

Initial report on the *History of the Gardens*
at the Hillwood Museum & Gardens

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Introduction

Long before there was even a Hillwood Museum and Gardens or a Rock Creek Parkway, the area, which we now occupy, was the residence of Native American Tribes, who lived in log-houses and hunted along the nearby waterways

In the early 1700's settlers began developing home-sites farm son the banks of Potomac River and came to Rock Creek. It was some time in the late 1700's when Isaac Pierce arrived here; several mills were already operating along Rock Creek. Pierce Mill operated in its present location until Rock Creek Park was established in 1890.

The Pierce's were well known for farming and also horticulture, Joshua Pierce operated one of the countries first nurseries, and it is believed that he sold many of the existing trees in Lafayette Park!

When Rock Creek Park was established, the National Park Service employed Fredrick L. Olmsted to create an interesting design including a Park and Carriage Path for the Nations Capital, much the same as he had done with Central Park in New York and The Emeral Necklace in Boston. Olmsted set out to create pleasure grounds, for people in Washington to enjoy on the weekends, most of what we see when we drive down Rock Creek Parkway was designed by Olmsted. (The famous Stone Bridge in the Park is a standard for Olmsted typical rustic designs.) Today we enjoy the benefits of our ancestors and their foresight in preserving Rock Creek as a national treasure.

In the early 1920's, because of rapid growth in the city, people started venturing further out, most of them were looking for a sense of space and wanted to reap the reward of country life and, yet be close to "downtown".

At the time the concept involved mostly sites of 10 to 25 acres of land. At the same time that Mrs. Post was creating Hillwood Long Island with the architect Marion Coffin, Abermont in Washington DC was being built, and so was Tregaron. All three houses shared many of the same features; hence the Country Place Era was born!

To have a "proper house" several considerations had to be made, mainly would the site accommodate the landscape? Typical of this time were Georgian Style Homes then had long winding driveways, and gave the illusion of a country estate. Another important aspect to the approach was that all the drives either curved to the house and away or actually deminated in a motor court, usually an ellipse. All landscapes in this period share many features found in much larger estates: formal rose gardens, putting greens, vistas, sculptures and English country planting designs, just to name a few!

The following report concerns the prehistory and history of Hillwood's Gardens. Essays, photo's, newspaper articles, and bibliographies of designers relate to the Country Place Era, and how that era shaped our present gardens. Comparisons to other gardens and designers are not intended to state as fact. However as we research Mrs. Post past and our present Hillwood, as well as her other properties, only then can we hope to interpret how she came to create those gardens and take better care in the version of the legacy that she left us.

FREDERICK LAW OLMSTED

Father of American Landscape Architecture

Frederick Law Olmsted, the leading landscape architect of the post-Civil War generation, is not only considered the father of American landscape architecture, but also founded the American Society of Landscape Architects (1899). Known for his parks and residential suburbs, he was a visionary whose goal was to improve American society through landscape architecture. His parks would fill the need for pastoral scenery and recreational opportunities, while his residential suburbs would provide a refuge from the stress and artificiality of urban life. And with the development of a rapid transit system from suburbs to city, one could have the best of both worlds.

Frederick Law Olmsted was born in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1826. He moved to the New York City area in 1848, and by the 1850's the Olmsted firm was permanently settled in Brookline, Massachusetts. In 1857 he was appointed Superintendent of Central Park with the task of designing the entire park. From 1858-1872, he designed some of the major park systems in the east and mid-west, including Rock Creek Park in Washington DC, Prospect Park in Brooklyn NY, Chicago's South Parks, and Mount Royal Park in Montréal. He also designed the site plan for the World's Colombian Exposition in Chicago, the Biltmore estate in Asheville, NC, the grounds of the United States Capitol, and Stanford University campus.

Olmsted's parks featured gracefully undulating greenswards with scattered groves of trees. He would develop several different landscape themes and separate them with walks and drives, and included areas for recreational activities as well. This design philosophy is clearly evident in New York City's Central Park as well as Washington's Rock Creek Park. With regard to his suburban designs, in his most famous residential suburb, Riverside in Illinois, he used curving streets to create a sense of enclosure. This also prevented through traffic, in keeping with his philosophy of providing a calm, tranquil, family-friendly suburban environment.

Olmsted had a strong sense of community and public service, and was active in the movement to preserve areas of great, natural beauty for public use. He served as head of the first commission in charge of Yosemite Valley and was a leader in establishing the Niagara Reservation in 1887.

Olmsted's inspiration was primarily American and derived from America's natural scenery, social values, and the writings of Andrew Jackson Downing. He also drew from English landscape design tradition. However, when he began to receive commissions to work in the American south and west, he realized the importance of adapting design to climate and natural settings, and created water-conserving systems for those arid lands and promoted the use of local plant varieties.

Among Olmsted's many valuable contributions to landscape architecture were his efforts to make his profession more socially conscious. He set the example by providing

the average citizen with residential and recreational amenities that had been enjoyed previously only by the privileged classes in Europe. He also championed the concept of using space so as to fill not only the aesthetic needs of people but their social and psychological needs as well.

Olmsted died in 1903, but his stepson and son carried on the firm for a number of years. In 1980, the National Park Service purchased the property to create the Olmsted National Historic Site.

Arbremont 1924 to 1955

In the early 1900's, Washington D.C. was developing into one of the major cities on the East Coast. For a long time, Washington had been a kind of small southern town, even though, it was the nation's capital. With the end of World War I, Washington was now energized. Massive building projects were underway, that included new homes for returning war heroes. As the city quickly grew and transportation became more accessible, people started to venture away from the congestion and pollution of the city to the tranquility and fresh air of the country.

One such family was that of the Gaillard twin sisters. For a wedding present, their father built a house for each daughter. The houses were built on hill top parcels of land, across from the other but each over-looking Rock Creek and into Washington. The Georgian mansion on the east hilltop was named "The Rocks" and the Georgian mansion on the west hilltop was named "Arbermont".

We do not know much of what became of the Rocks, however in 1985, Jay Rockefeller purchased the property from an heir Col. David Gaillard.

Arbermont, on the other hand, remained the residence of Colonel and Mrs. Henry P. Erwin until it was sold to Mrs. Post in 1955. The Erwin's made many improvements to the property. A photograph from Town and Country magazine of 1937 shows an Italianate rose and cutting garden with pergolas and stone steps leading to a formal boxwood garden. This was our first introduction to the work of Willard Gebhart, who noted this as his first job.

We do not know exactly how much work Willard Gebhart did for the Erwin's but we have to assume that he designed and built most of the developed gardens, which are typical of his design style. We do know that much of the rose garden and the area of the putting green are from this period. Gebhart loved flowering gardens and is known for his use of rhododendrons and flowering trees. His design principles came right out of the Country Place Era and reflect greatly on this.

A 1955 survey plan of Arbremont at the time it was purchased shows many of the landscape features we enjoy today. Noted in this plans were: the rose garden, the pixie terrace, the lunar lawn and rhododendron walks, the elm trees along the house, the woodland walk, a gazebo, a formal fish pond, a walled entry motor court, a swimming pool, the greenhouses, stables, a bridle path, a Japanese garden, vistas, fenced areas for animals and roads with parking. The following plan will show these, many of which are still in use.

It is clear that Arbremont was and is an important era in the history of the Hillwood. We will further define the value Mrs. Post placed on the aesthetic features she acquired when she purchased Arbremont. Hopefully, a greater appreciation for the history of this site can be obtained and thereby reveal it's intricate past.

WILLARD GEBHART

HILLWOOD'S FIRST LANDSCAPE DESIGNER

Long before Marjorie Merriweather Post purchased Hillwood its basic garden plan had been laid down by a master garden designer. His name was Willard Gebhart, the year was 1924, and he had just graduated from the Cornell University School of Architecture. Col. and Mrs. Henry P. Erwin hired him to design and develop gardens that would embellish their new property, Arbremont. It was Gebhart's first job and the beginning of a long and successful career that would span over 65 years. Arbremont became Hillwood in 1955 when Mrs. Post purchased the property from the Erwins.

Willard Gebhart was born on March 26, 1900, in Hart, Michigan. His parents owned orchards and were prominent fruit growers. After graduation from Cornell University in 1924, Gebhart came to Washington, DC and joined the landscape firm of J. H. Small and Sons. In addition to Arbremont, other landscape projects he worked on were the Folger Shakespeare Library, the British Embassy, and Senator Guffey's residence in Georgetown.

Federal, Georgian, and colonial architecture and the formal gardens of Virginia had a strong influence on Gebhart's work. Design elements of a strong, central axis, formality in a casual garden setting, broad terraces overlooking pleasant views and easy access from house to garden became hallmarks of his style and can be seen in the Hillwood gardens today.

In 1932, Gebhart returned to Michigan where he lived and worked the rest of his life. His first project there was to design the landscape plan for the Muskegon Causeway Memorial Park. He went on to design landscapes for both commercial and residential properties not only in Michigan, but in Texas, Indiana, Pennsylvania and Florida, where he was a winter resident for many years. He traveled widely in the United States and Europe, always seeking to improve his skills. He was a member of the American Society of Landscape Architects and was considered a pioneer in his field.

Gebhart was a one-man show. He did all the design work, drawings and specifications himself. His choice of plants usually included yews, hemlocks, rhododendrons, forsythias, plums, cherries, and evergreen ground cover, choices strongly influenced by the plant varieties used in Virginia landscapes. A typical Gebhart landscape plan included: separation of the property from the street, an entrance drive with a clear arrival destination by the main entry of the house, easy access from indoors to outdoors, and a broad stone or brick terrace for outdoor living and entertaining.

The Hillwood gardens follow so closely the typical Gebhart plan that it can be safely argued that his designs for Arbremont formed the basis of the future gardens of Marjorie Merriweather Post.

Plan 1955

MARIAN CRUGER COFFIN

PIONEER WOMAN IN LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE

Marian Cruger Coffin was one of the first women to enter the field of landscape architecture in the first half of the twentieth century. She was also one of the first women to graduate from a formal university program in landscape architecture, to set up her own firm, and to join the American Society of Landscape Architects. Immensely successful, she had an enviable list of clients, including the du Ponts, the Pells, the Fricks, and Marjorie Merriweather Post and her husband E. F. Hutton.

Coffin was born in September 27, 1876, in Scarborough, New York. On her mother's side she was descended from a prominent and well-connected East Coast family, the Churches. Unfortunately, her father died of malaria when Coffin was only seven years of age, leaving her and her mother destitute. They went to live with her mother's relatives in Geneva on the shores of Lake Seneca in New York State. Coffin flourished in the warmth and security of the extended Church family, and her interest in landscape design must have been awakened by the beauty of the community's lakeside landscape and gardens.

In 1902, Coffin began her formal training in landscape architecture at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and in horticulture at the Arnold Arboretum. Her mentor at MIT, Guy Lowell, Director of the School of Architecture and designer of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, favored a geometrical basis for landscape design. This approach contrasted with the more natural style of Frederick Law Olmsted much in vogue at the time, and was to have a great influence on Coffin. She picked up many design principles from Lowell, such as the flow from house to garden, the garden as outdoor room bounded by hedges and walls, walks laid out in straight axes, statuary, fountains, sundials and pools placed at junctures as focal points. A simple rectangle is rounded off with a half-circle or ellipse.

The design elements Coffin learned at MIT, she applied to her projects, including Marjorie Merriweather Post's first Hillwood in Wheatly Hills, New York. As horticulturist as well as landscape architect, she emphasized the importance of plants in the landscape, especially trees. Since many of the estates she worked on were newly built, she planted large, mature trees to give the impression of age and permanence. She followed this practice when she landscaped the first Hillwood in 1922. Another feature Coffin often used in her designs was the grand, sweeping, circular drive from the street to the entry of the house.

Through her travels abroad, Coffin picked up some European features such as "*allées*", exemplified by the Woodland Walk and Magnolia Walk at the Hillwood Long Island. Magnolia Walk was much photographed for garden magazines, and Coffin used many professional photographers, including Mattie Edwards Hewitt, to record her work.

In 1904, after completing her studies at M.I.T. and the Arnold Arboretum, so she opened her own firm in New York City. Coffin discovered that no one would hire her because she was a woman. Her first commission was in 1906 for Mr. and Mrs. Edward Sprague in Flushing, New York, and she was accepted into the American Society of Landscape Architects that same year. By 1910, her career was launched and she was in great demand until the end of her career in 1955.

Because of the structural features of her landscape designs, Coffin is often classified as a Renaissance landscape designer. However, that is only part of the picture because, true to her training at the Arnold Arboretum, she had a profound interest in the living plants that were an integral part of her designs.

In addition to the country estates of wealthy families, Coffin had important institutional commissions such as the gardens at Winterthur from 1910 until 1955, Delaware College from 1918 until 1952, the Pavilion at Fort Ticonderoga, and Foxcroft School in Middleburg, Virginia. At the very end of her life, she was still working on Winterthur, and completed a commission for the New York Botanical Garden. She died in New Haven at her beloved home, Wendover, on February 2, 1957 at the age of 81.

Hillwood 1955 to 1973

When Mrs. Post purchased Arbremont in 1955, she set out to create a estate similar to those she previously owned. Mrs. Post change the name of the property from “Arbremont” to “Hillwood” some time in early 1956.

Arbermont, like her former home Hillwood, Long Island shared many common landscape features, but Tregaron architecturally shared even more. When you examine all three properties it is easy to find a common thread in all of them.

It is clear that Arbremont’s gardens were well established when Mrs. Post arrived. Most of our Garden refer to the Gebhart period previous to 1955 and remain as a major influence today.

The first efforts Mrs. Post applied to the grounds of Arbremont was to retain the services of Innocenti & Webel, a landscape architecture firm from Long Island, New York. It is not clear why she chose a firm from Long Island, considering she had no association with them prior to this time. Innocenti & Webel were prominent at the time and were from the same area as Hillwood, Long Island. Innocenti & Webel were famous for their work on many prominent Long Island estates. Innocenti & Webel’s main purpose here was to create better circulation routes and to design the French Garden. Several parallels with other properties can be drawn from their task. First Nancy Fleming stated in her book, *Money Mamure & Maintenance*. Marian Coffin believed that it was essential to have a winding drive, and designed one for Hillwood, Long Island. Innocenti & Webel, being designers of the same period as Marion Coffin, were taught similar design principals, which could explain why most homes of that had similar amenities.

Arbremont’s main drive was converted into a service drive and Hillwood’s new main drive was designed up and around a hilly slope. This gave the visitor a pleasant view on the approach and left some mystery to the estate not to be revealed until you were received at the “porte-cochère”. The porte-cochère, was an idea that may have come from Mrs. Post’s New York apartment where she employed a similar feature. Along the drive the visitor passed flowering trees, azaleas, rhododendrons, and formally pruned evergreens that drew you further into the garden. Because the drive was cut through a hill, a series of stone retaining walls were constructed. Cascading phlox, jasmine and cotoneaster draped the walls. Of course this was a visitor’s first impression of Hillwood, and Mrs. Post knew that it had to be perfect. After a guest arrived at the porte-cochère, a separate exit lead to the service road, which included parking and access to other areas of the estate (greenhouse, camellia house, cutting garden, staff housing, and carriage house, ...). Those areas thought important, were not part of the formal setting like the main drive.

Another task for Innocenti & Webel was the design and construction of the French garden. When Mrs. Post redesigned the house, she added the French Drawing Room, which housed 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 and eightieth French garden ornaments which were also included in the design. At one end is Diana, goddess of the hunt and at the other end 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 has direct ties again to the Hillwood, Long Island where a similar garden was designed. In both instances, Mrs. Post's bedroom looked down into the garden.

Innocenti & Webel affected major changes on the property between 1955 and 1958. Several small houses were built to house important staff members including the chauffeur's house, the head gardener's house, the curator's house and a dormitory for male staff. 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, putting green, lunar lawn beds, and front entry court. Perry Wheeler was solely responsible for the design and emplacement of the friendship walk, pet cemetery, and breakfast fountain area.

It should be noted that Mrs. Post already had the fountain for the breakfast room garden, which was previously installed, in her New York apartment. Also, the four seasons over look, which terminates the friendship walk, was previously a summerhouse in a garden space and walk that already existed. Perry Wheeler's influence can be seen through the formal gardens at Hillwood. Many of the changes he made with were mainly designing appropriate settings for objects 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. Mayida to design the Japanese garden, where an oriental garden already existed. Mayida set out to create a Japanese-style garden, that combined the American and Japanese cultures and suited the type of garden maintenance available in the U.S. What was created is now a world famous Japanese-style garden, and should be cherished as one of many truly unique garden styles displayed at Hillwood.

Several other changes occurred throughout the property between 1955 and 1973. Marble sphinxes were added to the French Garden in place of the original terra cotta sphinxes. The old sphinxes were relocated just outside the French gardens. Ivy was added to the brick walls of the house in the French garden and next to the breakfast room. The ivy is now gone. Buildings were added, such as greenhouse enlargements, the director's house, the Dacha, and extremely important to the botanical collections, the camellia house. The camellia house will be discussed in greater detail later in this report.

All in all, Mrs. Post achieved very much in a very short time. Between the years 1955 to 1958, most of what we see today was 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. Mrs. Post had great intention in renaming Arbermont, to Hillwood. As you will note in the photographs included Hillwood, Long Island was truly magical. The gardens were meticulously maintained and everything was in its proper place. It's that legacy that she continued at Hillwood, Washington DC and understandably should remain.

INNOCENTI & WEBEL

For more than 40 years, Richard K. Webel and Umberto Innocenti joined hands in a fruitful and innovative partnership to build landscapes of outstanding character and creativity throughout the United States. Their commissions included grand private estates for the wealthy and famous: E.F. Hutton, Pierre S. du Pont, Marshall Field, Nelson Doubleday, Henry Ford, Mrs. William Randolph Hearst, to name just a few. Their public projects are of astonishing range and scope and include some of the most celebrated landscapes in the country: Augusta National Golf Club in Augusta, Georgia; The Greenbrier Hotel in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia; several pavilions at the 1939 and 1964 World's Fairs in New York City; the University of South Carolina's campus in Columbia; Damrosch Park at Lincoln Center in New York City, and three of the country's most notable racetracks: Aqueduct and Belmont in New York, and Keeneland Race Course in Lexington, Kentucky. (A selected list of public and private projects is included at the end of this article).

Innocenti and Webel each brought different strengths to the operation. Webel had a Master's Degree in Landscape Architecture from Harvard University and in 1926 won a three-year fellowship to study at the American Academy in Rome. He was an expert in drawing and etching, and while in Italy traveled widely, measured gardens, and sketched as he refined his views about landscape theory and practice. His experience in Europe influenced his entire way of thinking about landscape and design.

"RKW (Richard K. Webel) had understood something that became a key ingredient in his partnership with Innocenti and in his entire approach to design: that beauty in the world could be achieved through the overlapping of a strong visual order on the ground plane with the enriching effect of living, changing, and at times uncontrolled vegetative cover. He had a simple way to characterize it".

What I saw was that if the ground plan guides one's feet and the planting leads one's eyes, the scene can be infinitely rich."

Innocenti's family owned a farm and nursery outside Florence, and when he arrived in the United States to study landscape architecture, he already had an expert knowledge of plants.

"Innocenti was one of a rare breed of professional landscape architects whose craft begins and ends in the site, rarely lingering in the design studio. It is the august and ancient tradition of garden makers, those whose handiwork raises the garden to one of our highest forms of cultural expression, that Innocenti represented in the partnership. Although his formal study of the discipline certainly informed his every day work, it was his love of plants and his intimate knowledge of plant culture and practice that motivated him."

Innocenti and Webel met in New York, where both had been hired to work at the firm of Vitale & Gieffert. The company was hit hard by the Depression and closed its doors in 1931. Innocenti and Webel formed a partnership and offered to complete one of the firm's unfinished projects on Long Island: a waterfront estate in Bayshore for investor Landon Ketchum Thorne. Other commissions soon followed, including Long Island estates for Evelyn Marshall Field, Mrs. William Randolph Hearst, and many others. The firm shortly became recognized for its practice of installing massive trees that gave their gardens instant depth and presence.

"Although more modest in scale than some of its grand North Shore predecessors by the Olmsted Brothers. The Field residence was nonetheless a testing ground for the ideas and practices for which the firm would come to be known. Though decisions about architectural character and organization were often somewhat conventional in these country houses, the landscape architects could build on the unique character of the site and establish a sense of permanence in the setting. So at Marshall Field, Webel set about solving the functional organization of the property, reshaping the land to great advantage, and installing a landscape of sizable, almost mature stature."

As the reputation of Innocenti & Webel grew, they began receiving commercial commissions. They designed landscapes for the Italian and Netherlands pavilions at the 1939 World's Fair in New York, the Greenbrier Hotel in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia, Furman University near Greenville, South Carolina, the National Zoological Park in Washington, D.C.

Throughout their long years together, Innocenti and Webel were remarkably uniform in their approach to design and in the way they worked.

"While the evolution of project types themselves points out the magnitude of change that occurred in the twentieth century - from immense gardens on large private holdings in the 1930s to early exurban corporate campuses, to wholly new suburban colleges and universities, land subdivisions, exclusive residential communities, and conservation land trusts in more recent years -- there are patterns of consistency in Innocenti & Webel's work that are exceptional. Within each of these project types we find the persistence of a strong formal order, a uniformly dense deciduous canopy of mature and well-bred leafy aristocrats, roads that fit, spaces well bounded, and architecture in reciprocal dialogue with landscape. What has made this so is the continuity of the firm's ways and practices, even against the weight and pressure of change."

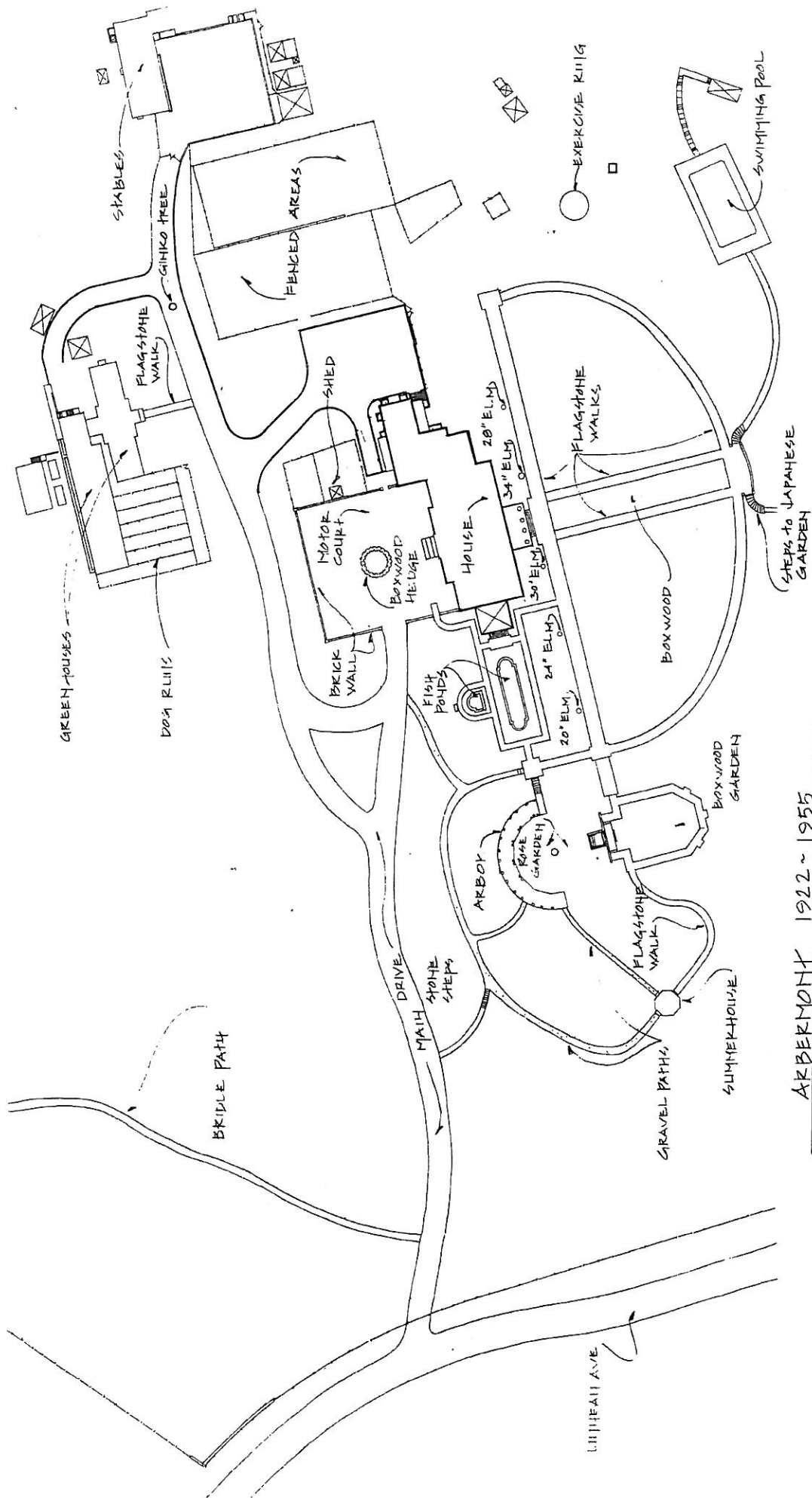
It is not known precisely how Mrs. Post came to select Innocenti & Webel for her project at Hillwood, but their firm was based on Long Island, where she had an estate until the late 50's, and they had designed many projects for clients of her same social class and financial status.

Innocenti passed away in 1968; Webel continued designing until he retired in 1995 at age 95. The firm is now owned by his son, Richard C. Webel.

PERRY WHEELER

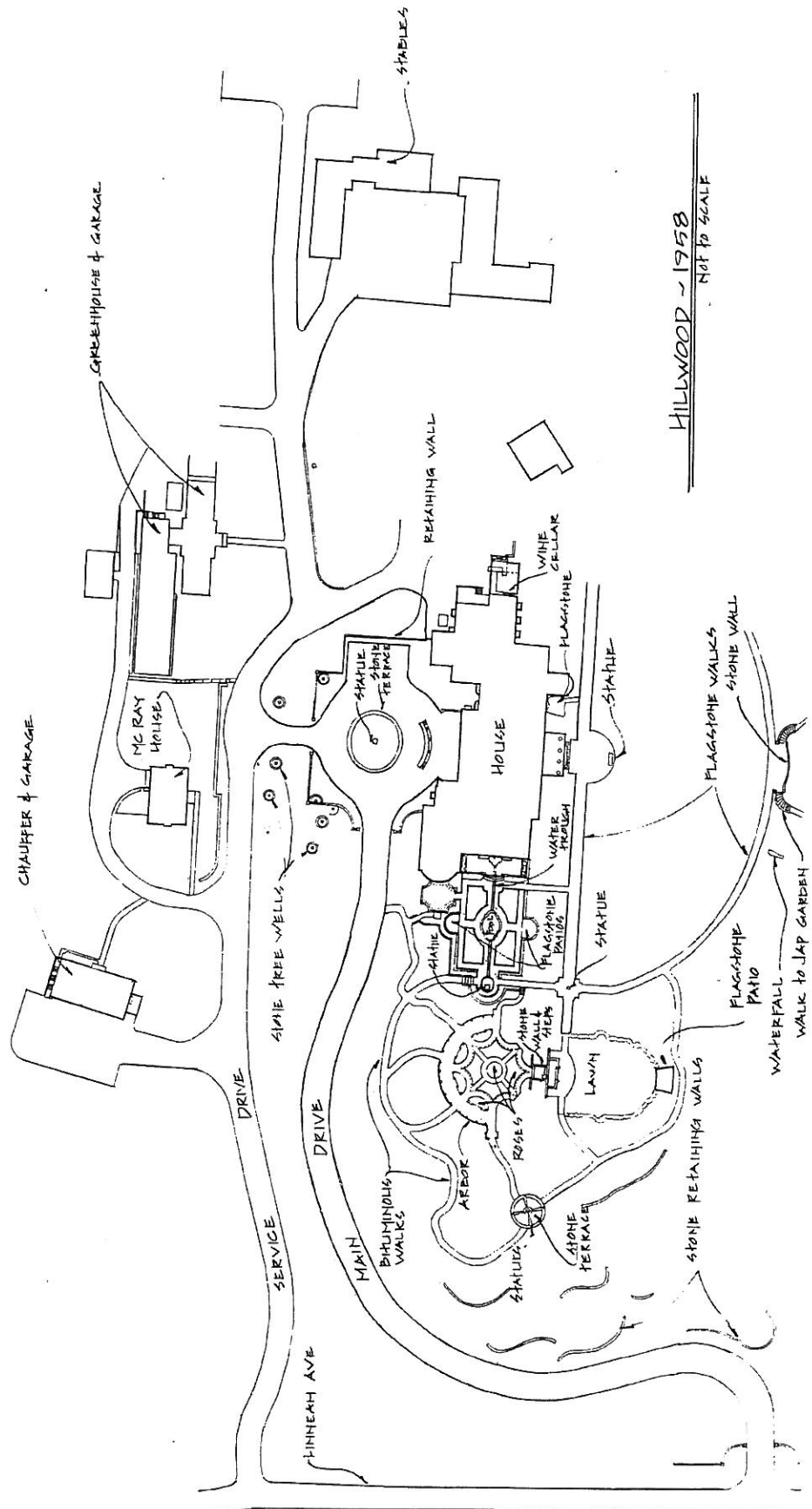
Perry Wheeler was born in Georgia around the beginning of World War I, the son of a farmer. In the 1930's he attended Emory University in Atlanta, earned a BA in Landscape Architecture from the University of Georgia in Athens, and then pursued graduate work at Harvard University's School of Landscape Architecture.

He came to Washington D.C. during World War II, where he served in the OSS (The Office of Strategic Services) as a cartographer and camouflage planner, and settled in Georgetown after the war was over. The post-war revival of Georgetown and Wheeler's work there for private clients soon made him one of city's most sought after landscape designers. At Hillwood, he made suggestions for planting and embellishments to existing designs in the "Porte Cochère" area, the Rose Garden, and the Lunar Lawn. He later designed the Pet Cemetery for Mrs. Post, and also the Friendship Walk donated by some of her closest friends.



ARBERMONT 1922 ~ 1955

NOT TO SCALE



HILLWOOD ~ 1958
NOT TO SCALE