

Lady into Landscape Gardener: Beatrix Farrand's Early Years at the Arnold Arboretum

Jane Brown

One of America's great landscape gardeners, Beatrix Farrand was deeply influenced by Professor C. S. Sargent, the Arboretum's first director.

For the whole of her long and successful career, Beatrix Farrand was consistently and loyally appreciative of the place she regarded as her *alma mater*, the Arnold Arboretum. Her gratitude and affection shine through her public writings, from a piece she called "The Debt of Landscape Art to a Museum of Trees" for the *Architectural Record* of November 1918,¹ to her pieces for *Arnoldia* in 1949, describing her work on the azalea border and her layout plan for Peters Hill.² Her friendship with Professor Charles Sprague Sargent, her adored "Chief," who had taught her "by precept and example," was maintained until the end of his life in 1927; and after that, she conducted a lengthy and vigorous correspondence with Alfred Rehder and Karl Sax, and especially with William Henry Judd, the Arboretum's English propagator, who died in 1946. Judd, who had first come to the Arnold in 1913, was her closest contact after Sargent's death, and there was a rather sad irony in that *Arnoldia* of May 31, 1946,³ announced his sudden death from a heart attack at the same time it made public Beatrix's appointment as consultant landscape architect. Beatrix's last surviving letters on Arboretum matters—she

refers to herself as "the old lady" whose mind works very slowly—are dated in the spring of 1953, just six years before her death.

This well-documented relationship of her later years will be the subject of a future *Arnoldia* article, but for the moment, I would like to concentrate upon how it all began. For my forthcoming book on Beatrix Farrand's life and work, I have had to piece together much more elusive evidence on how she came to study at the Arnold in the 1890s and what she did there. She left no diaries or letters of that time, and her references to it were persistently vague, even to the drafting of what amounted to her own obituary, for the *Reef Point Bulletin*, where she mentioned "a fortunate meeting" (one of many in her life) with Mrs. Charles Sargent and how the Professor became interested in her love of plants. She then became "the grateful guest" of the Sargents, at which time the facilities of the Arboretum were thrown open to her. Thus, as she also wrote, her life was changed; it most certainly was, for chance and circumstances had brought her into the realm of perhaps the only person, in the only place, where the restrictions imposed by her native society could

A portrait photo of Beatrix Cadwalader Jones at her debut, circa 1890, the year she first met the Sargents. Reprinted courtesy of the College of Environmental Design Documents Collection, University of California, Berkeley.

be overcome, and she could be launched into the world of men as an independent professional woman.

Family Connections

Beatrix Jones was born into a rigid society of old-money New York in the 1870s, where it was decreed that a lady's name only appeared in print to announce her engagement and her death. She was an only child, born on 19 June 1872, something over two years after the marriage of her parents, Frederic Rhinelander Jones and Mary Cadwalader Rawle. Her father (who had a young sister who would grow up to be the novelist Edith Wharton) was rich, fun-loving, and purposeless; her mother was lively, bookish, and used to the company of scholarly Philadelphia lawyers and soldiers in the society from which she came. Mary had probably married in haste, and she and Freddy soon discovered their deep incompatibilities, so that by the time Beatrix was ten her father was virtually absent from her life.

Beatrix was highly intelligent and well educated; she grew up to be a handsome young lady, of elegant bearing, always beautifully turned out, but with an awesome briskness of manner. This was probably a self-protective device, a result of her fatherlessness. She was surrounded by her mother's friends, a predominantly female society with a sprinkling of eminent men, including John La Farge, John Singer Sargent, Francis Marion Crawford, and later Henry James, as well as Mary's dour and fastidious cousin, the lawyer John Lambert Cadwalader. But of almost equal influence as any person on Beatrix (except for her mother) was the place she loved most, Mount Desert Island and Bar Harbor in particular, where she spent her summers. Beatrix explored every inch of the island, she was an expert on its trees and wildflowers, and she sailed her catboat around its rocky shores. At her home, "Reef Point" in Bar Harbor, she learned to garden with a sympathy for the soils and conditions of the island. She learned from her parents at first, but as Mary Cad-

walader Jones became busy with other things, Beatrix took control of the garden and was probably in charge of its progress by the time she was fifteen or sixteen.

A Suitable Profession

Given her passion for the Maine landscape and gardening, it seems likely that John Lambert Cadwalader suggested that she should study the subject seriously; he could well have been prompted by his friend Mariana Griswold van Rensselaer's timely approval of landscape gardening as a career for ladies.

But the key to her decision was, as Beatrix wrote, her "fortunate meeting" with Mary Sargent. Beatrix was immediately attracted by Mrs. Sargent's skill in botanical illustration; she was nearing completion of her set of watercolors of the flowers, leaves, and fruit of each tree represented in Professor Sargent's collection of the woods of America. In her turn, Mary Sargent probably enjoyed Beatrix's enthusiastic and knowledgeable chatter about plants, which was in a lighter vein than the high-flown table talk of the Professor and his academic friends. Anyway, Beatrix Jones⁴ was soon swept up into the comfortable and capacious milieu of the Sargents' house, Holm Lea, where apparently the Professor too appreciated her interest in plants. Her good looks and elegance were not wasted upon Sargent, but of course she in turn was quite used to distinguished gentlemen, and would not have been shy or daunted by his stern gaze and the aloofness of his Boston soul.

By the summer of 1893, the Sargents were convinced of the seriousness of Beatrix's interest in landscape gardening. Beatrix and her mother Mary had visited Holm Lea en route from New York to Maine (this became a regular habit in later years) in June when the rhododendrons were at their best. The Sargents may have visited them at Reef Point (this too became a regular event in later years), but the Professor had most certainly instructed Beatrix to make the most of her summer, to use her eyes, to observe good land-



The pond at Professor Sargent's estate, Holm Lea, in Brookline, Massachusetts. Photographed in 1900 by Thomas Marr.

scape effects and plant relationships and note them down. Her summer flew by, as happy holidays are wont to do, but towards the end of September she remembered that she needed something to show her "Chief," and bought a brand-new notebook. This was almost certainly not her first, but it was the only one she kept as a treasured reminder of what were to be some of the most momentous days of her young life.

Observing the Landscape

The notebook begins on 10 October 1883 with her comments on the landscape around Bar Harbor; one of her favorite haunts is the Dorr family's Oldfarm at Compass Harbor, where

she finds many good planting ideas, but she is noticeably critical of exotics on her island setting, including Mrs. Dorr's "unfortunate" weakness for magnolias. Her last holiday entries are made on the train as she leaves for Boston to meet up with the Sargents, who had promised to take her to the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, to see the wonders of the fair, but especially the triumph of Olmsted's landscape setting. After a short rest at Holm Lea, Beatrix and the Sargents are bound for Chicago, where they arrive on October 19.

For a week she wandered around the Exposition, investigating details of design and planting, and noting them down; she was mys-



An aerial view of Beatrix Farrand's home, Reef Point, in Bar Harbor, Maine. Reprinted courtesy of the College of Environmental Design Documents Collection, University of California, Berkeley.

tified by the first Japanese bonsai that she saw, but entranced by the mix of gardens and contrived wilderness on Olmsted's precious wooded island. Being at the fair under the Sargents' wing taught Beatrix a great deal, but it also brought her into the inner circle of her chosen profession. She was no longer on the outside, but having met so many people and heard so many conversations on the hard-won triumph of the fair, she became one of the "few" who realized, as Sargent had thundered in *Garden and Forest* "that the harmony of the scene and the perfection and convenience of the whole scheme of arrangement were due to the genius of one man, Frederick Law Olmsted."⁵

Beatrix returned to New York to continue her reading, but her future was decided and must have been talked about; the following February (1894) she and her mother were in the Sargents' party to visit Biltmore, which caused Olmsted to remark rather grumpily that she was "inclined to dabble in Landscape Architecture."⁶ This much-quoted slight reveals the depths of the difficulties Beatrix had to overcome, and just how important Sargent's faith in her was to her eventual success. Olmsted was on the summit of his fame, yet conscious of his failing energies; he had a punishing schedule of travels that spring of 1894, and was obsessed with the "exceptional" education of his son, Frederick, Jr., who, on

the point of graduating from Harvard, was being fitted to be his heir. No man, with Olmsted's almost messianic fervor, could look kindly on a society lady who dared to dabble in his precious profession. But, on Beatrix's side, was it not hard for her that her contemporaries, her equals in so many ways, Charles Eliot, Henry Sargent Codman, and Frederick Olmsted, Jr., should be pampered, eased, and ushered through the surveying and field work, the European travels, and the office experience necessary to becoming a landscape architect? She had to do it all on her own. It was this imbalance that made Sargent's encouragement crucial. He was kindly, he had that Brahmin tendency to give a serious-minded woman encouragement, and just perhaps, she appeared at the right moment, with her brightness and enthusiasm, to fill the gap left by the death of his former protégé, Henry Sargent Codman, in early 1893.

Beatrix probably never knew of Olmsted's slight, but the situation was clear enough; it was to affect her life greatly, as well as her later relationship with the American Society of Landscape Architects. She refused to call herself a landscape *architect*, always preferring the term *gardener*.

After the trip to Biltmore in February 1894, she returned to Holm Lea in the summer for what was to be her longest stay; she studied at the Arboretum and was ushered around Brookline by Sargent (including a visit to H. H. Hunnewell at Wellesley, and he was impressed by her knowledge and manner). On June 5, she faced up to her Waterloo, taking a chance to visit Olmsted's office (in his absence). She was allowed a thorough look around the shrine she could never enter professionally. Her notes were detailed: "The entrance is quite charming, a lych gate covered with *Euonymus radicans*, both the plain and variegated, and quite bushy on top. The road goes around a tiny island with shrubs planted on a high mound and completely shutting out the gate. To the right the ground has been dug away making a little dell . . ." Her description goes on, and has

gathered interest with time, for the entrance to 99 Warren Street is still much the same as she saw it. She describes the planting around the house, noting some "badly arranged" shrubs and the clashing azalea flowers in bluish pink and bright orange.

But she was really interested in the Olmsted office, and she was allowed to see every aspect of the work, as her detailed notes reveal. She was shown, perhaps by the affable John Charles Olmsted, how design layouts and areas for planting were sketched on tracing paper over the site surveys, and how planting plans were made by reference to a card index, which gave size, shape, availability, and required growing conditions for each plant. The plants were keyed into the design by a number. All she saw was of vital interest to Beatrix, and she carried all the ideas and methods away with her for future reference.

On the following Sunday, June 10, 1894, Professor Sargent drove her to the Arboretum; she took this in her stride since for her to have a private tutorial was almost certainly not a unique occasion, but it is the only excursion she recorded in detail:

On the way we stopped and looked at Mr. Parkman's collection of shrubs. It was awfully dreary—house and grounds taken by the Park Commission, house being torn down [Parkman had died the previous year]. Only a year ago the grounds were under cultivation and now they look as if they had been deserted for years, paths overgrown, and long grass springing up everywhere. St. Bruno's lily in full bloom—*Azalea calendulacea* still fine too, *Magnolia macrophylla* not flowering yet—the largest in the neighborhood. *Aruncus spirea* in bed quite handsome altho' a little coarse . . . Jamaica Pond is lovely—or at least must have been lovely before the Parkway took it—Mr. S. is trying to make the Commission give up the plan for the road along the shore in one of the loveliest spots.

In the Arboretum itself a great deal of work has been done, especially behind the building [the Hunnewell laboratory was completed in 1892] where the Magnolias are to begin.

Beatrix noted *Magnolia parviflora* (= *M. sieboldii*) in bloom, though only a small bush, and *Magnolia glauca* (= *M. virginiana*), perfumed almost like a rose. Professor Sargent led



An 1894 photograph of F. L. Olmsted's Brookline home and office, Fairstead. Beatrix Farrand visited Fairstead on June 5 of that year. Photograph courtesy of the National Park Service.

her on to the roses—*Rosa spinosissima* in bloom and also *R. nitida*, *R. lucida*, *R. setigera multiflora*, and the Austrian briar were all noted for future use. Other shrubs that caught her eye were the hydrangeas, *stewartia*, *Viburnum molle*, and *V. dentatum* in bloom and *Fothergilla gardenii*, just beginning to fruit.

Sargent must have insisted—if Beatrix needed any bidding—that she attend J. G. Jack's dendrology lectures, which he gave that June; and being Beatrix, she would have made the most of every chance to learn from that remarkable character, the chief propagator and Arboretum superintendent, Jackson Dawson. Dawson, a jovial, good-natured Yorkshireman, resplendent each morning in a fresh boiled white shirt (on which he invariably wiped his plant labels), knew everyone who had any business among his precious plants in the Arbore-

tum. Beatrix would have found him an immensely attractive personality, always willing to answer her questions and explain what he was doing. It seems likely that her later friendship with Chief Propagator Judd was founded on her earlier good relationship with Jackson Dawson.

If Beatrix had acquired a foundation of good plant knowledge from her visits to Holm Lea and the Arboretum, especially in that summer of 1894, she still needed to learn in other ways. In the autumn she made arrangements for private courses in technical drawing and surveying from the teachers at Columbia's fledgling School of Architecture, and she made plans for her very necessary European study tour.

This first important tour lasted for six months, from March until October of 1895;

she and her mother traveled alone (except for their lady's maid) but met old and new friends in many places, including Teddy and Edith Wharton. Beatrix wrote that Sargent exhorted her "to see all the gardens she could, and learn from all the great arts as all art is akin." He gave her introductions to the Jardin d'Essai in Algiers, where she studied subtropical plants, and to the Rovelli brothers who had a collection of azaleas and rhododendrons near Milan. Charles Eliot was also very helpful, with good advice on parks and gardens he had seen in Paris and Berlin, giving her as well an introduction to the "very kindly" Carl Bolle and his marvelous garden of trees on an island in the Tegel. Sargent may well have paved the way for her to meet the reigning triumvirate of English gardeners, William Robinson, Gertrude Jekyll and Theresa Earle, which she did, all in one week in July.

Olmsted's advice to William Platt had included his opinion that the "fine and costly" Italian gardens had less to offer the young landscape architect than the carefully observed details of the everyday landscape and common places. Beatrix, attuned by Holm Lea dinner-table conversations to the sensitivities of formal versus natural landscape tastes, adopted right from this start her carefully judged position along the middle way, that was to mark the whole of her career. She saw over twenty villa gardens in Italy, as well as the great formal gardens of Germany, France, and England, but it is interesting to note that her first contribution to *Garden and Forest* (and her first published piece of writing)⁷ was on the merits of a vernacular stone bridge she had seen in the English Lake District. (She designed very similar bridges for the woodland at Dumbarton Oaks over thirty years afterwards.) She pursued further egalitarian interests in city parks on her return, and it was her ideas for these that brought her to the notice of Samuel Parsons and eventually the embryonic American Society of Landscape Architects.

In the April 7, 1897, issue of *Garden and Forest*, she wrote about a paper that the land-



Portrait of Jackson Dawson, chief propagator at the Arnold Arboretum, and a good friend of Beatrix Farrand. Photograph from the Arnold Arboretum Archives.

scape gardener Henry Ernest Milner had delivered in London on "The Garden in Relation to the House," which was really concerned with the architect in relation to the landscape gardener. By this time also, Professor Sargent had delighted her by finding her a little job, which she described as to do "some tree thinning and remodel a little planting on a garden slope." By the following autumn, when she gave her first professional interview to the *New York Sun* (October 31, 1897), she could speak with a breezy, though conscientious confidence of her work—draining a 25-acre swamp, clearing a 40-acre forest plot in Bar Harbor and transforming it "into a pleasing grove," laying out a cemetery at Seal Harbor, as well as more garden work in Bar Harbor and the landscaping of the entrance to Tuxedo Park in New York State—these last two jobs



The bridge over the River Kent at Levens Hall, from Garden and Forest, 1896 (vol. 9, no. 25). In her first published article, Beatrix Jones described the bridge this way: "The simple lines and quiet color of this ivy-draped bridge in Westmoreland are what make it satisfying to the eye and an added charm to the stream; it is made from the stone of the country, and the native plants grow about it as familiarly as though it were a boulder playfully deposited there by nature in the ice age."

being current. The *Sun* reporter noted her long box full of plans, the three hundred books on her subject, and asked if landscape gardening was profitable, and could a young woman afford to marry on it? Beatrix laughed as she replied that "she did not think a young woman dedicated to her profession could afford to marry at all!"

Miss Jones, "twenty-five years old and comely" was well on her way, to a full and busy life and a professional reputation for fine work that was truly deserved. Beatrix, whose honesty was one of her most engaging features, never ever forgot that she owed so much to that "kindest of autocrats,"⁸ her "Chief" Charles Sprague Sargent and his generously helping her over so many of the professional hurdles that time and society placed in her way. Probably we shall never now know the full extent of his kindnesses. And, of course,

he also opened up for her his living textbook of shrubs and trees, her professional stock in trade.

Endnotes

- ¹ Vol. 44 (5). 407.
- ² *Arnoldia* 9 (2): 6-7, Vol. 9 (9): 38-43.
- ³ Vol. 6 (4): 5.
- ⁴ Beatrix married Max Farrand in 1913.
- ⁵ May 3, 1893, editorial.
- ⁶ Laura Wood Roper, *FLO: A Biography of Frederick Law Olmsted*, John Hopkins, 1973, p. 455.
- ⁷ *Garden and Forest*, January 15, 1896.
- ⁸ E. H. Wilson, quoted in *A Reunion of Trees*, by S. A. Spongberg, Harvard U. Press, 1990.

Jane Brown studied landscape design, but, as she says, "happily diverted to writing." She is a prolific writer on the subject of garden history and design, and is currently working on a biography of Beatrix Farrand, from which the above article is extracted.