

Naumkeag's Landscape: A Vision & A View

A Masterful Collaboration between an Artist and His Patron

The gardens at Naumkeag represent a unique collaboration between an artist and his patron over a more than 30 year time period from 1926-1958. Mr. Fletcher Steele and Miss Mabel Choate built on the ideas of Nathan Barrett to create a landscape of singular vision. They added to and modified the solid base of Nathan Barrett's design to bring modern design sensibilities to a home with Victorian style. They created "outdoor rooms" in the true Modernist style for both aesthetic and functional purposes, and they subdivided the panoramic view of the Berkshires into a series of magnificent discrete views framed by landscape and plant materials. Fletcher Steele and Miss Choate enjoyed experimenting in the gardens to find just the right combination of color and form - from the paint on the Blue Steps and the purple iron fence at the Rose Garden to the selection of coal and colored gravels as mulching material and a vast array of ornamental groundcovers. Unique materials and unique combinations of materials helped them to create a landscape of unsurpassed beauty and functionality. Due to the forethought of both Mr. Steele and Miss Choate, the landscape is preserved today. Upon her death in 1958, Miss Choate bequeathed her estate to the Trustees of Reservations with an endowment for the upkeep of both the house and grounds. The Trustees have held the property since that time and have enjoyed fulfilling Miss Choate's dream of opening her house and gardens to the public as one representation of life in the Berkshires from the late 1800s to the 1950s.



The Garden Entrance and Pyramid Steps

The Garden Entrance and Pyramid Steps were two of the first elements added to the grounds by Fletcher Steele in 1928. Climbing Hydrangea surrounds the gate, and Pachysandra covers the ground at the entrance. Miss Choate experimented widely with both vines and ornamental ground covers.



The Afternoon Garden

The Afternoon Garden was the first of a long series of gardens designed by Fletcher Steele for Miss Mabel Choate. He designed the garden, in 1926, as an “outdoor room” like the ones Miss Choate had seen on a recent trip to California. The garden represents a blending of the Victorian style of the house with a garden of Modern sensibilities.



The Top Lawn and Perugino View

The Top Lawn serves as an extension of the house towards a dramatic view to the West. The Great Seat provides a comfortable place to sit and enjoy the view with espalier Apple Trees in the foreground. Fletcher Steele used Umbrella Magnolia, Devil's Walking Stick, Russian Olive, and Globe Arborvitae to create a Mediterranean feeling in the Top Lawn.

The Perugino View is named for the Italian Renaissance painter, Pietro Perugino. He was known for his landscape paintings and his use of trees in the foreground to frame views. Fletcher Steele is known for the same technique translated into landscape architecture.



The Great Seat was built in 1932. Miss Mabel Choate's guests enjoyed the seat with a cool drink to watch the sunset.



The Perugino View was constructed at the same time as the Great Seat. The 'outcrop' in the middle ground is actually constructed from pieces of marble and is designed to perfectly reflect the shape of the notch at the top of Monument Mountain. In the fall of 1931 mature Elm trees were transplanted to the Top Lawn. They died of Dutch Elm disease in the early 1960s.



This espalier Apple tree was planted in 1934. An Elm stands in the background.

The South Lawn

Fletcher Steele created the South Lawn by grading several dumptruck loads of dirt that Miss Choate acquired by making a deal with a series of trucks passing her as she walked up the hill from town. They asked for 50 cents per load, and Miss Choate bought all of it. The dirt piles sat on the lawn for 2 years before Fletcher Steele and Miss Choate had time to use it, but the end results were worth the wait. The resulting lawn represents one of the first and largest earthworks projects for purely aesthetic purposes.



Fletcher Steele graded the South Lawn to reflect the curvature of the mountains in the distance (see historic photograph below). He also directed tree climbers by way of a temporary phone line from the Afternoon Garden to trim the trees to the South to perfectly reflect the same curve. He brought distant landscape features into the gardens with great care.



The Oak Lawn



Picnics under this 300+ year old oak tree convinced the Choates to purchase the property for Naumkeag in 1884. The tree stands on the lawn today, protected by lightning rods.



The Runnel

The Runnel carries water from the Afternoon Garden to the top of and down the Blue Steps. From there, the water was used to irrigate the apple orchard and to water the cows.



Rond Pointe and the Linden Walk

Rond Pointe is a gathering of paths that Fletcher Steele designed to unify the Linden Walk with Wooded Walk and the South Lawn. The Pagoda covers the Philosopher's Stone, which Miss Choate sent back from her travels to China.



The Blue Steps

Fletcher Steele designed the Blue Steps at the peak of Art Deco in 1938. The steps provided a comfortable way for Miss Choate to get down hill to her cutting garden.

They are now one of the most famous and photographed sets of stairs in the United States.



The Peony Terrace



The Tree Peony Terrace includes 60 varieties of Chinese and Japanese peonies. Fletcher Steele designed the rock terraces to diminish the steep slope down from the Top Lawn.

The peonies bloom in mid May.

The Rose Garden

Fletcher Steele designed the Rose Garden in 1953 to be viewed from Miss Choate's bedroom. The pink gravel strips seem to radiate from the house.



The Evergreen Garden



The Evergreen Garden was originally designed by Nathan Barrett in 1890. It was then altered by Fletcher Steele in the 1940s. In 2004, the garden was restored to reflect the changes made by Fletcher Steele.

The Summer House (at right) doubled as the Choate Family ice house.



The Chinese Garden

Miss Choate traveled to Asia in 1935. She spent more than a month there, visiting gardens and purchasing garden ornaments. When she returned from the trip, Fletcher Steele and Ralph Adams Cram (an architect friend of Steele's) convinced her that she needed a new garden to house all of her Korean, Chinese, and Japanese ornaments. The Chinese Garden and Temple were then constructed.



The Moon Gate was added to the Chinese Garden in 1956. It is said to bring good luck to all who pass through.



Aerial Photograph - 1957

Pleased with the completion of the gardens at Naumkeag, Miss Mabel Choate paid for aerial photography of the grounds in 1957. She died at the age of 88 in 1958. Upon her death, Miss Choate bequeathed Naumkeag to the Trustees of Reservations. The house and grounds are preserved today and open for public enjoyment and recreation.



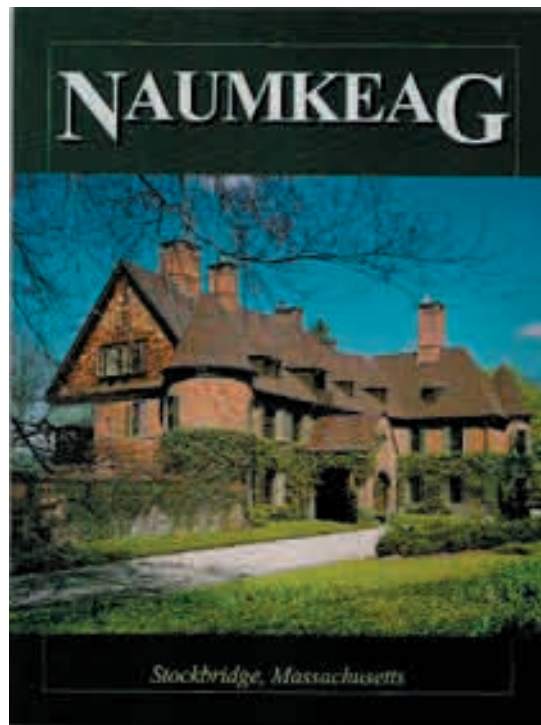
This tour was created by Reid W. Bertone-Johnson during his internship at Naumkeag in the summer of 2004. Reid is a graduate student of Landscape Architecture at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. Funds from the Jeannine Rioux Memorial Fund supported his work.

For more information contact the Trustees of Reservations:

Western Regional Office
The Mission House
1 Sergeant Street
P.O. Box 792
Stockbridge, MA 01262

westregion@ttor.org

Suggested Reading:



“Naumkeag” - A guide book available through the Trustees of Reservations Western Regional Office,
bdowling@ttor.org

Fletcher Steele, Landscape Architect: An Account of the Gardener's Life, 1885-1971, by Robin Karson, Library of American Landscape History, Amherst, MA, distributed by University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst & Boston, 2003.

- Available at the Naumkeag Gift Shop and Anywhere Great Books are Sold.

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