

George Dorr's Vision for "Garden Approaches" to Acadia National Park

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Nearly ninety years ago, the Founder of Acadia National Park, George Bucknam Dorr (1853-1944), published a plan for developing "Garden Approaches to the National Monument." This little known essay is one of several that develop the Acadian plant sanctuary theme wherein Mr. Dorr argued for permanent exhibits of hardy plants in the form of "garden walks" extending from the park toward Bar Harbor. This article will look at two key expressions of Dorr's approach to gardens as interfaces between natural and cultural habitats: the gardens at his home and the Wild Gardens of Acadia.

Dorr is well known as a trail builder who laid out pathways to previously hidden sanctuaries. He established the Jesup Path, the Wild Garden Path, and the Cadillac Path to connect Bar Harbor to botanically interesting areas. The gardens he envisioned are a blend of nature's unpredictability and the human desire to impose order. From the time that he was 25 years of age, Mount Desert Island was Dorr's home, and the two garden projects considered here were one developmental element in his complex array of strategies to conserve the matchless grandeur of the island.

The Gardens at Old Farm

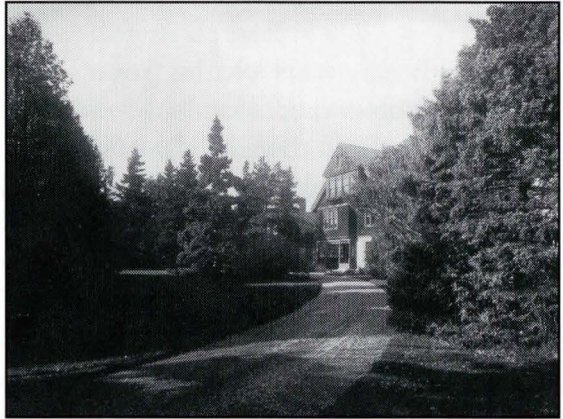
In late 19th-century New England, dependence on the land for subsistence was still an imperative. However, for the wealthy who summered on this island, gardens were not designed to meet the nutritional needs of the household. Instead, statuary, fountains, stonework, and water features were incorporated into increasingly elaborate gardens that symbolized the status of the owner. The garden concepts of the park founder, however, were tempered and framed by his family experience in Massachusetts.

The importance of household gardens is repeatedly expressed in the surviving manuscripts of Dorr's maternal grandfather, Thomas Wren Ward (1786-1858), whose Canton (MA) farm featured "a garden of an acre prepared for fruits and flowers."¹ Dorr's maternal uncle, Samuel Gray Ward (1817-1907), a financier of great renown, "had a passion for gardening and manfully ploughed and planted in the beautiful surroundings of Lenox," a simple Berkshire village that Dorr frequented as a youngster.²

Following his father's 1868 purchase of more than a hundred acres of Compass Cove real estate, George Dorr and his parents began a decade of travel abroad interrupted by the death of his sole sibling, his elder brother William. In part to offset this loss, the Dorr's travels were protracted and centered on visits to a great variety of European gardens. The *George Bucknam Dorr Papers* at the Bar Harbor Historical Society Museum contain more than a dozen essays that detail their visits to both modest and grand European gardens and his subsequent historic research into their origins. Dorr was more impressed with the simple gardens of both English and American cottagers. The reason for his preference is unambiguous: because their modest efforts brought beauty into the monotony of their lives.

Historically, the maternal side of his family was beset with *furor hortensis* – the term used by English gentry to indicate a passion for gardening. "The site my mother, father, and I . . . chose for the Oldfarm house in the fall of 1878, was the broad, flat top of an old sea-cliff, facing north to the Gouldsboro Hills across the long reach of Upper Frenchmans Bay."³ The Main Street property faces east toward Compass Harbor just north of Schooner Head Road. Following the 1880 completion of Old Farm, Mary Gray Ward Dorr (1820-1901) and her son George acquired local plant stock and also transplanted their Massachusetts hardy flowering shrubs and herbaceous plants to Mount Desert Island, experimenting to determine whether they would adapt to local conditions. Over the next two decades the Old Farm guest book reveals entries from friends and celebrities commenting on the beauty of the grounds.

The *Bar Harbor Record* characterized Old Farm as “one of the most attractive showplaces of the village.”⁴ Following Dorr’s death in 1944, Park Superintendent Ben Hadley would describe this late 19th-century garden as “among the most extensive and best kept” in Bar Harbor.⁵ That this garden was well maintained for at least half a century we learn from a lengthy *Bar Harbor Times* article of 1928 on Old Farm which characterized the plantings as an “old fashioned garden by the sea,” containing sufficient plant diversity as “to fit the taste of any flower lover.”⁶ Nonetheless, it is puzzling – and perhaps an indication



The House at Old Farm, Bar Harbor, c. 1916

that the gardens were in decline – that the Old Farm gardens were not included in the three days of MDI garden tours organized for the highly celebrated 1934 annual meeting of the Garden Club of America.⁷

Unfortunately, documentation of plant location at Old Farm is almost entirely lacking. We know that a rose garden lay to the northeast of Dorr’s home, screened by the rock ridge to the east that ran down to Compass Harbor. Cedar hedges enclosed garden paths that led visitors to huge vegetable gardens intermingled with flowers and fruit trees. Of lasting historical significance are the impressive Old Farm photographic images taken by Herbert Wendell Gleason, one of the foremost New England landscape photographers of his day, who documented the early 20th-century botany of the island.⁸

Dorr repeatedly and unequivocally states that the origins of Acadia National Park are to be found at Old Farm. “It was the wonderful beauty of the flowers that grew so naturally and simply in my mother’s garden by the sea at Oldfarm that, more than aught else, led me along

the way, step by step and all unconscious of the greater goal to which it would lead me, to the founding of Acadia National Park.”⁹ This claim is no gratuitous figure of speech. Dorr envisioned what could be realized on a grand scale throughout the island based on what had been achieved at Old Farm. However, nowhere does Dorr envision the entire island transformed into a sanctuary.

Nearly sixty years after his parents purchased Old Farm, George Dorr gave public expression to a series of arguments for conserving this property. Both the Coolidge and Roosevelt administrations were offered the property as a summer White House, in part to enlarge public awareness of the charms of the property and ensure its survival beyond Dorr’s lifetime. The elderly – and now nearly blind – park founder argued eloquently and incessantly that Old Farm should be incorporated into the Park. By implication, his family property and its gardens could easily be enjoyed by Bar Harbor residents. In 1942, the government accepted the property, two years prior to Dorr’s death.

Immediately following the end of WWII, the park service questioned the value of Old Farm. Following extensive administrative review, the decision was reached that the operational expenses associated with preserving and maintaining Old Farm for public use were too heavy for the park service to bear.¹⁰ The Dorr home was razed, the grounds became overgrown through neglect, park service public information about the property was reduced to a minimum, no signage was evident identifying the property, and for the last sixty years only the most knowledgeable local residents have made use of it as a place of historic repose. Some current residents still regard the razing of Dorr’s home and longstanding government neglect of this historic property as shameful. No gardens survive.

The Wild Gardens of Acadia

Since 1961, the phrase “The Wild Gardens of Acadia” (WGA) has been identified with the thriving public garden containing more than 500 native species situated adjacent to the Sieur de Monts Springhouse. Thanks to an offer from then Park Superintendent Harold Huber, this

public garden was established by the wild gardens committee of the Bar Harbor Garden Club. Volunteers still maintain plant communities that replicate native species found in similar habitats throughout the park. Visitors delight in experiencing the botanical diversity of the park within a three-quarter acre plot of land. However, Dorr's original concept of the "Wild Gardens of Acadia" was far broader in scope and found its origins in a different time and place.

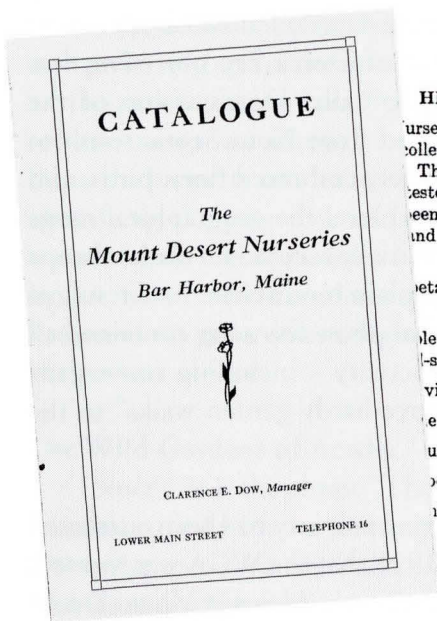
The year 1901 is the historic benchmark for an organized island-wide effort to conserve Mount Desert Island. Harvard University President Charles Eliot called together a group of conservation-minded MDI residents to establish the Hancock County Trustees of Public Reservations (HCTPR). Over the next fifteen years, Dorr was the HCTPR executive officer who negotiated the acquisition of more than 5,000 acres of land. As Dorr recounts in *The Story of Acadia National Park*, achieving National Monument status (in 1916) was critical to realizing national park status. In order to achieve full status as a National Park, several initiatives were undertaken to ensure that the natural environment would be handed down to future generations in a non-degraded state.¹¹

As monument "custodian," one of Dorr's key objectives was to expand public awareness. Conceptually, Dorr's vision of the geography of the "wild gardens" ranged from Nova Scotia south to the Penobscot Bay, and its natural variety embraced flora, birds, and other wildlife. However, at a practical level the geographical range was limited to Hancock County and initially focused on the landscape between present-day Dorr and Champlain mountains. As a result of close analysis, Dorr was convinced that these few acres contained all the requisite elements for a plant sanctuary – including convenient access. To that end he developed "three hardy garden walks" to the area from Bar Harbor.

Although the Sieur de Monts Spring property had been purchased in 1908, it was not until December 1916 that the WGA was formed. Composed of leading summer and permanent residents of Mount Desert



George B. Dorr with Dr. and Mrs. Drury at Sieur de Monts



HERBACEOUS PEONIES.

Nurseries for many years have made a specialty of the Her-
 collection of these today comprises the best varieties ob-
 The numerous named varieties introduced from year to
 tested by them, and those alone which have shown some
 been retained. These and the best of the older kinds are
 and new—which actual trial has proved the most desirable

petals, lemon center, a strong grower, pleasantly scented,

le garnet, large, fairly compact flowers, fragrant, growing
 l-season.

violet, large flower and fine shape, medium height, late.
 e flower; delicate rose color, deeper on the under side.
 used with yellow, large and late.

od late bloomer.

ite petals, pale yellow crown, fragrant, tall; a grand

Island, its purpose was to develop a seacoast national park that would not only conserve Acadian flora and fauna but provide “an opportunity for observation, by students, architects, gardeners, and planters, of our native plants growing under natural conditions in a beautiful and uniquely various setting.”¹²

Dorr’s plans for the WGA were much more ambitious than what the organization could realize within the emerging structures of the new National Park Service (established in 1916). For example, the WGA aimed at an ever expanding collection of trees, plants, shrubs, and flowers drawn from near and afar “through costly expeditions sent to far off lands.” Due to a lack of sponsorship, these botanical expeditions were not realized. However, the *Dorr Papers* contain scores of detailed descriptions of successful propagation of native and non-native plant species. As a student of horticulture, Dorr’s experience taught him that gardens of native species attract interest as much as hybrid gardens which also include non-native species. It is likely that hybridization experimentation was carried out by staff at The Mount Desert Nurseries, a commercial enterprise that Dorr established in 1896. For nearly fifty years it would provide most island residents with the plant materials necessary for their gardening and landscaping needs.

Dorr was not able to develop the specific wild sanctuary we visit today because he could not secure sufficient endowments to generate the return required. Instead, the WGA functioned as an umbrella organization which acquired land, developed horticultural communities, and preserved the island scenery.

Ten brief publications celebrating the natural landscape of the island were sponsored by the WGA and form part of the twenty-three *Sieur de Monts Publications* which were published between 1916 and 1919.¹³ These widely circulated pamphlets were educational tools that provided the public with the cultural, historic, and scientific rationale for conserving even more of the available island. Authored by Dorr and other researchers, three of the publications are horticultural essays that emphasize the distinctiveness of Acadian

botanical specimens. Unfortunately, it is difficult to gauge the success of these publications.¹⁴

If gardening is the effort to produce organic beauty, “to compose an organic whole with a number of related parts,” then Mr. Dorr’s gardens exemplify this definition.¹⁵ The Old Farm estate and his diverse efforts with the Wild Gardens of Acadia provide the evidence. For a fuller view of Dorr’s horticultural interests we would need to examine his contributions to the Bar Harbor Village Improvement Society, the development and impressive growth of his Mount Desert Nurseries, and his intriguing relationship with landscape gardener Beatrix Farrand.

Ronald Epp is writing a biography of George Bucknam Dorr, the first such effort to document his historical significance as a conservationist. Dr. Epp is currently Director of the University Library, Southern New Hampshire University.



ENDNOTES

¹ Thomas Wren Ward to John Ward, 18 July 1854, *Thomas Wren Ward Papers*, Massachusetts Historical Society. B1, f. 15.

² Edward Waldo Emerson. *Eighty Years of the Saturday Club: 1855-1870*. (1918), 108-16.

³ *George Bucknam Dorr Papers*. B1. f. 14. Dorr often used “Oldfarm” rather than “Old Farm.”

⁴ May 8, 1901.

⁵ Acadia National Park, Sawtelle Research Center. *History of Park Management Records*. B2. f.1. Letter to R. W. Shankland. March 30, 1949.

⁶ “The Garden at Oldfarm Manor,” *Bar Harbor Times*. April 18, 1928.

⁷ *Bulletin of the Garden Club of America* 11 (Sept. 1934): 2-40.

⁸ The Gleason photographs are included in a digitized collection of several hundred black and white images of common and rare indigenous plants recently made accessible at the Acadia National Park Sawtelle Research Center.

⁹ *George Bucknam Dorr Papers*. B2. f. 6.

¹⁰ Curator Office Files ("Oldfarm"), Acadia National Park Sawtelle Research Center.

¹¹ Dorr was likely familiar with Edward L. Rand and John H. Redfield's first systematic study of the *Flora of Mount Desert Maine* (1894). See also Barrington Moore & Norman Taylor's *Vegetation of Mount Desert Island, Maine, and its Environment* (1927).

¹² "Wild Gardens of Acadia: Statement of Aims and Purposes." Rockefeller Archive Center. *Rockefeller Family Papers*. III. 2. I. B98, f. 969.

¹³ "Garden Approaches to the National Monument" is number XVII in this series.

¹⁴ Thomas W. Ward (a cousin of George Dorr, and not to be confused with his grandfather) pens a September 30, 1917 letter of appreciation to his cousin for the "beautifully printed and illustrated *Sieur de Monts* publication." The specific influence is clear when Ward writes that he wishes he "had known of [the publication] while on Mt. Desert as it would have spurred me to explore more in detail the northern trails from the Bar Harbor side that I have missed." *Thomas Wren Ward Papers*, Massachusetts Historical Society. B8, f. 5.

¹⁵ Mariana G. van Rensselaer, "Landscape Gardening: A Definition," *Garden & Forest* 1 (Feb. 29, 1888).