampshire country home. “Working daily in my garden for fifteen years,” she wrote, “taught me to know plants, their habits and their needs.”¹

Shipman brought a fine-tuned artistic sensitivity to garden design. She transformed the flower border into an art form by using carefully articulated compositions of flowers, foliage, and color, thoroughly grounded in her exceptional knowledge of plants. This planting expertise set her apart from other landscape architects of the period. Shipman's simple, unpretentious designs for gardens served as a framework for her dazzling plantings. To create the proper setting, she would surround the garden with an enclosing curtain of trees and always used generous quantities of small flowering trees, shrubs, vines, and standards (such as roses, lilacs, or wisteria) to create structural notes and to cast shadows over the borders. Invariably her gardens were enhanced by her delightful designs for rose arbors, pergolas, benches, teahouses, dovecotes, and other structures that carefully echoed the architectural style of the house. Shipman collaborated with numerous architects and landscape architects, including Charles Platt, the Olmsted Brothers, and James Greenleaf. Warren Manning, with whom she collaborated on many projects, considered her “one of the best, if not the very best, Flower Garden Maker in America.”²

Once hailed as the “Dean of American Women Landscape Architects,” Shipman designed nearly six hundred gardens throughout the country during the course of her thirty-five year career (1912–1947).³ Clusters of her gardens once proliferated in areas such as Grosse Pointe, Michigan; Greenwich, Connecticut; and Chagrin Falls, Ohio, where she designed several dozen gardens. She also carried out a number of commissions in the New England states, where she had gotten her start. Sadly, few examples remain in their original condition.

Ellen Biddle was born into a prominent Philadelphia family, the military rather than the financial branch. Her father was a career soldier, and she spent an adventurous childhood in frontier outposts in Nevada, Texas, and the Arizona Territory. Her discovery of gardens came when she was sent back East to live with her grandparents, who had an old-fashioned, rose-filled garden in New Jersey. Later, when she attended finishing school in Baltimore, interests in art and architecture were awakened.

During her early twenties, Ellen lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts, sharing a house with Marian Nichols, who later married the landscape architect Arthur Shurcliff, whose professional path would intersect with Shipman's. Ellen's brief academic career at Radcliffe (then known as the Harvard Annex) ended when she married Louis Shipman, a dashing young playwright from New York who was then attending Harvard. They moved to the artists' colony in Cornish, New Hampshire, where they were part of a lively coterie surrounding the colony's founder, American sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens, who was also Marian Nichols' uncle. Years later, recalling her first visit to Cornish in 1894, she wrote, “a garden became for me the



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Ellen Biddle Shipman (1869–1950) in her New York City home on Beekman Place in the 1920s

most essential part of a home."⁴ This would become Ellen Shipman's credo in garden design.

In 1910, when Ellen Shipman was in her early forties and the mother of three children, she turned to garden design at the suggestion of her Cornish neighbor, the country house architect Charles Platt. By then the Shipmans' marriage had deteriorated, leaving Ellen to fend for herself financially after her husband left her. Platt admired her garden at Brook Place, the Shipmans' colonial farmhouse in nearby Plainfield, New Hampshire, and the remodeling she had recently carried out there. Platt thought she had a good eye for design and no doubt felt that her plantings would be an asset for his gardens. While the Shipmans' elder daughter (also named Ellen) managed the household, Ellen studied drafting and construction under Platt's tutelage. Within two years she was collaborating with Platt as well as undertaking small, independent commissions.

Shipman's originality as a garden designer came from several different sources. The country gardens in Cornish, once dubbed "the most beautifully gardened village in all America," were the pre-eminent influence on her early years.⁵ Gardens such as those of Thomas Wilmer Dewing, Stephen Parrish, Augustus Saint-Gaudens, and other artists brimmed with old-fashioned flowers, dirt paths, and simple ornaments and features, such as rose arbors and circular reflecting pools. As a young wife of an aspiring but penniless writer, Ellen was not able to take the grand tour of European gardens as did other prominent colleagues such as her Cornish neighbor, landscape architect Rose Standish Nichols (a sister of her friend Marian Nichols), or Beatrix Jones (Farrand).⁶ Instead, she read *House Beautiful*, *House and Garden*, and popular gardening magazines that would later feature her own work. She consulted recent books such as Mabel Cabot Sedgwick's *The Garden Month*



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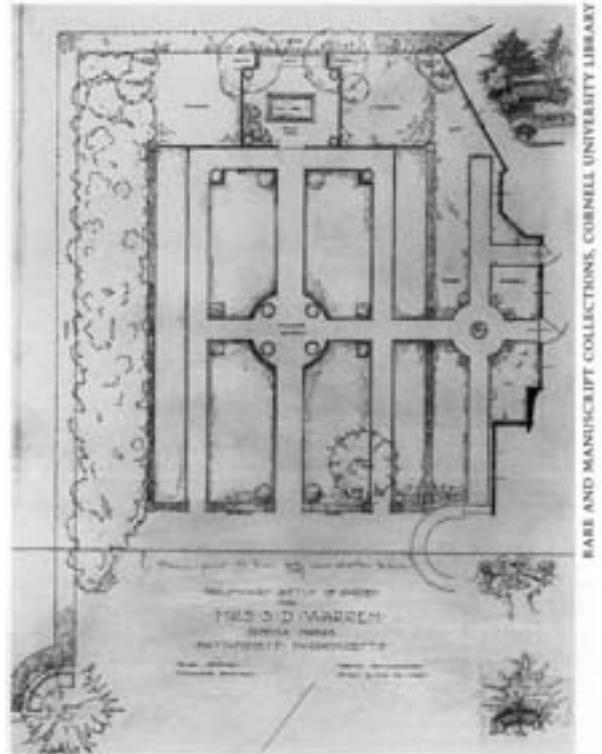
Clusters of peonies and summer phlox with vines climbing on the pergola in Ellen Shipman's own garden at Brook Place, New Hampshire. Photograph by Mattie Edwards Hewitt, 1923

by Month, Helena Rutherford Ely's *A Woman's Hardy Garden*, and others that promoted the revival of interest in hardy plants. As a result, Ellen Shipman's approach to garden design, in particular her planting style, was refreshingly American in spirit, escaping, for the most part, European influences that dominated the work of Farrand and Marian Coffin.

Shipman's apprenticeship with Platt strengthened her design sensibilities. She loosely adapted his basic axial garden plan and habit of placing at regular intervals features such as the tubs of plants, statuary, and clipped evergreens associated with Italianate gardens. The resulting compositions, which varied little throughout Shipman's career, balanced formality and informality, more in the manner of Colonial Revival gardens of the era. At the crux of her garden design philosophy was the close integration of house and garden, with easy transitions from one area to the next, without stiffness and artifice.

Ellen Shipman had nearly four dozen clients in Massachusetts and several gardens in the Boston area exemplify the range of her capabilities, including two designs from her fledgling years. In 1912, when she was just starting out, she designed a small seaside garden in Mattapoisett for Mrs. Samuel D. Warren as a complement to the modest shingle-style summer house. Shipman's simple, four-square Colonial Revival plan consisted of beds of phlox and lilies edged with low, clipped barberry hedging, with converging stone walks. A sundial and a Lutyens bench—at the time a novelty in America—appear to have been the two major ornaments. The garden was enclosed on one side by a dense wall of evergreens, and existing cedars (*Juniperus virginiana*) were accommodated in the plan. Shipman felt an unswerving belief in the importance of privacy: "Planting, however beautiful, is not a garden. A garden must be enclosed . . . or otherwise it would merely be a cultivated area."⁷ In this respect she differed from Platt, whose walls and hedges defined spaces but rarely offered a sense of seclusion. The present status of this garden is unknown.

The following year, in March 1913, Shipman designed an innovative garden in Wenham, on Boston's North Shore, for Alanson Daniels. Her



Preliminary sketch for a garden in Mattapoisett, Massachusetts, for Mrs. Samuel D. Warren, 1912. Shipman's Colonial Revival-style plan has four main beds edged in clipped barberry, a small lily pool, and a sundial on a side path.

design for "Old Farms" harmonized with its country setting and the clapboard seventeenth-century house. At the front entrance, she designed a Colonial Revival dooryard garden with mounds of hardy plants such as peonies, phlox, and lilies in boxwood-edged beds, but behind the house she created a new-style garden that would quickly become one of her signature creations. Here she made a garden with low stone walls of native fieldstone, set in an old orchard. Happily, the "bones" of the garden still exist. The design was composed of a series of rectangular beds and walks culminating in a pool and a semicircular "apse" with a curved stone bench. Since several of the old apple trees were allowed to "stray" into the garden, its character derived directly from its setting. Screening was provided by clumps of small trees and shrubs around the perimeter. Photographs of the garden show it to be one of the earliest instances in which Shipman used more innovative plantings than the simple flowerbeds filled



A wall of evergreens frames flowerbeds filled with phlox and lilies in the Warren garden. Fieldstone paths converge at the sundial. Photograph by Edith Hastings Tracy, 1912.

with masses of only two or three kinds of plants. In the Daniels garden, she created a strong sculptural effect around the small reflecting pool by using clusters of bold foliage—hostas, bergenia, and iris. Her comment, that she used plants “as a painter uses the colors from his palette,” is admirably demonstrated in this garden.⁸ In this respect, her approach to garden design was similar to Gertrude Jekyll’s. However, Shipman’s style of planting, with her structural “notes,” was more architectural than Jekyll’s, and she juxtaposed colors in fan-shaped clusters in contrast to Jekyll’s impressionistic drift plantings.

By the early 1920s Shipman’s gardens were receiving wide notice in magazines and books, inspiring many new clients to commission a Shipman garden. One editor summed up a well-publicized garden in Philadelphia: “Sheltered and friendly and livable . . . a delightful bit of artistry, so skilful and so finely balanced that one forgets the plan and is conscious only of the pervasive pleasantness of it all.”⁹ This was the

kind of garden that appealed to her clients, wealthy women, the wives of prominent industrialists, who sought traditionalism in the form of good taste and privacy. Often her clients were gardeners themselves, affiliated with local garden clubs where Shipman was a frequent speaker.

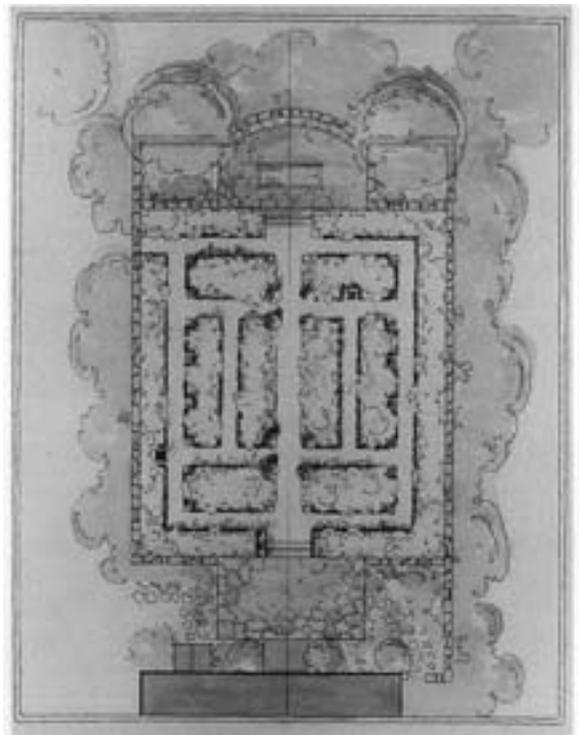
For Mrs. Henry V. Greenough of Brookline, Shipman designed a small garden in 1926, when she was at the height of her fame. In her design—an excellent example of her facility with small spaces—Shipman skillfully combined formal and wild gardens in a compressed suburban setting. Using her prototypal layout, the garden was surrounded by high brick walls.¹⁰ The plantings around the house and terraces were designed for all-season horticultural interest, with an emphasis on foliage and the color green. Juniper and pachysandra carried the garden through winter. In the adjacent formal garden, her prescription for perpetual bloom—from bulbs in spring, heliotrope and petunias in summer, and asters and boltonia in the autumn—was precisely outlined on her planting



Above, low stone walls and a small reflecting pool, with plantings of bold foliage around the edges, in the Daniels garden Photograph by Edith Hastings Tracy, 1913 A plan for the garden is below

plans. One of Shipman's planting secrets was that she used no more than six to eight types of flowering plants in each design, letting "each, in its season, dominate the garden. For the time one flower is the guest of honor and is merely supplemented with other flowers."¹¹ The other flowers were drawn from lists that she maintained in her working notebooks. If the client was not a gardener herself, then Shipman helped her find a gardener who could maintain the garden to her satisfaction.

In the Greenough garden, the farthest point from the house, under a dense tree canopy, was the setting for a naturalistic garden with a pool. Although Shipman will forever be associated with flower borders, she designed a number of wild gardens, sometimes in association with Warren Manning. As in the Greenough garden, she augmented the naturalistic effect by using native stone and creating tiny rills of running water. As a formal counterpart, she also incorporated sculptures, such as a tiny frog sitting on a lily pad. The planting palette included a wide variety of native and non-native species to make





A naturalistic pool with native plants, part of a garden in Brookline, Massachusetts, designed for Mrs. Henry V. Greenough in 1926. Photograph by Dorothy Jarvis, c. 1931.

it seem as natural as possible: mountain ash, arborvitae, hemlock, dogwood, laurel, rhododendron, viburnum, big-leaf saxifrage, calla lilies, waterlilies, iris, eupatorium, shortia, and native creeping woodland and water-loving plants.¹²

For Mrs. Holden McGinley (Mrs. Greenough's sister), Shipman designed a large garden in Milton in 1925 that was awarded a blue ribbon by the Massachusetts Horticultural Society for its "great charm and restraint . . . planted in an unusually interesting manner."¹³ It exemplifies the best of Shipman's approach to garden design at the peak of her career. The gently sloping site overlooking the Blue Hills to the south, with massive trees on the west and north, elicited an imaginative design solution. To take advantage of the view, Shipman created a two-part plan that coaxed visitors across the lawn and into a walled garden before glimpsing the view outward to the hills.

The enclosed garden, with whitewashed brick walls, is divided into three long, narrow gardens, each on a successively lower level and each with its own distinctive character. The uppermost garden, planted with iris and peonies in low clipped hedges, has as its centerpiece a central, bluestone-bordered lily pool extending the length of the garden. The pool itself is a classic Lutyens and Jekyll design, clearly lifted from the pages of Gertrude Jekyll and Lawrence Weaver's pivotal book, *Gardens for Small Country Houses* (1912).

The long, narrow central garden, on axis with the door of the sunroom of the house, has a central greensward flanked by perennial borders, with a blue-bronze sculpture at the far end. Hedges of Carolina hemlock and low walls, with posts covered with climbing roses, separate this area from the gardens on either side. The lower garden is given over almost entirely to roses—'Golden Salmon' polyanthus around



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For Mrs Holden McGinley of Milton, Massachusetts, Shipman designed a garden of successively descending rooms. The upper one, with the bluestone rill, has yellow 'Emily Gray' roses covering the walls. A lotus fountain is the centerpiece of the middle garden, and the lower one is filled with roses. Photograph by Herbert W Gleason, 1932



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In the McGinley garden, an opening in the wall of the lower garden frames a view of the Blue Hills in the distance. Photograph by Herbert W Gleason, 1932



The spring border in the McGinley garden has double-flowering peach trees, pearl-bush (Exochorda racemosa), Spiraea prunifolia, daphne, Phlox divaricata, and flowering almonds. Photograph by Herbert W. Gleason, 1932.

the central circular pool and lotus-leaf fountain, standard and bush roses, hybrid teas and perennials in apricot, copper, and yellow tones in the beds.

Another delightful bit of Shipman's artistry can be seen in the spring border adjacent to the house. Along the walls she placed double-flowering peach trees interspersed with pearl-bush, and overhead, a canopy of flowering almonds. Masses of tulips in shades of pink and lavender—"crescendos," as she called them in her planting notes—were underplanted with pansies and *Phlox divaricata*. A simple stone-lined dirt path separated the border from the lawn.

Even though the example of Shipman's career, and those of Beatrix Farrand and Marian Coffin, opened the door for women in the profession of landscape architecture, relatively few examples of Shipman's work can be seen today. One reason is that her gardens, which were unusually plant-intensive and therefore fragile, had

already begun to disappear before she died in 1950. Another aspect is that her practice was devoted almost exclusively to private gardens, and only a handful of these have been converted to public use. Had circumstances been otherwise, two Massachusetts gardens could have fallen into the latter category.

In 1925 Shipman prepared plans for replanting part of Alice Longfellow's garden in Cambridge, originally laid out by Martha Brookes Hutcheson in 1904. Hutcheson was no longer designing gardens at the time of Shipman's commission. Shipman's charge was to rejuvenate the garden by preparing planting plans, plant lists, and horticultural notes only, without any changes to the overall design of the garden.¹⁴ Many other landscape architects would not have done this type of work—rejuvenating gardens designed by others—but Shipman's willingness to do so exemplifies her compliant attitude toward garden design. It may also account for the large number of projects she car-

ried out in her career, six hundred as opposed to Farrand's two hundred. The Shipman plantings disappeared years ago and now the property is known as the Longfellow National Historic Site and managed by the National Park Service. The historic significance of the landscape, including Shipman's planting plans, is currently being evaluated with the possibility that Shipman's garden may be reinstated.¹⁵

In April 1930 Shipman sketched a preliminary design plan for Long Hill, the Beverly, Massachusetts, home of Mrs. Ellery Sedgwick (better known as Mabel Cabot Sedgwick, the garden writer), now a property of The Trustees of Reservations. Shipman proposed a series of garden rooms encircling the house and taking full advantage of the dramatic setting. All the features associated with Shipman's work can be found in this plan, including three square gardens to the east of the house, one of which was a rose garden with a serpentine wall and dolphin fountain. There were several pools, long walks, boxwood-edged flowerbeds, a series of terraces descending the hill, and woodland paths. The areas farthest from the house were to be planted with native plants, especially flowering trees and shrubs, while the areas closer to the house were more formally planted. Had her scheme been installed, we would have had a delightful example of Shipman's mature work. Mabel had her own ideas about the garden, so the project went no further.

While the "bones" of several of Shipman's private gardens in the Boston area have survived—stone walls, pools, or paths—none has yet been discovered with the original plantings and it is unlikely that they will be found. For Shipman gardens open to the public, the garden visitor must travel; one of the best examples of her work is Stan Hywet Hall, in Akron, Ohio. As in the Longfellow garden, Shipman's task was to rejuvenate a walled garden originally designed by Warren Manning. The garden was recently restored, following Shipman's 1929 plans and planting lists but using modern-day cultivars to create her precise color scheme.¹⁶ Two other gardens that may be visited are examples of her late work: Longue Vue Gardens in New Orleans, designed for Edith and Edgar Stern in 1936, and the terrace gardens at Sarah P. Duke Gardens, in

Durham, North Carolina. Both of these gardens are hosting symposia in 1998 to honor the significance of Ellen Biddle Shipman.

Notes

- ¹ Shipman, foreword, *Garden Note Book*, p. 4 (box 10, folder 15, Rare and Manuscripts Collection, Cornell University).
- ² Manning, letter to Frank Seiberling, Akron, Ohio, 20 July 1917 (Archives, Stan Hywet Hall).
- ³ "House and Garden's Own Hall of Fame," *House and Garden*, June 1933, 50.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.
- ⁵ Mary Caroline Crawford, "Homes and Gardens of Cornish," *House Beautiful*, April 1906, 12–14.
- ⁶ See Jane Brown, "Lady into Landscape Gardener—Beatrix Farrand's Early Years at the Arnold Arboretum," *Arnoldia* 51 (Fall 1991): 2–10.
- ⁷ Design chapter, *Garden Note Book*, 38.
- ⁸ Preface, *Garden Note Book*, 2.
- ⁹ "Three Pennsylvania Gardens," *Garden Magazine and Home Builder*, September 1924, 11.
- ¹⁰ See plan and photograph in Mac Griswold, "Fairsted," *Arnoldia* 56 (Summer 1996): 11.
- ¹¹ Lamar Sparks, "A Landscape Architect Discusses Gardens," *Better Homes and Gardens*, November 1930, 20.
- ¹² "Variety of Form and Abundance of Bloom within a Small Area: The Garden of Mrs. Henry V. Greenough, Brookline, Massachusetts," *House Beautiful*, March 1931, 62.
- ¹³ Ethel B. Power, "A Blue-Ribbon Garden: The Garden of Mrs. Holden McGinley," *House Beautiful*, March 1933, 86–89, 118.
- ¹⁴ Catherine Evans, *Longfellow National Historic Site, Cultural Landscape Report*, Boston: National Park Service, 1993, 71–73.
- ¹⁵ The National Park Service is currently reassessing the garden. Shary Page Berg and Lauren Meier, *Longfellow National Historic Site, Cultural Landscape Report, Volume 2 Analysis, Significance, Integrity*, forthcoming.
- ¹⁶ To learn more about Stan Hywet Hall, see Judith B. Tankard, "The Artistry of Ellen Shipman," *Horticulture*, January 1997, 72–76.

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