

It is, as always, a pleasure to be back with you tonight, and it is a special pleasure to be here to talk about Hillwood's gardens. We have three main facets here, as you know: the art collection—which is what you've been thinking about in the two months since we last met; the founder and collector, Marjorie Post—who is my usual topic; and, then, the estate, the buildings and gardens. This evening I'm going to talk with you a bit about the gardens. I can't do what Brian Barr, our director of horticulture, is going to do: I can't talk about the types of plants we have, how we keep them growing, how we protect them and nurture them. What I can do is offer you some deep background on Hillwood's gardens, or, to state it slightly differently, Mrs. Post's gardens at Hillwood.

The gardens and estate are, in a broad sense, part of our collection, part of our responsibility. Brian and his colleagues in horticulture, and I and my colleagues in collections, think about these gardens not only as living plant matter but also as a historic site, like the mansion, like the former staff buildings. We can learn about them through the landscape design drawings in our archives; through photographs; through oral history interviews; newspaper articles; home movies. I'm going to share with you tonight some of the ongoing research into Hillwood's gardens. You'll hear a number of different voices talking about these gardens. What we know is not definitive: we are not finished, ready to box up and put away our work on the history of these acres. This is still very much a work in progress. But tonight, I'm going to talk with you about two aspects we are particularly interested in. I'm going to connect these gardens to the world beyond and before Linnean Avenue in two ways: first, by thinking of them as particularly American gardens, and, second, by examining the deep roots of these gardens in Mrs. Post's

gardens in other times and other places. We'll look first at Hillwood's relationship to the tradition of the American country house garden and then at the relationship to of these gardens to other gardens on other estates over the arc of Marjorie Post's life.

The American country house garden was born at the same time as the American country house: at the turn of the 20th century. In 1904, Barr Ferree, wrote in his book *American Estates and Gardens*, that in the "very brief space of ten years...an entirely new type of American country house [has developed], the house to which the words 'stately' and 'sumptuous' may be... applied...Country houses we have always had, and large ones, too; but the great country house as it is now understood is a new type of dwelling, a sumptuous house, built at large expense, often palatial in its dimensions, furnished in the richest manner and placed on an estate, perhaps large enough to admit of independent farming operations, and in most cases with a garden which is an integral part of the architectural scheme."¹ Industrialists who had made gilded age fortunes almost overnight were eager to display their wealth in settings that recalled the ancestral homes of European aristocrats. George Washington Vanderbilt began work on Biltmore, in Asheville, North Carolina, 1889; work on the Rockefeller's Kykuit, in Pocantico Hills, New York, began in 1906; Alfred du Pont's Nemours, in Delaware, in 1909.² Dozens of other estates were built in the same period. Architects drew on every style from French baronial to Tudor to Colonial Revival in the modern palaces they built for their clients, and "eclecticism and historicism dominated landscape as well as architectural design."³

¹ Barr Ferree, *American Estates and Gardens* (New York, 1904), p. 1, quoted in Clive Aslet, *The American Country House* (New Haven, 1990), p. 19, 21.

² Aslet.

³ Mac Griswold and Eleanor Weller, *The Golden Age of American Gardens: Proud Owners, Private Estates, 1890-1940*. (New York, 1991), p. 13.

Rarely was a garden built in one style only: rarely would a weekend visitor to one of these fabulous estates walk in a garden that was only Italian in style, only English, only French, only Japanese. Rather, the gardens that surrounded the mansions on these estates almost always “accommodated features from every century of Western garden history.”⁴ Eclectic the gardens may have been, but they were also uniform: each country house garden tended to have the same conventions. Mac Griswold and Eleanor Weller, in their study of *The Golden Age of American Gardens*, tell this part of the story for us: at a typical American country house built between 1890 and 1940,

“a long drive was lined with trees, through which parkland, fields, and handsome farm buildings could be glimpsed. The drive ended in a formal court on the entrance front of the house. On the most sheltered side of the house lay a terrace or loggia, which was both a visual foundation for the building and a platform from which to look down at the rest of the garden. From this stage, hedged or walled enclosures ran down to a naturalistic lawn and trees that connected the house-surrounding to the wild landscape and the view. Somewhere in the woods or laid out as a separate garden was a place for ferns and wildflowers, or a rock garden, or a Japanese teahouse and pond, or a water garden – or all of the above.

“...Three other places completed the gardening arrangements on any self-sufficient country estate: a kitchen garden for fresh vegetables, a cutting garden for flower arrangements, and a green house for propagating annuals for the flower borders, for wintering over tender tubbed shrubs, and to provide cut flowers in winter for the house.⁵

⁴ Griswold and Weller, p. 13.

⁵ Griswold and Weller, 18.

It was common, too, to have a golf course – Shelburne Farms, the Webb estate in Vermont, had one, as did Otto Kahn at his 1919 estate on Long Island. And a fanciful architectural folly somewhere on the grounds – a children’s playhouse, in Tudor style, or a tennis pavilion, or a summer house for taking tea – was often featured. A beautiful garden could display an industrialist’s new wealth, and it could also help advance the family’s business and social interests: as Griswold and Weller explain, “the struggle to become one of the elite took place at ‘the country place’ as much as in the ballroom or boardroom, and thus a beautiful garden had the same social utility as good horses, a box at the opera, or magnificent dinner parties.”⁶

You will have grasped by now, I know, the point I am trying to make: that Hillwood’s gardens fit comfortably into this tradition. And yet, you may be itching to point out, these gardens do not date to the 1890-1940 period of American country house and garden design to which I have been referring. These gardens were designed, built, and initially planted in the late 1950s and early 1960s. But bear with me. Let me take you back to Marjorie Post’s first country house and garden, and its origins. In fact, let me take you back a year before that first house, to the summer of 1904. That summer, C. W. Post took his daughter to England. She was 17, newly graduated from Mt. Vernon Seminary; her parents were already separated and about to divorce; C. W. was increasingly up to his neck in political activity against organized labor. So he whisked his child away from the scene of growing up, of grown-up anxieties, and rented a coach and four to take her and a few friends along the back roads of southern England. Young Marjorie was, like many girls her age at the time, an indefatigable collector of postcards. It is thanks to that collection, now stored in the Hillwood archives, that we know that the

⁶ Ibid. p. 14.

Post party visited a number of stately homes, including, of course, Windsor Castle, but also slightly less stately abodes. Marjorie bought penny postcards and put them in an album when she got home.

The following year, in December of 1905, Marjorie was married to Edward Bennett Close, of Greenwich, Connecticut, and, as a wedding gift, C. W. gave the young couple a house or, perhaps more accurately, gave them an estate. The Boulders was in the Rock Ridge section of Greenwich, which was already a leafy and elite New York City suburb. Not only was Greenwich the home town of C. W.'s new son-in-law, it was also convenient to C. W.'s business interests in New York and it was one of the social centers of the Eastern elite. Two Rockefellers already lived there; so did railroad financier J. Kennedy Tod and stockbroker Elias Cornelius Benedict. Mrs. Post recalled more than 60 years later that she and her father planned the estate together. We know that she was furious with her father for divorcing her mother and marrying his secretary; we know that C. W. initially didn't want her to marry Ed Close. Planning The Boulders together may have been about the only thing the two of them did together in her late adolescence that was, as she later said, "great fun."⁷

Guests approached The Boulders down a long gravel driveway, past a medieval-looking stone tower, past the stables and other farm buildings. Across a small bridge lay the house: a veranda wrapped around the fieldstone mansion. There was a vegetable garden and an orchard – C. W. wrote recommended to his daughter in 1908 that she plant apple trees – Rhode Island Greenings, Northern Spy, and Jonathan apples were among

⁷ Rubin, 57.

his choices, “two or three trees of each and perhaps a few peaches and some pears.”⁸ And there was a nine-hole golf course.⁹ The grounds also included a rose garden, a stream, and a pond, that appears to have been bordered with various plantings. It was, you may safely say, an excellent example of the American country house garden of the time. And it was out of this garden, laid out and planned with her father after their trip abroad, where they visited the English estates on which so many American estates were modelled, that all of the other gardens in Marjorie Post’s long life grew.

The Boulders burned in 1917. Three years later, Marjorie had a new estate and a new life with E. F. Hutton at Roslyn, on New York’s Long Island. The garden here, Mrs. Post’s first Hillwood, carried over many of The Boulder’s themes: the golf course, the kitchen garden and orchards, the extensive outbuildings – including an architectural folly, a two-storey child-sized play house. For this garden, Marjorie hired the young landscape architect who was already making her name with the Winterthur gardens, Marian Coffin. Coffin designed a series of garden rooms for the Huttons. There was a formal cutting garden, a rose garden with a pergola, and a topiary garden. Every morning Marjorie could look down from her bedroom window on a formal parterre garden, with paths and low boxwoods.

Hillwood remained her home until 1935, when a new marriage to diplomat Joseph E. Davies precipitated exciting years abroad. When the couple returned stateside, it was to Washington, D. C., and they found a suitable perch in the 1912 estate designed by Charles Platt, a popular architect of the American country house, and Ellen Biddle Shipman, a leading designer of country house gardens. This estate, which the Davies

⁸ C. W. Post to Marjorie Post Close, Box 4, folder 18, Post Family Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan-Ann Arbor.

⁹ Rubin, 71.

renamed Tregaron, already featured many of the elements of Marjorie's earlier estates and that of many of their sister estates: a winding drive across a bridge leading to a court in front of the main house; a terrace overlooking a carefully groomed lawn and, beyond it, a more natural landscape; outbuildings, including cottages for the staff; a greenhouse, formal garden, and pond. The Davies added a nine-hole golf course and an architectural folly: a dacha, set in one quadrant of Ellen Biddle Shipman's elegant formal garden, where Davies installed his office, his collection of Russian and Soviet paintings, and his cigars.

Mrs. Post moved across Connecticut Avenue to Hillwood in 1957, following her 1954 divorce from Davies and two years of renovations to this 1922 estate. Arbremont's original gardens had included, it appears from the photographic record, a great many boxwoods, as well as a rose garden, and, according to the archival record, an "oriental garden" in the woods on the southern hillside. Mrs. Post had had ample experience of gardens at age 70, and she knew what she wanted: a garden that condensed and highlighted the elements of all the other gardens she had lived in and loved. There would be a winding drive ending in a courtyard; a shady porch on the southern side of the house from which to look across the manicured lawn towards the treetops of Rock Creek; a parterre garden reminiscent of Marian Coffin's below her bedroom windows almost forty years before at her first Hillwood; a green for golf, to which she must have become accustomed from The Boulders onwards; winding woodland paths, a rose pergola. The Japanese-style garden was a new feature for Mrs. Post, but it was an accepted part of the garden tradition in which she was rooted: the Rockefellers had a Japanese garden at Kykuit, and Marjorie had perhaps walked, many years before, in the Japanese woodland

garden of steel baron Edmund Converse at his 1904 estate in Greenwich. Mrs. Post's garden at Hillwood was the culmination of all of her gardens, a distillation of the features that she used and reused over the course of her life. Where our cutting garden is now laid out, there was a kitchen garden and a few fruit trees while Mrs. Post lived here. We cannot say whether any of trees provided C. W.'s preferred Jonathans or Rhode Island Greenings. What we can say is that this garden connected Marjorie at the end of her life with that first garden that she and her father planned when she was in her late teens.

Hillwood's gardens offer us a glimpse into Marjorie Post's life, into being Marjorie Post, that no other feature of her estate can. We can stand in the parterre garden at Hillwood and know something of what it was to stand in the parterre gardens at the first Hillwood, and at Tregaron. We can putt on the green at Hillwood, and know something about what it was like to play golf at The Boulders. We cannot sit down in the French Drawing Room and imagine what it was like to sit there forty-five years ago with a spring breeze fluttering the curtains, or what it was like to sit in any of the many similar incarnations of that room in all of Marjorie Post's other houses. But we can sit on her garden furniture in her gardens. The water trickling in the fountain outside the breakfast room sounds the same as it did. The lilacs and white wisteria in the rose garden smell the same. The immediacy of our experience in the garden – the sights, sounds, smells of the garden – offers a rich and rewarding historical experience.