

# *An Island Landscape Gardening Culture: The Legacy of Nurserymen from 1880 to 1920*

By Betsy Hewlett

When the Mount Desert Nurseries were started [in 1896] conditions at Bar Harbor and elsewhere on Mount Desert Island were far different from the present. The simple fishermen's huts and farmhouses, collected around each sheltering harbor when the sea was the only highway, had grown as the stream of visitors increased into big hotels; while summer residences, simple or costly, were springing up on every available site along the shore, flowers were in demand to make the bare hotel rooms beautiful and gardens around the new summer homes were everywhere in the making. It was a transitory condition, but it was based upon a real and permanent human need and opportunity for gardening, which trial and experience had shown to be extraordinary. The time was one of great activity along horticultural lines.<sup>1</sup>

—George Bucknam Dorr, ca. 1942

As the eastern Mount Desert Island shoreline transformed from fishing villages and shipping gateways into a horticultural showplace of lavish cottages with gardens and manicured landscapes, economic opportunities for local residents moved away from fishing, shipping, and farming to gardening, landscape construction, and property maintenance. Over a forty-year period from 1880 to 1920, there was a major shift from traditional island land and sea occupations to new ones that relied on the summer cottagers for their creation and their income. The contemporary legacy of this lifestyle change is a robust garden and landscape history built upon the aesthetics of place established in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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### *A Scottish Nurseryman Comes to Bar Harbor*

William Miller was an early nurseryman who relocated to Mount Desert Island at the outset of the horticultural boom in the Northeast. His birth into a farming community near Firth of Clyde on the southwest coast of Scotland in 1863 meant Miller was well-versed in rough terrain and often cruel and hard seasonal changes similar to those of Mount Desert Island.

In his late teens, Miller's first stop after leaving the family farm and plant nursery in Ayr, Ayrshire County, Scotland, was the city of Edinburgh.<sup>2</sup> The public gardens were hiring, and the new horizon looked promising. His family were nurserymen, growers and propagators of plants for the elaborate landscape design projects common throughout the British Isles and elsewhere in Europe. As populations were shifting to the industrialized urban areas, Miller saw opportunity in Edinburgh.

A requisite stop in any late-nineteenth-century European garden study tour was the Royal Botanic Garden of Scotland, located in central Edinburgh.<sup>3</sup> While carrying out his duties as a gardener in the Edinburgh public gardens, Miller encountered touring scholars. Many of these encounters were with Americans studying and visiting the grand gardens of Europe.

The Royal Botanic Garden in Edinburgh contained one of the foremost scientific and educational garden collections. Founded in 1670, this esteemed institution amassed one of the finest herbarium and living collections in the world by the late nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Gardeners associated with the public gardens of Edinburgh were prized and in demand, especially for those American industrialists and scholars eager to replicate the beauties of European gardens in their home estates, summer playgrounds, and nearby public spaces.

Miller was aware of opportunities in Boston and the Northeast for experienced gardeners, particularly those versed in nursery production by virtue of their Scottish training. It was not long after arriving in Edinburgh that Miller sailed to the United States, arriving in Boston in January 1886 aboard the ship *Prussian*. He immediately obtained garden construction work at Stonehurst, the newly constructed Robert Trent Paine country estate set on 109 acres in Waltham, Massachusetts. This lush, rural retreat was one of many design masterpieces of the famed Boston landscape firm of Frederick

Law Olmsted. Miller likely drew the attention of principals in that firm, among them men with ties to Mount Desert Island, such as Olmsted's young business associate, Charles Eliot.<sup>5</sup>

As installation and plantings were completed at Stonehurst, William Miller's connections with Boston families who were retreating to Mount Desert Island were solidified. He was introduced to Boston patrician George Bucknam Dorr, who in 1888, hired the young plantsman to oversee his mother's cottage gardens at the family's recently built Bar Harbor estate, Oldfarm.<sup>6</sup>

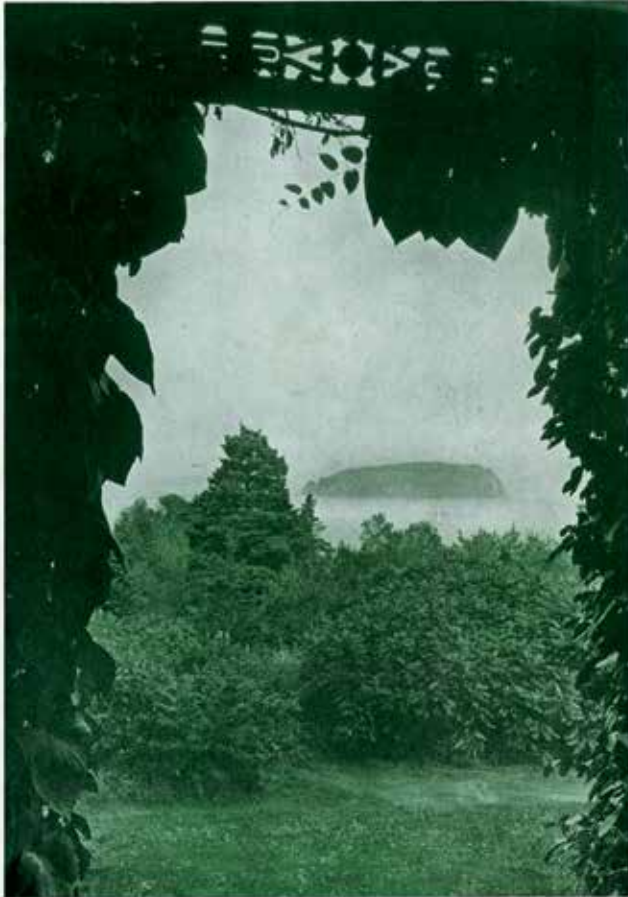
### *An Aesthetic of Place*

George Dorr recognized early the delicate and dynamic relationship of native plant vistas adjacent to carefully cultured landscapes. Lionized for his role in the founding of Acadia National Park, Dorr is less known but equally significant for importing non-native plants and precepts of European gardens to Mount Desert Island. Dorr's world and that of many of his contemporaries was one that worshipped the intricacies and diversity of the natural world. He lauded the bold and beautiful vistas that the rugged island offered. He concurrently prized and studied the delicate and fragile flora that could be cultivated in a controlled greenhouse environment through the science of plant propagation and hybridizing. He was steeped in European landscape traditions and trends through his studies and travels.

As with many in his generation, he was influenced by the growing knowledge of the plant world widely disseminated through the works of pioneering eighteenth-century Swedish taxonomist Carl Linnaeus, the writings of philosopher and English art critic John Ruskin, and the art and writing of nineteenth-century American landscape purists, such as Henry David Thoreau and the Hudson River School artists. It was Dorr's aesthetic of place that recognized the need for a scientifically based garden and plant center on Mount Desert Island. He personally provided an introduction for the new Mount Desert Nurseries' business among the island's summer elite, creating a new economy for highly cultivated, professionally designed landscapes and gardens alongside preserved native fauna and naturally occurring geologic formations unique to Mount Desert Island. Dorr's island was an inclusive one that embraced the

# THE MOUNT DESERT NURSERIES

BAR HARBOR, MAINE



THE PORCH AT OLDFARM

George Dorr and his Oldfarm estate were integral to initiating the nurseries business in 1896. A view from the estate graced the cover of the 1924 Mount Desert Nurseries annual catalog. *Courtesy Land & Garden Preserve of Mount Desert, Maine (hereafter LGP)*

art of landscape architecture and the science of the natural world as aesthetic partners. The entire island was his garden, an aesthetic of place that embraced cultivated landscapes alongside complementary naturally occurring vistas and forests.

### *Mount Desert Nurseries*

William Miller fit squarely into Dorr's growing obsession with the science of growing plant varieties that were well-suited to New England, and most specifically, Mount Desert Island. Miller was a perfect match for Dorr's prolific plant collections because of his background in Scottish nurseries and gardens with similar growing conditions and weather zone characteristics. After joining Dorr's family in the Compass Harbor estate, Miller was also seen at many of the same Boston haunts as Dorr during the off seasons, taking advantage of the explosion of interest in horticulture. In Dorr's words, "The flower shows of the Boston Horticultural Society were famous. The Arnold Arboretum, making trial of woody plants and spending great sums on expeditions for the collection of new species and varieties, was at the zenith of its fame and books by the score came from the press, telling of the plants in cultivation and their wild congeners."<sup>7</sup> The explosion of horticultural knowledge generated in Boston came to Mount Desert Island first-hand through Dorr and Miller, who were moving often between these two communities, putting their knowledge into practice in the nurseries' greenhouses and many acres of plant stock.

Although landscape engineers and garden designers such as early Northeast Harbor summer resident Joseph Henry Curtis had provided plans and designs for wealthy summer estate builders and land owners since the 1880s, ornamental plants suitable to the island and knowledgeable garden construction and maintenance staff were not an organized industry on the island until 1896.<sup>8</sup> Bucksport-based plantsman Frederick H. Moses had the largest island greenhouses and a floral and decorative plant business that he started in 1879 in Bar Harbor.<sup>9</sup> Moses enjoyed a successful business of supplying cut flowers and potted plants to the hotels and cottagers.<sup>10</sup> He did not attempt to enter the growing market for landscape designs, trees, and shrubs until the first decade of the twentieth century, and then, only with a small, auxiliary operation.<sup>11</sup> Nor did he pretend to be

other than a florist and flower grower. He prided himself on his decorative stock sold or rented to the summer trade of Bar Harbor and nearby villages.<sup>12</sup>

Dorr was not interested in decorative floral design or house plants. Together with the substance provided by Miller's plant knowledge and landscape installation experience, Dorr infused capital and his extensive private land holdings to start a business unique on the island, a business which served all of the needs of landscape gardening interests, from initial garden planning and plotting to final installation and maintenance of suitable plants, trees, and shrub stock. Dorr knew Miller's expertise well from his seven years' oversight at the Oldfarm estate gardens. Previous experiences at the Miller family's Ayrshire nursery, Edinburgh public gardens, landscape installations under Frederick Law Olmsted, and estate gardening at the extensive Oldfarm cottage garden put Miller in a professional category of his own in the small island community. Dorr's personal associations with other Boston Brahmins and a growing list of wealthy Bar Harbor and Northeast Harbor summer gentlemen furnished a ready clientele. In the winter of 1896, Mount Desert Nurseries was born on approximately thirty acres of land adjacent to Dorr's Oldfarm home, between lower Main Street and the water, east as far as Schooner Head, and West to Compass Harbor. George B. Dorr was the president and William Miller the general manager.<sup>13</sup>

Between 1896 and 1910, the business grew from one greenhouse selling plants propagated from imported seeds to three year-round greenhouses, two retail stores, two ponds with prolific water plants, a nearby granite quarrying operation, and more than thirty acres of cultivated nurseries for trees, shrubs, cut flowers, bedding plants, and perennial stock. The first printed catalog was released in 1899 and circulated widely to the trade throughout the Northeast, promising of shipping certified stock in over seventy-five different species and cultivars.<sup>14</sup> It was reported that in 1904, the Dorr quarry employed "200 to 300 men all winter," and the nurseries employed upwards of 100 mostly seasonal men with nine year-round employees.<sup>15</sup> Several of the business managers and their families, including Miller, resided in homes that Dorr built on the property. Mount Desert Nurseries was the premier island source for gardening expertise, supplies, and

installations and remained so until the slow but eventual decline of the island's lavish playground for the wealthy by the onset of World War II.

Although immersed in creating a national park on Mount Desert Island, Dorr continued his intense interest in the science of plants through his association with the Massachusetts Horticultural Society and by maintaining his role of president of the nurseries. While Miller designed and hybridized specialty plants that were well suited to the rigors of the local climate, such as the "Milleri fern" and "George B. Dorr phlox," he also managed the daily operations of the nurseries business and checkbook.<sup>16</sup> Annual general catalogs and specialized plant lists, such as one published for peonies, phlox, and iris, continued to be published, and plants were packed and shipped out of Bar Harbor via Maine Central Railroad or Steamship.<sup>17</sup> Both Dorr and Miller were officers of the Bar Harbor Horticultural Society, regularly attending their lectures and presenting occasional papers on particular species or new cultivars.<sup>18</sup> For many years, Miller and his family attended both the Boston and Bangor Flower shows.<sup>19</sup> The nurseries business not only provided full service for the island clientele but also shipped trees and shrubs throughout the northeastern United States and often further afield.<sup>20</sup> It was not long before Miller's brother, George, was called from Scotland to open the Northeast Harbor branch of the nurseries, staying seasonally for three years before finally returning to Scotland for family matters.<sup>21</sup>

Although Miller continued as a highly regarded nurseryman and businessman on the island and Dorr served as the first superintendent of Acadia National Park, the nurseries' business met insurmountable challenges and an economic downturn within twenty years of opening its doors. Construction of new estates and their lavish gardens slowed considerably after 1910, poor financial management decisions and mounting debts were incurred as Dorr's attentions were focused elsewhere, and finally, the financial crash in 1929 precipitated the end of the boom years for Mount Desert Island. The nurseries' clients were neither interested nor could they afford to support the landscape extravagances that fed the business.<sup>22</sup> Although the nurseries continued, the business had peaked by 1918. It was gradually scaled back until finally being foreclosed, sold, and permanently closed in the late 1950s.<sup>23</sup>



**HERBACEOUS SPIRÆAS**

In flower, at midsummer, in their nursery beds. These are among the most valuable of all hardy plants, thriving abundantly and blooming with extraordinary freedom

**THE MOUNT DESERT NURSERIES, BAR HARBOR, MAINE**

Mount Desert Nurseries perennial gardens and greenhouses covered thirty acres of land off the Schooner Head Road in Bar Harbor. This view is of one planted area, circa 1923. Annual Plant catalogue, 1924. *Courtesy LGP*



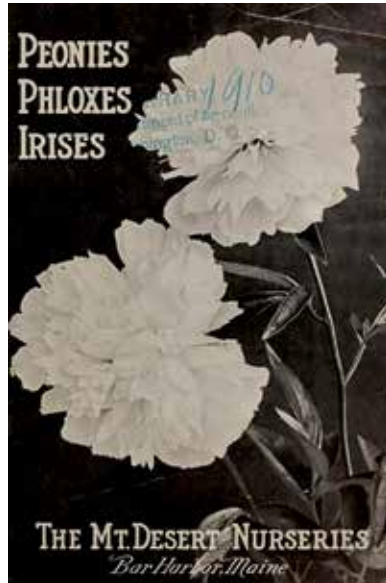
### *Changing Employment Patterns*

In shepherding Mount Desert Nurseries into existence, Dorr introduced a micro-culture of nurserymen and their families onto the island. In addition to William Miller, who was the first to participate with Dorr, other immigrant families began island life under the tutelage of Dorr at the Mount Desert Nurseries. Two of these families, the Northern Irish Ryans and the Scottish McIsaacs, started their trek to the island via Newfoundland and Prince Edward Island where they had relocated from the British Isles in the 1840s.<sup>24</sup> Living conditions in Newfoundland were harsh and unforgiving. Their primary occupation, farming, was a marginal and inhospitable pursuit. Immigrating to the United States was a goal held by many families in the eastern Canadian provinces and British colonies. The business boom in Bar Harbor, readily accessible by ship either directly or through Boston, created a passage of immigrants from that area to settle on the island from 1880 through 1910.<sup>25</sup>

Mount Desert Nurseries employed two young immigrants who became longtime managers at the business, James “Jimmy” Ryan and Hugh McIsaac. Dorr provided lodging on the Oldfarm property for the men. As they married and had children, he enlarged these simple structures to include more bedrooms and living areas to accommodate family life. In addition to the Dorr family cottage Oldfarm, there were at least two family houses incorporated into the nurseries’ property by the end of the nineteenth century. Assorted barns, outbuildings, and a salt water tidal swimming pool were integral to the working estate community of gardeners, their wives, and children that lived alongside the Dorr family. Although Jimmy Ryan bought a home and moved to Ash Street in Bar Harbor in 1916, Hugh McIsaac continued to live on the nurseries’ property, raised a family of seven children there, and maintained a residence near Dorr until Hugh’s death in 1944.<sup>26</sup>

Steady work in the garden building trades was plentiful on the island at the turn of the century. Having a steady job was the best road to US citizenship. Naturalization was attractive to the growing numbers of men who were marrying young immigrant women working on estates or in hotels and establishing their families on US soil. Working men, and after a waiting period, their young brides, were eligible for naturalization after ten years of residency.

William Miller, Jimmy Ryan, and Hugh McIsaac all had obtained US citizenship by 1920.<sup>27</sup> Although maintaining family ties in their countries of origin, each was proud of their new and prosperous life as full citizens with the opportunity afforded by their adopted homeland.



Mount Desert Nurseries published annual seed and plant catalogs starting in 1897. As new cultivars were propagated in the three large greenhouses and naturalized on the grounds, several specialty catalogs also were published. Specialty catalog, 1910, <http://biodiversityheritagelibrary.org/item/183830>.

*Courtesy of the Biodiversity Heritage Library*

In addition to the immigrant men who started careers and families on the island prior to 1920, the nurseries also employed many seasonal employees who arrived on the island in March, often from Newfoundland, Ireland, and Scotland, and often staying into December. These seasonal men were family and friends of the Ryans, McIsaacs, and Millers. Most boarded with them or at other Bar Harbor homes during the work season before returning to their country of origin in the colder months of the year.

Quarrying on the island provided a similar opportunity for immigrants and for young men from off-island communities. Although several large granite quarrying operations on the island were located in Hall Quarry as early as 1890, George Dorr owned and operated a granite quarry on property his family owned to the east of Oldfarm between Bar Harbor and Otter Cliffs. There was intermingling of Dorr's quarry employees and those of the nurseries during the period 1896 through 1920 as large estates with both stone hardscapes and extensive vegetation needs were created. Primarily seasonal workers in the Dorr quarrying operations were often used in the estate garden building projects commissioned through the nurseries. The extensive projects were overseen by Miller as general manager from 1896 to 1911, and later, Hugh McIsaac and Jimmy Ryan.

The population growth on the island and the changing employment and lifestyles associated with this are illustrated by the US Census records from the towns of Bar Harbor and Mount Desert.<sup>28</sup> Bar Harbor more than doubled in population from 1880 to 1920, increasing from 1,629 to 3,622 residents. During the same time period, the population of Mount Desert increased by nearly half, from 1,017 residents to 1,497.

Census data reveal that the island newcomers were not entering those occupations long associated with island life, such as farming and fishing. Rather, the recent arrivals were young men who came to work as tradesmen in the developing careers associated with construction, landscaping, and quarrying trades. Although most of these new residents came from farm families in their respective home countries, once on the island, they quickly adapted to a ready market for occupations unassociated with their family traditions. The young men made the best of a market that needed their often backbreaking labor and determined work ethic.

In an analysis of the occupations within the towns of Bar Harbor and Mount Desert in 1880 and 1920 as reported on the US Census, it is clear that the most common occupations for island men were trending away from traditional land and sea based work. Laborer—a catch-all description for men who participated in manual work, most often under the supervision of someone else—is a prominent occupation in both enumeration years. (See Table 1) In



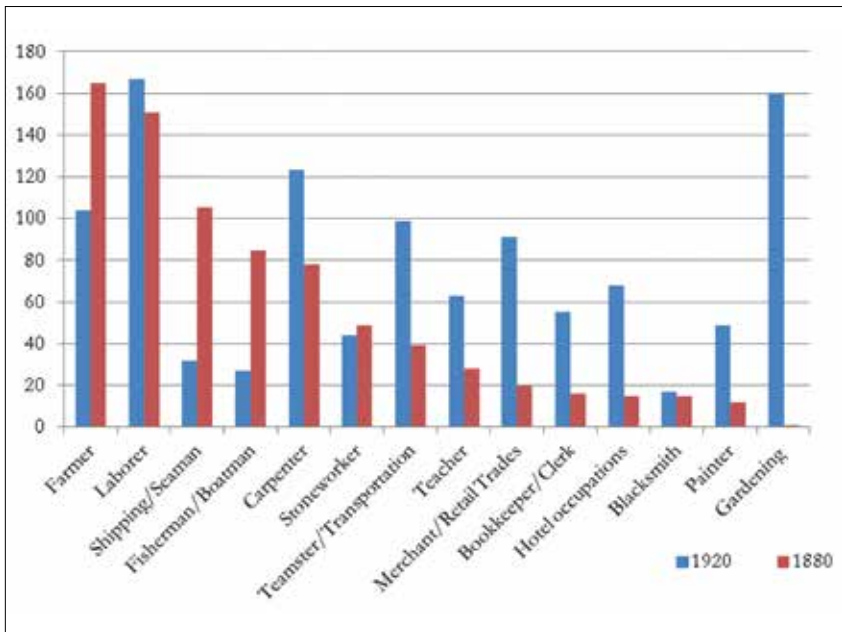
At the peak of the Mount Desert Nurseries' success, many local men supported their families with year-round employment in the gardening, quarrying, and landscaping trades. Unidentified man with business truck, circa 1930. *Courtesy of the Bar Harbor Historical Society*

the 1920 Census for the towns of Bar Harbor and Mount Desert, the second most prevalent occupation in these two towns is gardener, an occupation that was only noted by one person in 1880 data from these same two towns. (And that one male described his occupation as “garden maker,” which could perhaps be more closely aligned with “laborer” than “gardener.”)

As new immigrants swelled the male labor pool, some men from island farm families also migrated to the trades, as farming could no longer support families who had settled on the island generations before. Independent farming households transitioned to an economy that relied heavily on income derived from the summer population and their fortunes and needs. Planting seasons remained the same, but the primary crops were fast becoming horticultural specimens and bedding plants rather than hay, corn, apples, and table vegetables.

Table 1: Most Common Occupations in the Towns of Bar Harbor and Mount Desert, 1880 and 1920

N=908 total occupations reported (1880) and 1,787 total occupations reported (1920)



While Mount Desert Nurseries alone was certainly not responsible for such dramatic lifestyle changes in the short forty-year period, the business was a significant player in instigating economic and social change from 1896 through the first quarter of the twentieth century. The business sustained occupational diversification, an influx of male immigration from foreign countries, economic growth potential for enlarging families, and new social networks among island residents. Many of the young men who were employed at the nurseries went on to become independent contractors or estate employees, trained well through their association with the nurseries. In lieu of farming their land, many island-born families joined the new immigrant ones in working in the gardening and landscape trades, often selling off family shorefront and farm land as they moved to employment outside the home.

Of side note in the census of 1880 is the lack of land or real estate agents listed as primary occupations. Although some men were involved in brokering land sales, along with selling insurance, providing mortgages, and other banking and investment business, the census reports only a lone Bar Harbor male with a primary occupation related to land sales.<sup>29</sup> Although not a prominent island occupation, by 1920, both towns supported several real estate agents who brokered many land deals that moved large tracts of land ownership out of the hands of local residents and into those of wealthy land speculators and summer residents. This land exchange nurtured estate building, lavish garden landscapes, and subsequent land donations that were made to create Acadia National Park.

Also of side note in this census data are the very small number of women reporting occupations in Bar Harbor and Mount Desert. Women reported in only two of the top ten occupations in 1880: teacher and boarding house/hotel worker. In the 1920 census for the towns of Bar Harbor and Mount Desert, the number of occupations reported by women totaled only seven, while men reported 134 different occupations. By 1920, proportionately more women were employed outside of the home and were noted in four of the top ten wage earning occupations: retail trades, hotel workers, teachers, and clerks. By and large, island wage earners were men in both the 1880 and 1920 census. Of the small number of employed women, all who reported an occupation were either single or widowed. Women

of age who married remained in the home with “housekeeper,” “housemaker,” or “at home” listed as an occupation and no place of employment reported. Unlike Boston and urban areas where women were increasingly populating domestic and factory trades during these same years, men held nearly all of the paying positions on the island.<sup>30</sup>

### *Crossing Class and Gender Lines*

One outcome of the shift of occupations to landscape gardening and estate maintenance was the increase in personal relationships and access that these new jobs nurtured across increasingly obvious and divided social-class lines.

The analysis of census records shows that the gardeners and caretakers working on the island in 1920 lived on the island year round. Unlike summer estate household staff based in Philadelphia, New York, Chicago, Boston, and other winter home locations that traveled to the island as servants, family men who both lived and worked on the island for twelve months of the year held most gardening and caretaking positions. Very few household estate staff appear in the 1920 census records because these workers, male and female, were not present on the island during the April census and were being counted as household members in the winter homes of their employers. Most were immigrant servants and did not have families of their own, which stands in stark contrast to the island gardeners who established themselves independently while they depended heavily on the summer trade for their livelihood.

George B. Dorr was the first seasonal resident to establish a sizable locally based staff. He was also one of the only cottagers to create a business requiring hundreds of gardeners, nurserymen, and quarry workers. More summer estates soon followed Dorr in hiring local staff, each employing several local landscaping crews, many of which had been trained in the nurseries under the leadership of Dorr, Miller, and their staff. Dorr and Miller lived and worked alongside each other for almost twenty years, both attended St. Saviour’s Church, where Miller long served on the vestry, and they co-authored papers on plant propagation as officers of the Bar Harbor Horticultural Society.<sup>31</sup> Dorr, always the learner, gained practical knowledge from Miller, who did not disappoint with his highly

successful scientific propagation projects and working knowledge of precepts of European garden design. Their professional partnership seems one of equals in a pattern that came to blur the immigrant/patrician distinction and was advantageous to both regardless of lineage, family wealth, education, or country of origin.

This was a relationship of mutual dependence: the gardener knew what grew well on the island, where to get stone and strong men for building the lavish designs of the estate designers, and how to keep the grand projects progressing throughout the winter. The new class of gardening workers, many of whom advanced quickly into being appointed caretakers, were unlike the household help and servants so often associated with the summer cottage trade. The new group of island workers was able to partner with wealthy businessmen to build monuments to wealth through Maine gardens and cultivated landscapes while also supporting their families in a comfortable lifestyle that afforded hope, opportunity, and upward mobility. Unlike industrial urban areas of the United States where immigrants were feared and routinely discriminated against, the island embraced its immigrant population in roles that crossed social lines and afforded selective opportunities for economic advancement and assimilation unusual to this time period in United States history.<sup>32</sup>

After resigning his position with the nurseries in the winter of 1912, Miller's partnership with George Dorr ended.<sup>33</sup> Miller quickly established himself as a business proprietor, first with a greenhouse and planted fields at the C.C. Morrison Farm off of Bar Harbor's Cromwell Harbor Road between what are currently Kebo and Spring streets.<sup>34</sup> He later moved his greenhouse production to the Moses greenhouses on Mount Desert Street, and lastly, he established Miller Gardens on acreage that he purchased on the Otter Cliffs Road at the edge of the Bar Harbor town line in 1927.<sup>35</sup> His clients included many of the earlier estate owners whom he met at Mount Desert Nurseries and many of the new and prominent families who kept coming to the island during the summer seasons. Although the 1920 census includes many gardeners and caretakers, there is only one man on the island who identified as a "landscape gardener." That was William Miller.





**ACTINIDIA ARGUTA HEDGE, EIGHT FEET HIGH**  
Grown for wind protection in the Nurseries' gardens. This Japanese  
vine grows more vigorously than any native one in Maine  
and is free as yet from insect enemies  
**THE MOUNT DESERT NURSERIES, BARR HARBOR, MAINE**

The nurseries' grounds were planted as a display garden where new and native plants were showcased. The first general manager of the business, William Miller, started an extensive propagation program that resulted in sales of seeds and plant stock to accounts throughout the United States. Annual plant catalog, 1924. *Courtesy of the LGP*

An interesting example of this partnership of summer scion with local gardener is illustrated in the relationship between Miller and John D. Rockefeller Jr. (JDR Jr.), who first established a summer home in 1912 with purchase of an estate in Seal Harbor. Miller came to the attention of JDR Jr., who was rebuilding his Barr Hill estate, Eyrle, working with society architect Duncan Candler. Correspondence between JDR Jr. and Miller started as early as 1916 with detailed plans for Miller's work, pay rates and fees being carefully monitored and negotiated, and precise plants and their placement on the evolving Eyrle property being discussed.<sup>36</sup> Although their extensive correspondence over a seventeen-year period is businesslike and in the formal style of the time period, it is clear that Rockefeller came to prize Miller's opinions and resourcefulness about all things planted and propagated. In spite of his close relationship and respect, JDR Jr. never lost sight of the bottom line required to support Miller's

work and reviewed even the smallest details in Miller's accounting. He pursued volume discounts on plant materials, reduced hourly labor rates for lower-skilled workers employed on Miller's crew, and carefully examined and disputed even minor charges on Miller's invoices prior to payment.<sup>37</sup>

Miller provided key landscaping advice during the years of JDR Jr.'s extensive road building projects. He collected seeds from native plants in the fall, propagated well-established cultivars and species in greenhouses and nursery beds on the Rockefeller property, rode in carriages alongside Rockefeller and Beatrix Farrand to discuss the road building projects, and made plentiful a supply of plants for the many and extensive projects that Rockefeller initiated on his estate grounds and carriage roads.<sup>38</sup> After his resignation as an independent contractor for Rockefeller in 1933, most likely because of frustrating differences with the plant specifications needed to satisfy the new Rockefeller favorite landscape gardener Beatrix Farrand, Miller continued as a respected nearby resource supporting the family's love of island landscapes. After initially personally meeting with Miller to encourage him to stay on, JDR Jr. was resigned to his leaving and wrote to Miller,

In terminating this relationship of such long standing, which has always given me genuine pleasure, I am glad to feel that your interest in our place will always be the same, and also that I may come to you at any time for special counsel or advice or opinion in any matter that may come up.<sup>39</sup>

Miller responded,

If I can be of assistance to you in any way, at any time, it would give me much pleasure, or if there is work you wish to have done at any time under your personal direction, I shall be glad to attend to it.<sup>40</sup>

Although no longer a contractor for JDR Jr., Miller retained the family's respect throughout the remaining years of his life. On his advice and counsel, Miller's son Charles was immediately installed as

head gardener. Charles was directly hired to replace his father, who had long resisted being on the Rockefeller family payroll, serving instead as an independent contractor. (Charles Miller continued in his position until resigning in 1946 to join his sister Jane in overseeing the Miller Gardens family business started by their father.)

When William Miller passed away in 1939, JDR Jr. immediately sent a telegram of condolence to the family:

Greatly saddened to hear of your father's going. He was our loyal friend and helpful coadjutor for many years. We send our deepest sympathy to you and the other members of his family. John D Rockefeller, Jr.<sup>41</sup>

This telegram was followed with a personal note to Miller's son Charles conveying his deep regard for the Scottish nurseryman:

We shall miss your father greatly. For many years he and I worked closely together and always to my satisfaction and pleasure. His love of nature was a great bond between us. Your father was a man of high character. He was well trained in his profession and had a wide experience. ... Mrs. Rockefeller joins me in these expressions of sympathy.<sup>42</sup>

Apparent in this correspondence is not only Mr. Rockefeller's relationship with his respected garden partner but also Mrs. Rockefeller's association with Miller. Interest in ornamental horticulture had moved from the exclusive world of men and science into the domain of women through the garden club movement, which began in 1891 in Athens, Georgia, and quickly took hold in communities throughout the Eastern United States.<sup>43</sup> By 1923, with the founding of the Garden Club of Mount Desert by noted landscape gardener Beatrix Farrand, ladies were sponsoring lectures, study groups, and annual flower shows. Summer women were immersed in gardening as a pastime and social activity.<sup>44</sup> Both male and now female summer estate owners had avenues for close interaction with

their gardener and his staff, building a mutual respect alongside each other regardless of social status and gender.

Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, JDR Jr.'s wife, was a member of the Garden Club of Mount Desert and participated in club activities while spending summers in Seal Harbor. Many of her entries in the annual flower shows during the 1930s and into the late 1940s were prize winners. Her flower show specimen labels often included two entrant names: hers and that of her gardener.<sup>45</sup> This shared ownership of horticultural prizes was a way of publicly acknowledging the valued partnership of estate owner and gardener. Island families, summer and year-round, were immersed together in the world of gardening and shared a common interest in the beauty, spiritual connection, art, science, and joy of gardens.

The life work of renowned American landscape gardener Beatrix Jones Farrand, seasonal Bar Harbor resident from 1884 through 1959, provides another rich illustration of the gender melting pot that gardening brought to the island. "Mrs. Farrand," as she was known locally, had a profession, unusual in and of itself for the times, as we have noted through census data. She consulted and advised both the estate-building upper crust husbands and their wives, while directly supervising local men who were planting and constructing their lavish outdoor environments. Her iconic designs and exacting planting specifications for many of the island summer families embraced the crossover of native Maine plant culture with highly cultivated European cottage gardens. She knew Dorr and Miller well, often buying plants from the Mount Desert Nurseries as well as giving specific directions for Miller's propagation work for JDR Jr.<sup>46</sup> She carried out her work with some resistance but few lasting limitations based on her gender.<sup>47</sup> Although most of the gardeners on the island continued to be males throughout Farrand's lifetime, two of Farrand's closest working associates during her long career on the island were women, Amy Magdalene Garland (1899-1996) and Marion Ida Spaulding (1908-1994).<sup>48</sup>

### *The Legacy*

At the same time that Dorr, Miller, and JDR Jr. were intertwined in creating private estate gardens, the island hosted a parallel surge in conserving and beautifying public spaces. The Bar Harbor

Village Improvement Association, since its inception in 1881, had maintained public parks, trails, and green spaces with community health and welfare in mind.<sup>49</sup> Northeast Harbor social committees were holding raffles to raise money to replace dirt paths with proper sidewalks.<sup>50</sup> The idea of an ultimate public island landscape, Acadia National Park, began percolating in 1901 among the social and educational societies of men who cared deeply about the natural world and came to fruition in 1916 under the leadership of George Dorr.<sup>51</sup> From 1906 until his death in 1928, Boston landscape engineer Joseph Curtis built terrace paths along Asticou Hill for the enjoyment of hikers in Northeast Harbor. Through several successive land donations to a public trust, these paths provided the core for what is now Thuya Garden.<sup>52</sup> By 1900, commercial greenhouses were in both Bar Harbor and Northeast Harbor and also common at many of the largest private estates and local hotels, providing hundreds of thousands of bedding plants needed for the summer garden showplaces.<sup>53</sup>

A culture of landscape gardening initiated over 100 years ago on Mount Desert Island is today a history rich with family stories, interwoven cultivated gardens and naturally occurring wooded vistas, social and economic transitions, and lush public gardens. Mount Desert Island garden history is uniquely present and as relevant today as in the past. Summer estate gardens continue to bedazzle, some shared with the public through garden club-sponsored tours. Public spaces in all four island towns are enriched with gardens and special niches of carefully planned landscapes and conserved natural vistas and open spaces. Maine Coast Heritage Trust, founded on the island in 1970 and now a statewide organization, builds on the precedent of over 100 years of island beautification through its stewardship of a network of public land conservation easements and often heroic land preservation efforts.

From the late 1880s into the 1920s, the passions and personal relationships that were centered on growing and planting crossed natural landscape borders into the formal and cultivated estate planted beds. These same passions joined summer and island residents across social class and gender lines, changing the economic horizons of many island working families. Many new immigrants took advantage of a selective opportunity for acceptance and upward

mobility by entering and succeeding in the new island gardening occupation. Small sea and farming villages and their lifestyles transformed to a trades-based economy fueled by off-island resources flowing in through summer residents with elaborate wants and needs—one of which was beautiful gardens.

The island has nurtured a robust respect of natural beauty through its rich gardening history. Both summer and year-round islanders, men and women alike, continue to share in the pursuit of many of the same landscape gardening precepts promoted by Dorr and Miller over one hundred years ago, stewarding and carrying forward a unique island aesthetic of place.

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<sup>1</sup> Writings of George Bucknam Dorr, Acadia National Park Archives, B3F9.

<sup>2</sup> *Bar Harbor Record*, May 8, 1901.

<sup>3</sup> Judith B. Tankard, *Beatrix Farrand: Private Gardens, Public Landscapes* (New York: Monacelli Press, 2009), 199.

<sup>4</sup> “History of the Botanic,” accessed May 21, 2015, <http://www.rbge.org.uk/about-us/history>.

<sup>5</sup> Witold Rybczynski, *A Clearing in the Distance: Frederick Law Olmsted and America in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* (New York: Scribner, 1999); Keith N. Morgan, “Charles Eliot, Landscape Architect: An Introduction to His Life and Work,” *Arnoldia*, Summer, 1999.

<sup>6</sup> *Bar Harbor Record*, May 8, 1901.

<sup>7</sup> Writings of Dorr.

<sup>8</sup> Architectural drawings and blueprints for Maine subdivisions and community facilities developed by Joseph Henry Curtis, 1880 through 1913, collection of the Mount Desert Land & Garden Preserve, Seal Harbor, Maine.

<sup>9</sup> *Bar Harbor Record*, July 10, 1890.

- <sup>10</sup> *Bar Harbor Record*, May 22, 1895.
- <sup>11</sup> *Bar Harbor Record*, May 3, 1905.
- <sup>12</sup> *Bar Harbor Record*, May 22, 1895.
- <sup>13</sup> *Bar Harbor Record*, May 8, 1901.
- <sup>14</sup> *Hardy Herbaceous Perennials, Seedlings, and Young Plants of Northern Trees and Shrubs* (Bar Harbor, ME: Mount Desert Nurseries, Spring 1904), <http://biodiversityheritagelibrary.org/item/176107>.
- <sup>15</sup> *Bangor Whig & Courier*, May 4, 1904; *Bar Harbor Record*, May 8, 1901.
- <sup>16</sup> *Bar Harbor Record*, May 4, 1939.
- <sup>17</sup> *Peonies, Phloxes, Irises* (Bar Harbor, ME: Mount Desert Nurseries, 1910), <http://biodiversityheritagelibrary.org/item/183830>; *Hardy Herbaceous Perennials, Seedlings, and Young Plants of Northern Trees and Shrubs* (Bar Harbor, ME: Mount Desert Nurseries, Spring 1900), <http://mertzdigital.nybg.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15121coll8/id/63117>.
- <sup>18</sup> *Bar Harbor Record*, June 8, 1910.
- <sup>19</sup> *Bar Harbor Record*, September 1, 1909; April 7, 1909.
- <sup>20</sup> *Bar Harbor Record*, May 8, 1901; *Hardy Herbaceous Perennials, Seedlings, and Young Plants of Northern Trees and Shrubs* (Bar Harbor, ME: Mount Desert Nurseries, Spring 1904), <http://biodiversityheritagelibrary.org/item/176107>.
- <sup>21</sup> *Bar Harbor Record*, May 4, 1898; April 10, 1901; November 5, 1902.
- <sup>22</sup> Writings of Dorr; Anna Ryan, interview with author, June 1, 2015.
- <sup>23</sup> B.J. Hadley to John D. Rockefeller Jr., February 25, 1949, private collection of Ronald Epp.
- <sup>24</sup> Ryan, interview; M.J. McIsaac, interview with author, September 8, 2015.
- <sup>25</sup> Tim Garrity, "Immigrants in the Borderland: 1900–1920," *Chebacco* 16, in this issue.
- <sup>26</sup> Ryan, interview; McIsaac, interview.
- <sup>27</sup> 1920 US Census, Town of Bar Harbor, [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com).
- <sup>28</sup> For this study, analysis includes records of only two of the four Mount Desert Island towns. The towns of Southwest Harbor and Tremont were less aligned with the gardening occupation explosion on the island during the period 1880 to 1920, in large part due to the lack of motorized transportation that was needed for workers to reach the estate worksites on the eastern edge of the island and the continued success of the fishing and boatbuilding business on the western shores of the island.
- <sup>29</sup> Business Letterheads & Invoices Notebook, Bar Harbor Historical Society. Viewed September 16, 2015, collection of the Bar Harbor Historical Society, Bar

Harbor, Maine.

<sup>30</sup> Betsy Beattie, “The Boston States: Region, Gender, and Out Migration 1870–1930,” in *New England and the Maritime Provinces*, eds. Stephen G. Hornsby and John J. Reid (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2006), 253–263.

<sup>31</sup> *Bar Harbor Record*, March 1, 1911; April 20, 1910; January 26, 1910; *Bar Harbor Times*, May 4, 1939.

<sup>32</sup> Garrity, “Immigrants.”

<sup>33</sup> A.H. Lynam to George B. Dorr, February 29, 1912, private papers, Chapman Archives.

<sup>34</sup> *Bar Harbor Record*, August 14, 1912; January 1, 1913.

<sup>35</sup> Registry of Deeds, Hancock County, Maine, book 619, page 207.

<sup>36</sup> Selected correspondence between John D. Rockefeller Jr. and William Miller from 1916 through 1933 is archived in the Rockefeller Archive Center, Tarrytown, NY.

<sup>37</sup> Rockefeller to William Miller, September 17, 1917, Rockefeller Archive; Rockefeller to William Miller, July 31, 1933, Rockefeller Archive, family, homes, I(FA318), box 76, folder 780.

<sup>38</sup> Ann Roberts Rockefeller, *Mr. Rockefeller's Roads* (Rockport, ME: Down East Books, 1990); William Miller and Rockefeller, references throughout correspondence, particularly in the years 1926–1928, Rockefeller Archive, family, homes, I(FA318), box 76, folders 780, 781.

<sup>39</sup> Rockefeller to William Miller, August 29, 1933, Rockefeller Archives, family, homes, I(FA318), box 76, folder 780.

<sup>40</sup> William Miller to Rockefeller, October 23, 1933, Rockefeller Archives, family, homes, I(FA318), box 76, folder 780.

<sup>41</sup> Rockefeller to Charles Miller, telegram, May 1, 1939, Rockefeller Archives, family, homes, I(FA318), box 76, folder 780.

<sup>42</sup> Rockefeller to Charles Miller, May 6, 1939, Rockefeller Archive, family, homes, I(FA318), box 76, folder 780.

<sup>43</sup> William Seale, *The Garden Club of America: One Hundred Years of a Growing Legacy* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2012).

<sup>44</sup> “Who We Are,” accessed June 14, 2015, [http://www.gardenclubofmountdesert.org/who\\_we\\_are/](http://www.gardenclubofmountdesert.org/who_we_are/).

<sup>45</sup> Selected records of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller’s participation in the Garden Club of Mount Desert flower shows from 1932 through 1947, collection of the Mount Desert Land & Garden Preserve, Seal Harbor, Maine.

<sup>46</sup> Mount Desert Nurseries to Beatrix Farrand, invoice, September 29, 1923, private collection of Ronald Epp.



<sup>47</sup> Much has been written about the Beatrix Farrand legacy, and in particular, her persistence in crossing the prevailing gender roles in her profession. For more information, see Judith Tankard, *Beatrix Farrand: Private Gardens, Public Landscapes* (New York: Monacelli Press, 2009); Paula Dietz, introduction to *The Bulletins of Reef Point Gardens*, by Beatrix Farrand (Sagapress, 1997); Jane Brown, *Beatrix: the Gardening Life of Beatrix Jones Farrand 1872–1959* (New York: Viking Adult, 1995).

<sup>48</sup> Paula Dietz, “Beatrix Farrand and the Bulletins of Reef Point Gardens,” in *Of Gardens* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 14.

<sup>49</sup> *Bar Harbor Mount Desert Herald*, October 1, 1881.

<sup>50</sup> Ephemera related to a 1910 campaign to raise money to pave paths along what is now Peabody Drive near the Asticou Inn, Northeast Harbor, Maine. Land & Garden Preserve of Mount Desert Island, Maine.

<sup>51</sup> George B. Dorr, *The Story of Acadia National Park*, 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition (Bar Harbor, ME: Acadia Publishing Company, 1991), 13.

<sup>52</sup> Letitia S. Baldwin, *Thuya Garden, Asticou Terraces & Thuya Lodge* (Seal Harbor, ME: Mount Desert Land & Garden Preserve, 2008).

<sup>53</sup> G.W. Helfrich and Gladys O’Neil, *Lost Bar Harbor* (Rockport, ME: Downeast Books, 1982); photograph collection, Bar Harbor Historical Society; Stephen Hornsby, “The Gilded Age and the Making of Bar Harbor,” *Geographical Review* 83, no. 4 (October, 1993): 458.