

HILLSIDE FARM (IRA AND ANNIE COBE ESTATE)
NORTHPORT, MAINE

Job #913

In 1892 Ira M. Cobe (1866–1931), a young lawyer from Boston, married Annie Elizabeth Watts (1871–1928) of Belfast, Maine. The couple moved to Chicago, where Ira Cobe started a career in finance that rapidly placed the Cobes within the city's circles of wealth and power. In 1899 they commissioned a Shingle-style cottage, Bohemia Villa, in Bayside, a summer community within the town of Northport, just south of Belfast. A decade later, the Cobes built anew on Hillside Farm, one hundred acres of boulder-strewn pastures, wetlands, and spruce woods behind their existing oceanfront cottage. Although not directly on the water, the site straddled a glacial hill two hundred feet above sea level, providing panoramic views of Penobscot Bay.¹

Manning was designing several private estates in nearby Camden at the time, and it may have been through one of these connections that he secured the Cobe job.² The earliest known Manning plan is dated December 16, 1911, the same year that his firm logged Cobe as a client. Construction began on the entrance drive and the house the following spring.³ The Chicago architectural firm Marshall & Fox built the imposing red-brick Colonial Revival mansion that still stands.⁴ Situated about two-thirds of the way up the hillside, the house has a pitched roof and gable ends, with the main entrance on the southwest facade and a colonnade on the northeast facade, where a marble terrace commands the site's principal view of the bay and its backdrop of blue hills.

Manning wrapped the hill in a winding drive, which integrates the building and the landscape, highlights their contrasting forms, and provides a grand arrival experience. Lined with a boulder wall, the drive begins at a 45-degree angle to the slope and then follows the contours for a few hundred feet. The ascending vantage point exaggerates the height of the mansion's columns and its commanding location above a sweep of lawn. The drive then loops around a

spruce grove and cuts toward the house, where it branches to outline a teardrop-shaped island opposite the house entrance and a service turn off the west wing.

Manning's design honors the site's glacial topography and its native spruce–fir forest. In 1913, when the landscape was under construction, a local newspaper reported that “many of the surface rock[s] are to be kept in their natural positions, including an immense boulder near the road in the front,” and noted that “the plan of the grounds calls for the retention of the natural beauties so far as practical.”⁵ Manning incorporated other glacial rubble in a rock garden at the base of the boulder wall that supported a formal garden on a flat site originally built for the tennis court. The wall formed a “rustic parapet” at the top. Boulder steps descended from the formal garden to a stepping-stone path that meandered east through the spruce grove next to the drive.⁶

The formal garden was a rectangular space (140 by 30 feet) off the mansion's east wing. A sunken panel, sometimes called the “sunken garden,” filled the center of the space, enclosed on three sides by a series of three shallow planting terraces. The east end of the formal garden opened to face a rectangular reflecting pool (about 8 by 16 feet) extending from the east wing, its corners anchored by planters with small conifers that repeated the spires of the surrounding spruce. Slightly elevated above the sunken garden, the pool echoed a distant view of the bay.⁷ A plant list, prepared by Stephen Hamblin of Manning's office for 1916–17, specifies a colorful assortment of annuals for an “old-fashioned garden” in the sunken space. For the descending terraces he noted shrubs, including barberry (*Berberis thunbergii*), weigela (*Weigela florida*), althea (*Althea syriacus*), buddleia (*Buddleia davidii*), clethra (*Clethra alnifolia*), deutzia (*Deutzia scabra* or *D. gracilis*) and vitex (*Vitex agnus-castus*), flowering in pink, white, purple, and pale lilac.⁸ Low arborvitae hedges, lined with straight paved walks, enclosed the entire formal garden. Two parallel paths began on either side of the reflecting pool and continued through the sunken garden, visually attenuating the space.

Elsewhere, plantings, rather than architectural elements, defined the main spaces. The 1914 planting plan shows sinuous borders of perennials (achillea,

iris) and masses of ornamental shrubs (snowberry, lilac, rhododendrons, weigela, viburnums, honeysuckle, spirea) outlining the roughly elliptical lawn on the northeast slope. Near the service drive, oval beds softened the corner of the west solarium and the house. On the lawn below, spruce, flowering shrubs, and perennials were massed around outcrops of granite. The island near the house entrance was a flat lawn, in which the Cobes inserted oval flowerbeds. Screening the service drive, woodland plantings of honeysuckles, viburnums, and other native shrubs filled in among scattered spruce.⁹ Uphill to the south, old tote roads and trails wound through the woods, where the Cobes erected a water and observation tower.

Since Ira Cobe's death, in 1931, the property has had four owners, starting with the George and Gertrude Pingree family (1936–1978).¹⁰ Photos taken in 1936 show the reflecting pool filled in and the sunken garden devoid of plantings, but the walks and spatial layout remained intact. Images from the ensuing decades show simple flowerbeds flanking the stepping-stone walks and mature trees and flowering shrubs near the house entrance and edging the lower lawn. The Pingrees replaced the sunken garden with a swimming pool in the 1940s or 1950s, but kept the outer borders of shrubs and perennials.¹¹

The third owners, John K. and Jean Evans (1978–2001), tore down the stone wall near the property entrance and created an Asian-style garden in the island opposite the house entrance. It appears that the biggest changes occurred under the Evanses' ownership; in 2001, when the fourth and current owners, Gerald and Dorothy Reid, bought the estate, the property had decreased from one hundred to fifty acres. The flowering shrubs and perennials were gone, but the old oaks, and the bones of Manning's design, remained. The Reids filled in the swimming pool, leaving the flanking arborvitae hedges beside the sunken garden. Their trunks genuflect four feet above the ground, the point at which they had been clipped for the greater part of a century. Like a genie of the place, the "immense boulder" remains at the base of the hill.

—Jane Roy Brown

Endnotes [if not visible, go to View in top menu and select Footnotes]

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- ¹ “The Pleasing Future of Hillside Farm,” *Waldo County Herald*, 12 September 1912; news article from unidentified paper, 4 February 1909, Bayside Historical Preservation Society, Northport, Maine (BHPS).
- ² Between 1909 and 1911, Manning’s office listed three estate projects in Camden, approximately ten miles from Northport. Warren H. Manning project list, Warren Manning Collection, Center for Lowell History, University of Massachusetts Lowell, Lowell, Mass. (UMass Lowell).
- ³ Warren H. Manning, *Map of Property/No. 913-17*, 16 December 1911; and J. V. Monahan, Superintendent’s expense report [Warren Manning office form], week ending 28 September 1912. Gerald and Dorothy Reid (Reids). Warren H. Manning, *Survey of Existing Conditions*, Plan No. 913-74-1, 8 February 1913; and photographs by A. D. Taylor [Manning office], 24 May and 25 June 1912, Warren H. Manning Papers, Special Collections Dept., Parks Library, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa (Manning Papers).
- ⁴ “Pleasing Future of Hillside Farm”; photocopy, article from unidentified newspaper, n.d., February 1909, BHPS.
- ⁵ Photocopy, article from unidentified Maine newspaper, 4 May [1913?], Belfast Historical Society and Museum, Belfast, Maine.
- ⁶ Warren H. Manning, Landscape Designer, Boston, Mass., *Planting Plan of Formal and Rock Gardens*, No. 913-84, 24 July 1914, Reids. *Waldo County Herald*, 9 September 1912, BHPS.
- ⁷ Various historical photographs and postcards, most undated, Reids and Maine Historical Preservation Society (MHPS), Augusta, Maine.
- ⁸ Stephen Hamblin [Manning office], planting notebook <dates TK>, Reids. Hamblin used common plant names, and I have inferred the most likely species. None of the extant Manning plans show a rose garden, but fifty rose plants appear on a list of shrubs to be grown in on-site nurseries. Hamblin,

chart, *Location of Nursery Stock*, "50 Welsh Rambler Roses" for "Nursery #2 ... West of Tennis Court," 10 February 1913, Reids.

⁹ Warren H. Manning, *Planting Plan for the Home Grounds*, 23 July 1914, No. 913–85, UMass Lowell.

¹⁰ Property deeds beginning b. 402, p. 335 (Cobe estate to Pingree), Waldo County Registry of Deeds, Belfast, Maine.

¹¹ Various historical photographs and postcards, most undated, Reids and MHPS.