



The Sunken Garden

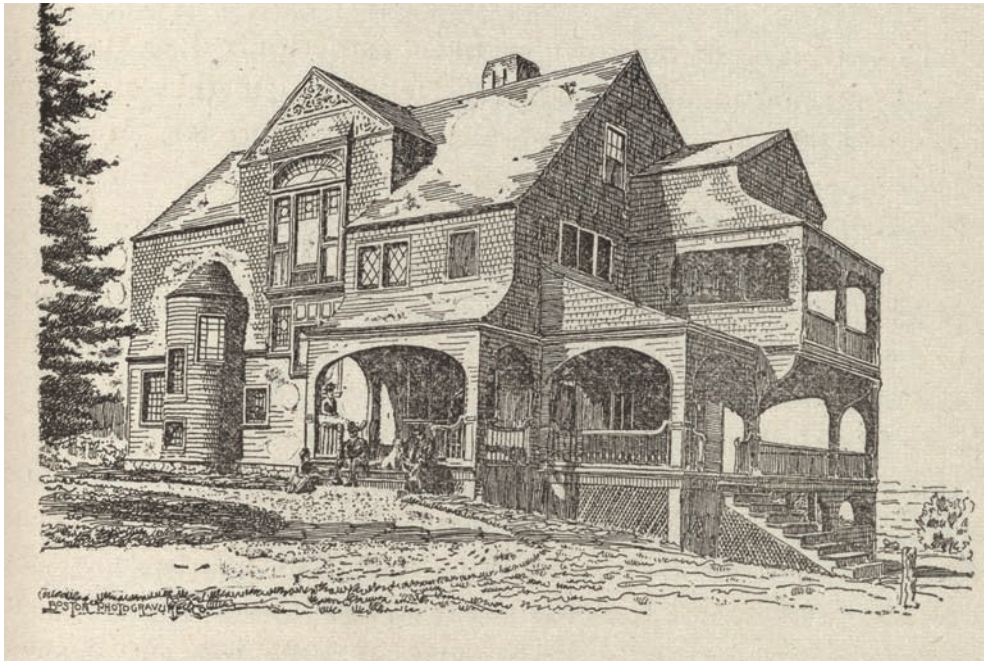
By Hannah Stevens

Situated just off the pathway connecting The Turrets to Deering Common Community Center at College of the Atlantic is a newly repaired stone archway leading into the Sunken Garden. Looking around, there is evidence of some maintenance: a plastic tarp held down by rocks covering a flower bed, brick pathways cleared of weeds and debris, recent plantings (flourishing),¹ and pieces of broken stonework laid out like puzzle pieces awaiting placement. Nevertheless, there is clearly a lack of upkeep and a wildness to this space. Though it is a small space, it holds great historical significance for the college.

Soon after I began working as the College Archivist, I received an inquiry from one very passionate student about the history of the Sunken Garden. I quickly learned that this garden has sparked interest in the institution's landscape history and captivated the imaginations of students and community members for decades. Since the mid-1950s, when the estate that the garden sits on was sold, there have been years of neglect bookended by times of resurgent interest, as enthusiastic students work to bring order to the space. In the forty-five years College of the Atlantic has been operating, four students worked to revitalize the Sunken Garden while dozens of others have enjoyed



Aerial photograph of The Turrets (center) and the Sunken Garden (lower right). Photographer unknown, ca. 1950.
Courtesy of College of the Atlantic Archives Photograph Collection



Sketch of The Moorings,
Sherman's Bar Harbor
Guide, 1890. Courtesy of
New York Public Library

studying and sitting amongst the plants, trees, and stonework. As Suzanne Morse, Faculty in Botany and Agroecology, wrote, 'It is a secret place in plain view ... Over the years, the garden has taunted the desire to make botanical order, perhaps touching on a desire to recreate the Edens of our mind. Plans are made and implemented. Over time, the garden settles back into disarray and once more is a place of surprise and discovery.'² However, the roots of the Sunken Garden take us back to 1895, some seventy years before the college was established.

The Sunken Garden's origin is linked to The Turrets, a grand summer cottage, which was built in 1895 for John J. Emery (a candle manufacturing magnate from Ohio) by architect Bruce Price (a distinguished architect, known for designing the Château Frontenac in Quebec City). The Turrets was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1974. Today, the building and the two surrounding

gardens, the Sunken Garden and The Turrets Seaside Garden, comprise the historic district of the college. Although much of the campus holds historic value as an amalgamation of properties developed in the 1800s by the wealthy cottagers who summered on Mount Desert Island, The Turrets is the only officially recognized historic section. Just to the south of The Turrets, on a very narrow plot, stood a summer cottage called The Moorings. The Moorings was built in 1885 by Burnham & Root of Chicago,³ and stood until about 1907, when John and Lela Emery purchased the cottage, and then demolished it, leaving only the foundation.⁴ It was in this foundation that an Italian garden was envisioned, a garden we now know as the Sunken

Garden. It is unclear who actually planted the garden, but its importance to the story of The Turrets is apparent.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, there was a trend among the wealthy cottagers on Mount Desert Island to create elaborate, formal Italian gardens. Several gardens on Mount Desert Island reveal a distinct European design, including Kenarden Lodge, Blair Eyrie, and Anne Archbold's Villa. Complete with symmetrical stone pathways, fountains, hedges, geometrical garden beds, and beautifully manicured green plants rather than colorful flowers, these gardens were designed to broadcast one's social status.⁵ Lela Emery was not unaffected by this Italian influence and had the Sunken Garden designed and built in the foundation of the former Moorings Cottage. Local cement artists, C. H. Norris and W. J. Richards were hired in 1910 to do the structural work. In their shop on Glen Mary Street in Bar Harbor, they molded and created pieces to construct "a concrete wall, with piers railings, a wide round arch entrance, paneled walls, two seats, and two hundred feet of balustrade with two hundred posts, all in handsome cement and concrete."⁶ Few of the balustrades still stand; many have been broken off of their cement bases and are now resting at the far end of the garden. Much of the stonework has been modified, repaired, or left to the elements.

The following twenty years are largely undocumented. John Emery died in 1908, but Lela Emery continued to live in The Turrets during the summers. She married Captain Alfred Anson in

1912, and they continued to reside at the estate with her children. After Captain Anson's death in 1953, The Turrets estate was sold to the Oblate Fathers of Mary Immaculate, and eventually the building and gardens fell into disrepair.

Between 1940 and 1950, Ken Riddell was a young boy living at The Turrets. His father, John 'Jock' Riddell, a master gardener trained at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh in Scotland, was The Turrets estate gardener.⁷ This was of course a fitting circumstance given the European influence of the garden's conception. In two phone interviews in July and August of 2017, Ken Riddell recalled the Sunken Garden, which he referred to as the Snapdragon Garden because it was then planted with many varieties of colorful snapdragons. His memories of the place are murky, but he spoke of a very pristine, quiet, private estate garden, rarely used by Lela Anson, who preferred to remain inside. Riddell remembered his father enlisting his and his brothers' help weeding the gardens and trimming the trees, but that was the only time they ever spent in the garden. One can imagine that a pristine, ornate, quiet garden is not ideal for young boys to run amok, especially the sons of the hired help.

Since Riddell was living at The Turrets, much has changed. When the college leased the property in 1969, The Turrets and the surrounding gardens were in ruin. They had been virtually abandoned by the Oblate Fathers of Mary Immaculate who had developed other areas of the property that College of the Atlantic now occupies. In her 1980 senior thesis, Claire Verdier writes that when Millard Dority, Director of Campus Planning, Buildings and Public Safety at College of the Atlantic, first began clearing the area, it was so overgrown that the garden was not visible.⁸ Verdier weeded the paths of the Sunken Garden a year before she began her senior project, reconstructing what she called The Turrets Formal Garden, with plants based on the



The stone archway leading into the Sunken Garden.
*Tom Leonard/House &
Garden 1948 (c) Conde Nast*



environmental conditions rather than the historical context. Verdier writes about weeding, planting, prepping beds for the various seasons, making tiles to line the rim of the fountain basin, growing plants, and developing a care and maintenance plan for the garden. In her concluding paragraphs, she mentions the work of her peers in repointing the stone pillars, building a stone arch, and constructing wooden trellises. Verdier envisioned her senior project, a complete restoration of the Sunken Garden, as a springboard for a continued resurgence of this space. Each garden bed could represent a specific time period (perhaps as an homage to the campus's historic past, though she does not elaborate on this point), the fountain

plumbing could be fixed, and the masonry repaired. John Anderson, Faculty in Zoology, Ecology, and Animal Behavior, recalls the time in the late 1990s when his children were old enough to walk around campus by themselves. They discovered the Sunken Garden, calling it the Secret Garden, an homage to Frances Hodgson Burnett's book of the same name. The garden in its state of ruin brought about "mystery and wonder that are essential to the development of a child's imagination."⁹ From John's brief description of the garden, it would seem Verdier's vision was, much like the garden itself, abandoned. Perhaps the efforts of the small buildings and grounds staff were better focused on maintaining spaces utilized for teaching and living.

In 2009, two determined seniors, Dakota Strassner and Timothy Brubaker, developed a plan to repair the stonework and re-plant the flower beds. They rebuilt the retaining wall out of repurposed

stone collected from one trustee's home and from spaces around campus. Plants were removed, beds de-rooted and fertilized, and new plants were ordered and planted according to a planting schedule developed by Strassner and Brubaker. Unfortunately, just as the garden fell back into disrepair after Lela Anson vacated The Turrets and after Verdier's work in 1980, so it did after Strassner and Brubaker graduated in 2009. Matt Shaw, a 2010 graduate, commented on that very fact: "Unfortunately, it has always seemed like a perennially incomplete senior project. More, I wish there was a plan or a dedicated group to maintain this most special garden."¹⁰ Though this cycle of neglect and resurgence is dispiriting, it does speak to the intergenerational interest in the relationship between humans and natural landscape.

Yaniv Korman, class of 2018, has a plan to break the cycle and put a new spin on the garden. He is working on making this neglected space into an edible garden filled with native plants. His ultimate goal is to create a sustainable, low-maintenance garden that is aligned with the mission of the college and that will function as an educational space, while also providing sustenance to people and to wildlife. He has developed a five-year plan and hopes that the garden will need minimal maintenance, an important development given fluctuating maintenance commitments, and that the garden will be able to remain a space where students can learn, practice, and visit.

Perhaps Korman has discovered the key to getting College of the Atlantic to commit to this garden: utilize it as an educational tool. On paper, this seems a perfect fit—College of the Atlantic has an entire academic area focused on farming and food systems. The Sunken Garden could be an experiential classroom, a space for students to practice their horticultural skills, a garden that provides food to

wildlife and maybe even to the college. After all, part of the college's mission is to improve the connection between people and the natural environment.

The future of the Sunken Garden may seem easy to predict based on the evidence presented here: when the spark of enthusiasm for reviving a neglected space flares up again, the garden will be the center of attention, only to be reclaimed by nature in the following years. But history has also shown us how the perseverance and dedication of even a few driven people can eventually realize change. Korman's gusto, and his dedication to this project of building a sustainable garden, may be the end of this pattern. Whatever the case, it would seem that the Sunken Garden will continue to captivate and challenge students while remaining part of the campus story.

Hannah Stevens graduated in 2009 from College of the Atlantic with a BA in Human Ecology. In 2012, she earned her MA in Library Science from Simmons College with a focus on preservation management. From 2012–2016 she worked as archivist at the Northeast Harbor Library, and in December of 2016 she began as the archivist at College of the Atlantic.

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1. American cranberrybush, alternate-leaved dogwood, highbush blueberry, and black chokeberry.
 2. Suzanne Morse, email message to the author, July 31, 2017.
 3. John M. Bryan, *Maine Cottages: Fred L. Savage and the Architecture of Mount Desert* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2006), 279.
 4. "Around Town," *Bar Harbor Times*, November 28, 1906.
 5. Lydia B. Vandenberg, *Bar Harbor's Gilded Century: Opulence to Ashes 1850-1950* (Camden, ME: Down East Books, 2009), 73.
 6. "Handsome Garden Work," *Bar Harbor Times*, March 30, 1910.
 7. John Anderson, email message to the author, July 12, 2017.
 8. Claire Verdier, "The Reconstruction of Turrets Formal Garden" (senior thesis, College of the Atlantic, Spring 1980), 17.
 9. Ken Riddell, phone interviews, July and August, 2017.
 10. Matt Shaw, email message to the author, July 12, 2017.