

Fletcher Steele: A lifetime spent glorifying the landscape

Fletcher Steele, *Landscape Architect: An Account of the Gardener's Life, 1885-1971* — Revised Edition
By Robin Karson
Library of American Landscape History, Amherst, Distributed by University of Massachusetts Press, 1989, 2003, 368 pages including index, \$34.95
Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman
Special to The Eagle

Sometimes you wish you had read a certain book before making an important decision. That's the experience I had reading this extensive volume on a man whose name was familiar and whose work I'd seen, but about whom I knew very little. This book about a landscape architect and the information I've gleaned from it could have easily altered my own recent experience with a local landscape designer in formulating a new small garden at my home in Pittsfield.

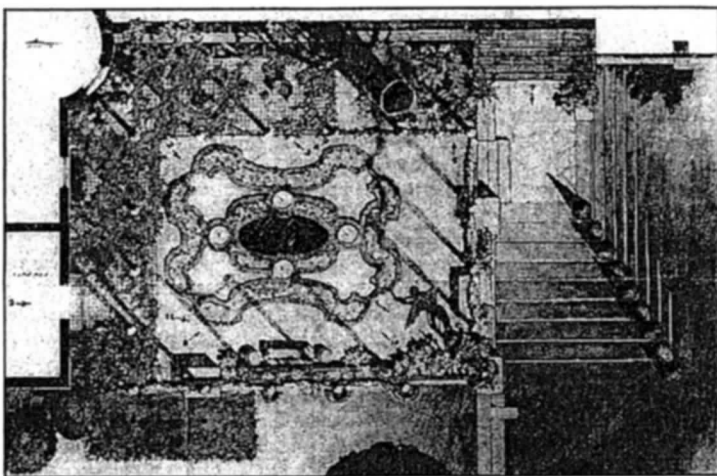
I love visiting Naumkeag, the Choate estate in Stockbridge. I enjoy the gardens there enormously. The afternoon garden with its odd, Venetian poles, the weirdly formal rose garden, the Chinese garden and the blue staircase surrounding the cascade and pools, itself surrounded by the white birch forest, are all among my favorite things to see and to show people who visit here.

Each of them was designed, planned and executed by Fletcher Steele, a man whose career spanned seven decades of devised gardens and metamorphosed vistas.

Robin Karson's biographical study of his work leaves an impression of a solitary, yet social, man whose entire being was absorbed in work and whose work was "whole earth" involved, drawing as it did upon impressions he drew from his travels in Europe and the Caribbean — particularly Haiti — and the Orient. He emerges as an odd figure, almost a "society hanger-on" sort of man who parlayed social contacts into contractual relationships. Those work-related friendships resulted in some of the most eye-appealing gardens, lawns and estates to be found in America, however, and the over 200 photographs and illustrations show how beautiful the mind of man can be when helping nature conform to human sensibilities.

For us Naumkeag is the key to the man. Mabel Choate hired Steele to create a simple afternoon garden for her, outside her library door, in 1926.

He continued working for her, on and off, until 1958. Ten years before that final thrust to complete the gardens he worked out an arrangement with the childless



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Above, Fletcher Steele's plan for the afternoon garden at Naumkeag, and below, the finished garden in a photo from 1979.



Choate to leave the care of both Naumkeag and the Mission House on Main Street to the Trustees of Reservations, a group he advised. It was that move that has helped to preserve the house and the gardens for posterity.

Choate was the ultimate patron, providing a yearly birthday party for Steele at Naumkeag, introducing him to wealthy friends who became clients, employing him over and over, even providing him with his own room in her home.

Steele without Choate would have been successful, but who can ever know to what extent this curious man owed his true level of

success to the devotion of just this one client. That neither one ever married is a curious, though not revelatory, fact.

Based on the information contained in this excellent volume, Naumkeag may be the best known existing example of his work, covering four decades of changes in his style and his perception of the relationships between the land and landowner, but it is not necessarily his finest work.

Indeed, other places may make an equal claim for that honor.

Ancrum House, located on Lake Delaware in Delhi, N.Y., boasted some of his finest Eur-

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opean-influenced work with its broad gallop and octagon seat. Steele invested time at this location from 1925 until 1948.

Westmoreland, in Ridgefield, Conn., boasted an absolutely revolutionary enclosed garden/greenhouse patio. His small garden design for the Charlotte Whitney Allen estate in Rochester, N.Y., gave the impression of a vast French estate and even boasted an early example of Alexander Calder's mobile designs. Rocklawn, the estate of Harry Stoddard in Gloucester, Mass., is another extraordinary example of Steele's brilliant manner of combining the best and worst of what nature has wrought with the finest conceptions the human mind can bring to bear on a difficult landscape.

All of this and more is contained in this book. Every thought projected onto these pages in quote and sketch and photograph should be of use to anyone planning to convert a barren lawn or untidy patch of woodland into something graceful, natural or grandiose, in which to wile away the hours within the confines of nature and the home.

Here is where I find my own personal dilemma. The landscaper who worked with me did a fine job, but I can see how my lack of perception may have limited his work on my own garden. If I had read this book before agreeing to a particular sweep of pathway, or arc of a patio line, or group of plantings I would have had a better vocabulary with which to approach the work. I will never have the dollars that a Mabel Choate or Charlotte Whitney Allen had to bring to such a project, but I could well have addressed the problems of space and light and visual impact from a better, more well-educated perspective.

It isn't often that a book comes my way that both entralls me intellectually and visually and also inspires me to examine my own motivations in life choices. This book brings all three into play simultaneously and if it took me a few days longer than it should have to read through to the end, it is only because page after page, and picture after picture drew me to my own windows to examine the landscape that surrounds me, drew me to examine the inexhaustible possibilities.