

Tales from the Greenhouse, #6

History Through a Horticultural Lens

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The Story Behind The Story

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Whenever visiting a historic building or garden, my mind always wanders to the concept of the “story behind the story.” What part of the story is not being told or lost to history? We all know the genius of Fredrick Law Olmsted, known for designing the Emerald Necklace, Central Park and the Arnold Arboretum. Yet, who were the skilled workers who pushed their shovel into the earth, planting an urban forest that made Olmsted’s vision possible? As I walk through the Endicott Mansion of Glen Magna Farms, I am always considering the “story behind the story.” Who were the cooks fueling the fire of the massive iron stove that heated the dinner for both Presidents Taft and Cleveland during their visit to the Endicott Estate? Where did they take their breaks? What level of skill and tolerance to pressure does one need to manage a kitchen that feeds two presidents? When the gardeners were hand edging the paths in Joseph Chamberlain's new garden designed in 1889, were they endearingly debating the local news and politics of the day? What was going through the minds of the workers while planting the famous weeping beech tree over 133 years ago? Perhaps there was a vision of tomorrow, a vision of their children’s children enjoying the cool shade they themselves would never know. Ideas, events, people, and entire cultures can be lost to history. Sometimes this is due to what a culture deems valuable at a particular time. What seems unimportant to us now may have incredible value for future generations. This article is my attempt to document the recent history of caretakers of Glen Magna Farms (post Historical Society ownership) to make it available for future generations. Additionally, my hope is that this writing creates an open dialogue to allow others to contribute to this idea of celebrating the “story behind the story.”



Let me begin with my predecessor. Devin Walsh was the restoration manager for the Danvers Historical Society from January of 2008 through June of 2013. Devin’s background in art and horticulture allowed him to see the property in a unique way. His restoration in the Shrubbery Garden, which was designed in 1889, was instrumental in breathing new life into the property. The removal of invasive plants saved many of the historic shrubs in the Shrubbery Garden from being outcompeted. Many of the original plantings have I.D tags made from lead. It was always rewarding when finding one of these original tags on a historic plant covered in invasive bittersweet. One of Devin’s favorite plants that was discovered under the constricting vines were the mature, native witch hazels planted by the Endicotts. After discovering these late season bloomers, the Shrubbery Garden quickly became Devin’s favorite garden on the property. Devin’s deep respect for the Endicott and Peabody families’ vision allowed him to care for all aspects of the property, even on the far outskirts of the boundary walls. Devin would often imagine the Endicott family meandering the garden paths towards the Shrubbery Garden contemplating the beauty of life.



Prior to Devin, Zachary Navarro was the restoration manager from March 2007 until March 2010. Zachary grew up near Glen Magna Farms. He has vivid childhood memories of discovering the property for the first time and feeling he entered a place of magic. Like Devin, Zachary's favorite garden is the Shrubbery Garden. When Zachary started, the pathways in the Shrubbery Garden were lost to time and mostly overgrown by encroaching lawn. His restoration efforts allowed visitors to walk through the Shrubbery Garden once again. Additionally, the famous weeping beech tree was in decline during this time. Zachary moved quickly to contact a local arborist who diagnosed the tree as suffering from severe soil compaction due to the years of visitors gathering under the tree. Luckily, members of the community, including the Danvers Rotary Club, donated the funds to aerate the soil with a tree spade. The result was a healthy tree and one of Zachary's proudest moments as caretaker.




While some may know Cathy Gareri from her more recent role as Operations Manager with the Danvers Historical Society, prior to that she was the restoration manager from 2001 until 2010. Like Devin and Zachary, Cathy's favorite garden is the Shrubbery Garden, mostly for its unique plantings of trees and shrubs. Cathy's horticultural expertise allowed her to restore many of the gardens of Glen Magna Farms, including the Chamberlain Garden. Her favorite memories are witnessing the historic peony blooming each June in the borders of the Chamberlain Garden. To Cathy, "Glen Magna Farms is special because of the garden rooms. They transport you to a less hurried time as you stroll from one garden room to another. The landscape casts a spell on you the moment you enter. From the design of the gardens tying in the landscape to the architecture, to the pockets of whimsy waiting to be discovered, you are presented with a look into a time long past."



Prior to Cathy, was Mark Brennan. Mark actually started caring for the gardens of Glen Magna Farms at the age of 14. In 1983, Mark officially became the restoration manager and worked tirelessly at restoring the gardens for the next 18 years. Mark was instrumental in many restoration projects at the Farms, but one in particular was the restoration of the Rose Garden. He has vivid memories of the community's enthusiasm bringing the Rose Garden back to life. When I asked Mark if he had a favorite garden, he had trouble answering the question. He said, "that's a tough one. Like trying to name a favorite child. The old-fashioned garden with its influences of George Hustler, Elliot and family members has the longest history. The flower garden with Joseph Chamberlain's design and influences from Highbury and Italian design popularity at the time was the garden I grew up tending to from the age of 14. The Rose Garden and Brownes dabbling in landscape design, was a painstaking project and required countless hours of maintenance but whose fragrance I can still recall from humid night walks. And the shrubbery garden, with its majestic beech tree that everyone delighted in when walking under its canopy". After pondering Mark's answer, I too can conjure up the feelings of strolling the Rose Garden on a summer afternoon. Can you? Later that day, Mark sent another message about his feelings and love of the property. He wrote, "I left out Mary's Garden, south of the Rose Garden because when I left, we had only begun the process of restoring. The Bur oak and garden gate dividing the tended garden from the meadow to the orchard was always something I loved. The transition from tended to meadow before a walled off orchard was always an element that I loved".

Another caretaker, the one who ran the Farms when Mark started working at 14, was Ralph Goodno. Ralph played an important role in restoring the gardens of Glen Magna Farms after the 1963 purchase by the Danvers Historical Society. But what I found interesting in my research is the information on his earlier life. Ralph, who was born in 1922, and took time off from his education to serve his country during WW2. After being honorably discharged in 1945, he went on to earn his degree in forestry from the University of New Hampshire. His passion for preserving history and conservation allowed him to help both the Danvers Historical Society and the town of Danvers. He was also instrumental in the coordinating the Endicott Park community gardens, co-author of the Danvers flood plains zoning by-laws and collaboration of a master plan for the creation of Endicott Park. In 1979, the Danvers Community Council voted him "Citizen of the Year " for his lifelong efforts as "The Shepherd of the Danvers Conservation Movement". On August 4th, 1980, Ralph Goodno was honored once again by both the Danvers Historical Society and the town of Danvers by officially naming the man-made pond at Endicott Park in his name. A bronze plaque reading "Goodno Pond" was placed at the pond, to honor a man who served his country, community, and the natural world. In our conversation, Mark recalled fond memories of working for Ralph and was inspired by his hard-working nature and deep knowledge for the gardens of Glen Magna Farms.

It's important for me to mention there were three other caretakers that cared for Glen Magna Farms after the Historical Society gained ownership. Leonard Perry (first caretaker after the Historical Society ownership), Wesley Goodno (Ralph's son) and Gino Morin all helped make Glen Magna Farms what we all know and love today. As I mentioned in the beginning of this story, my hope is to accomplish two goals. First, to document something that I feel passionate about, which is the recent history of caretakers of Glen Magna Farms. The second is to create an open dialogue with the community. History is not written in stone, nor is its story ever finished. Each generation has a unique opportunity to preserve its own collective memories, as well as the awesome responsibility of reexamining the stories of the past. It is my hope that with an open heart and mind, we all can partake in the "story behind the story." 

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