

THE HISTORY OF THE GARDENS  
AT  
HILLWOOD, WASHINGTON, DC  
(A Brief Elucidation)

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Hillwood Museum and Gardens is the culminating masterpiece of Marjorie Merriweather Post's life as a collector, philanthropist, businesswoman and hostess. It is also an aggregation of all her life's experiences that shaped her lifestyle and inspired her taste and preferences. The gardens at Hillwood are a clear illustration of the early influences on Mrs. Post's sense of style.

In our research of the history of Hillwood's gardens, both before and during Mrs. Post's residency, we found that she adopted, and retained, a style of estate building which was popular during the first half of her life. Mrs. Post was born during the Country Place Era, a period in the history of American architecture that started in the second half of the nineteenth century, culminating in the 1880's through the 1920's and eventually declining in the 1930's.

The Country Place Era was a time of economic prosperity in America, defined by commerce, finance and industry. The riches of such provided the affluent with the means to build large houses located on limited acreage in the country, with stables, gatehouse, gardens, and sometimes with a few acres for farming. The American country house tradition was drawn upon a deeply ingrained American characteristic that valued life in the country and near nature. However, the country place could not exist but for the city which not only provided the wealth to support it, but a direct connection in the form of transportation. In this contrast, the country place was an escape from urban chaos that also brought cosmopolitan sophistication to the countryside.

The size of a country place could vary, but all country places essentially embodied the same components, including gardens of some type, either formal or informal, and outbuildings or support structures, though they may be limited to a garage, pool house or garden pavilion. The house included easy access to the outdoors, with porches, verandas, and terraces. The country house was built for show, but also for pleasure, relaxation, and sport, and had its own sports facilities, such as a pool or tennis court. The house itself was large and substantial, containing a luxury of space especially in public areas such as halls, staircases, or a conservatory. The architectural style of the house was not important, and varied. The country place gave the effect, and in many cases was

the reality, of wealth, luxury, exclusion, and ease of interaction with the outdoors. The country place was given a proper name by the owner, rather than given a street address, and had amplitude of form in which the place became the statement of the owner.

Mrs. Post created her first country place, Hillwood, Long Island, in 1924, during the latter part of the Country Place era. By this time, the style of the country place had been well defined, and the architects and landscape architects commissioned to develop these estates for their clients were, themselves, influenced by the pioneers of the era. Marjorie Merriweather (Post) Hutton hired Marion Cruger Coffin to create the magnificent gardens and grounds that would surround her and her husband's English Tudor-style house. Marion Coffin developed the gardens to flow from the house, with walks laid out in straight axis to separate gardens designed as outdoor rooms bounded by hedges and walls, and containing statuary, fountains, sundials and pools as focal points. She included a grand, sweeping circular drive from the street to the house. Marion Coffin's plans also called for the planting of large specimen trees to give the effect of age and permanence. The design principles that Marion Coffin had applied to create the gardens of Hillwood, Long Island, would be repeated later by Mrs. Post at her future residences of Tregaron and, most especially, Hillwood, Washington, D.C.

At the same time that Mrs. (Post) Hutton was consulting with Marion Coffin to build the gardens at Hillwood, Long Island, Colonel and Mrs. Henry P. Erwin acquired a country place estate in Washington, D.C., named Arbremont, from the Gaillard family. The Erwins hired the young landscape architect, Willard Gebhart, to design a style of gardens and grounds in vogue for the time. Despite our research to this point, we cannot determine exactly which amenities were in existence at Arbremont when the Erwins purchased it. But early plans of Arbremont after 1922 show the typical components of a country place, including the stables, greenhouses, a garden summerhouse (gazebo), swimming pool, animal pens, a bridal path and a winding drive from the street to the house. At some point, the Erwins added a tennis court between the motor court and the stables. We are uncertain of the dates when the motor court to the north entrance of the house and the fish pond to the west of the house had been added, but they appear on plans of Arbremont before Mrs. Post purchased it in 1955.

However, through our research we have been able to identify the elements of the garden that were added by Gebhart. True to the style and training of the time, Gebhart developed separate garden rooms that flowed off straight axis from the house. Gehart's first job for the Erwins was the construction of a circular rose garden with a crescent-shaped, vine-covered pergola, which lead down stone steps to a clipped boxwood parterre. Gebhart was responsible for

the installation of the flagstone promenade that parallels the front of the house, and was connected at each end by an elliptic walk, called the rhododendron walk. At the south axis of the rhododendron walk Gebhart built a stone terrace, with a staircase and walk that led to a swimming pool to the east, and a staircase that led to an oriental-style garden to the west. He was known for his use of rhododendrons and flowering trees, which he placed along the walks. By the time Mrs. Post was to preview the Arbremont estate in 1955, mature elm trees flanked the front of the house, and mature plantings filled the estate.

When Mrs. Post purchased Arbremont, she acquired a property that had been built and developed during the same era that she built and developed Hillwood, Long Island. Arbremont and Hillwood, L.I., shared many similarities as other properties of the Country Place era. Both properties had stables, outbuildings, extensive gardens, greenhouses, and sporting facilities. A long, winding driveway led to each house, both of which were large and substantial. [This is also true for Tregaron, Mrs. (Post) Davies' home before 1955.] The style of garden Marion Coffin had designed for Mrs. (Post) Hutton was in keeping with the style that Willard Gebhart applied to Arbremont.

When Mrs. Post acquired Arbremont in 1955, we can only assume that she observed the similarities between Arbremont and her previous residence(s). When Mrs. Post began to create her Hillwood, Washington, D.C., she had every opportunity and means to completely alter the appearance and character of the estate. She did eliminate some of the amenities of the estate and alter some of the features of the gardens and grounds. However, she chose to preserve most of the landscape features that already existed, including the promenade walk, the rhododendron walk, the stone terrace and staircases, the woodland walk, and the rose garden pergola and stairs. She also preserved some of the original plantings, most notably the large elm trees flanking the front of the house.

To help her with the alterations she planned to make to the gardens of Hillwood, Mrs. Post retained the services of Innocenti & Webel, a landscape architecture firm from Long Island, New York. Umberto Innocenti & Richard Webel were prominent landscape architects of the time, and they were famous for their work on many prominent Long Island estates.

Mrs. Post first employed the skills of Innocenti & Webel to create better circulation routes through the estate. Similar to the training of Marion Coffin and Willard Gebhart, they believed an essential element to the landscape is a long, winding drive to the entrance of the house. Innocenti and Webel converted Arbremont's main drive into a service drive, and Hillwood's new main drive was designed up and around a hilly slope which was terraced with curving, stone, retaining walls. Along the drive, guest passed flowering trees, azaleas,

rhododendrons, and formally pruned evergreens. Cascading phlox, jasmine and cotoneaster draped the walls. This gave the guests a pleasant view on the approach and left some mystery to the estate not to be revealed until they entered the motor court walls, which were also modified by Innocenti and Webel, and were received at the porte-cochère. Mrs. Post's guests would have just experienced their first impression of Hillwood, and we suspect that Mrs. Post wanted it to be perfect. After a guest arrived at the porte-cochère, a separate exit that was added to the modified motor court led to the service road for access to parking and other areas of the estate.

Innocenti & Webel also designed and installed the French parterre garden in the same location, and nearly the same dimensions, as the existing fish pond. Mrs. Post added the French Drawing Room to the west side of the house to place most of her collection of French art and furniture. To enhance her collection, she requested that Innocenti & Webel design a eighteenth century French garden that would be viewed from the drawing room and her bedroom above. Mrs. Post collected eighteenth century French garden ornaments, which were also included in the design. At one end is Diana, goddess of the hunt and at the other, the swan fountain; both connected by a central waterway. The garden was further separated into four quadrants, in which a boxwood parterre was designed. This garden in particular has direct ties to the gardens of Hillwood, Long Island where a similar garden of boxwood parterres was built directly beneath Mrs. Post's bedroom windows. Innocenti & Webel were responsible for major changes on the property between 1955 and 1958. It appears that most of Innocenti & Webel's involvement was that of the entry drive, service road, circulation paths and service areas, as well as the French garden.

As the garden plans developed, Mrs. Post sought further help in some of the more established areas of the garden. Since she retained most of what Gebhart designed, Mrs. Post needed someone to customize it to her taste. For this task, she engaged the service of Perry Wheeler, a local landscape designer. Perry Wheeler was responsible for many changes throughout the garden, which included the rose garden beds and walks, the putting green, lunar lawn beds, and north entry motor court. Perry Wheeler was solely responsible for the design and installation of the friendship walk, pet cemetery, and breakfast fountain area. Perry Wheeler also designed the four seasons over look terminating the friendship walk, which had been a garden summerhouse for the Erwin's Arbremont. Perry Wheeler's influence can be seen through the formal gardens at Hillwood. He was responsible for creating appropriate settings for statuary Mrs. Post either received as gifts or had previously owned or purchased.

At the same time that Perry Wheeler worked under the instruction of Mrs. Post, she also contracted Shogo J. Myaida to design the Japanese garden,

where an oriental-style garden had existed. Myaida set out to create a Japanese-style garden that combined the American and Japanese cultures to create a hybrid garden that could be maintained by Mrs. Post's garden staff who were not trained in the intense style of maintenance required of Japanese gardens. What was created is now a well-known and respected Japanese-style garden, which represents the popularity of the Japanese culture and arts during the 1950's. It is one of the few gardens of its type that still remains in the history of America's gardens, and should be cherished as a truly unique garden style.

Several other changes occurred throughout the property between 1955 and 1973. English ivy was added to the brick walls of the house in the French parterre garden and next to the breakfast room. The tennis courts were removed and the cutting garden was installed. Gebhart's boxwood parterre below the rose garden was removed, and the putting green was constructed. Buildings were added, including the Dacha to replace the swimming pool. Several more greenhouses were built to culture Mrs. Post's extensive orchid collection and the camellia house was designed and constructed to hold her collection of tender camellias and tropical plants.

Mrs. Post made great changes to Hillwood, and achieved very much in a very short time. Between the years 1955 to 1959, most of the changes to the gardens, house and grounds were completed. To round out her botanical collections in the garden as she did with her art collection in the house, she continued to improve the gardens until her death. We surmise that Mrs. Post had great intention in changing the name of Arbermont to Hillwood. Mrs. Post's Hillwood, Long Island was truly magical. The gardens were meticulously maintained and everything was in its proper place. It is that legacy that Marjorie Merriweather Post continued at Hillwood, Washington D.C. and it is that legacy which we work to preserve.