



WILMINGTON, DELAWARE

# Marian Coffin's "Gibraltar" Gardens

*Restoring the Future*



Marian Coffin designed Gibraltar's "Country Place Era" gardens for the H. Rodney Sharp family in 1916. Located in Wilmington, DE, construction continued until 1923. Coffin was among the first women formally trained in landscape architecture. Typical of the time, the property is very Italianate in design but English in planting style. Sharp himself was an enthusiastic gardener and world traveler, and the Sharps collected the 35 statues that grace the gardens. Preservation Delaware saved the property and its gardens from demolition in 1990 and has run the property as a free public garden, open from dawn to dusk. In order to secure an "adaptive reuse" for the mansion, however, the entire property is now up for sale, with the intention that Preservation Delaware would lease the garden back from the new owner. In the interim, Preservation Delaware wants get the word out to all that this valuable garden is here and is in need of your assistance.

## HISTORY

Marian Coffin was among the finest and most well known landscape architects of America's "Country Place Era," which spanned the time between the rise of the Beaux Arts in the late 1800s and the outbreak of World War II. This era looked to Renaissance and Baroque "formal" (geometric) garden design forms for inspiration, often borrowing design ideas from a variety of cultures (a practice sometimes referred to as "Beaux Arts eclecticism"). However, women landscape architects of this era often preferred to soften this formal geometry with plantings done in the informal style associated with English country gardens. Such was Coffin's approach at Gibraltar, which she developed for H. Rodney Sharp between 1916 and 1923.



Sharp worked for Pierre duPont of Longwood Gardens and was related by marriage to Henry Francis duPont who owned the Winterthur estate: it is believed that they may have led him to Marian Coffin. Coffin had been life long friends with Henry Francis DuPont and worked on the design for part of his garden at Winterthur. When Coffin arrived at Gibraltar, she was presented with a “blank slate”: a Brandywine Blue Granite blockhouse above a rolling open field. The topography of the site lent itself to the terraced garden she created. Coffin designed the garden to be parallel to the mansion so that they to work together as a unit but also function independently. From the top terrace there is a 30-foot drop to the flower garden below. This change in elevation is softened by the addition of the Evergreen and Pool Terraces. Descending the curving marble staircase that connects these terraced gardens, you reach the Flower Garden. The Flower Garden is the most densely planted and dramatically changing area in the garden. It is based on a color wheel theory and English in planting style: the plant list is very similar to one published earlier by Gertrude Jekyll. From the Flower Garden, there are focal points drawing you out to all corners of the garden. The strongest pull is toward the large fountain and the allée. The allée, which was added between 1921 and 1925 as the “finishing touch,” is 200 feet long and flanked on both sides by *Taxodium distichum* (Bald Cypress). This “room” is a series of layers that give it scale: the cypresses were to be pollarded at 15’ with an understory of larger shrubs, underplanted with vinca. Marian also designed a low concrete curb running the length of the allée that was to be covered with ivy and maintained to give the appearance of a low hedge. The allée culminates in a Teahouse that was used for lunches and entertaining.

The Marian Coffin Garden at Gibraltar contains 35 original statues that were purchased by the Sharps on trips to Italy, England, Hong Kong, and France. Coffin’s design for the garden required statuary for niches and focal points. Although she was not specific about many of the pieces, she gave Mr. Sharp guidelines to follow when looking for the perfect piece. On occasion she traveled with the Sharp’s while they were looking for sculpture. They did not choose all of the pieces at one time; however, most were purchased between 1916 and 1923.

The Sharp family owned Gibraltar until 1990. When H. Rodney Sharp, Sr. died in 1968, the estate passed to his son. Although H. Rodney Sharp, Jr. did not share in his father’s love of horticulture, he nevertheless retained the “bones” of the garden. Upon his death in 1990, the estate was put up for sale. At this time, community members and Preservation Delaware saved Gibraltar and its garden from demolition.

By the late 1990s, the Marian Coffin Garden at Gibraltar had not been maintained for many years: it was overgrown, and many of the plantings had been changed or had died. The Sharp family, however, was more than willing to cooperate with the restoration efforts. They provided detailed drawings and photographs as well as Marian Coffin’s original linen drawings from 1916. Today, the site retains all of Coffin’s original linen drawings for the Garden at Gibraltar, as well as many photos dating from the 1916 installation through the 1950s. Gibraltar’s archive also contains correspondence between Coffin and the head gardener and letters between Coffin and Sharp. In addition, the archive holds many of the purchase orders from nurseries, tree moving companies, stone deliveries, and other garden related items.

The restoration of the Marian Coffin Garden at Gibraltar began in 1998-99. As a restoration of Coffin’s original design, it is about 85% accurate. Over the years, climate, plants and gardeners have changed, all of which has left a mark on Gibraltar and the garden that Coffin and Sharp created. The garden continues to retain its design intent, including its forms and textures. This integrity of design intent is considered to be the most important element in the restoration.

Today, visitors are welcome: this free public garden is open to the public daily from dawn to dusk. A growing volunteer program also provides a place for community involvement. However, money has proved to be a continuing problem. The garden restoration project was heavily funded in the early stages: the garden’s planting plan was re-installed, and many of the statues were restored (using Save Outdoor Sculpture funding). Sadly, however, this funding has not kept pace with the cost of on-going garden restoration and maintenance efforts.



Moreover, the Gibraltar mansion has been in decline for many years and currently is uninhabitable. Preservation Delaware has attempted to secure an adaptive reuse for the mansion: currently, the entire Gibraltar property is for sale. This is part of a preservation strategy to save and restore the mansion while retaining the garden, which would be leased back from the purchaser. If all goes as is planned, the future of the Marian Coffin Garden at Gibraltar should be assured. However, the situation at present is very uncertain: thus this garden fully merits inclusion in *Landslide 2006*.

## THE THREAT

The garden faces two major challenges: time and money.

**Time:** Preservation Delaware must quickly and successfully find a purchaser for the property or otherwise secure the future of Gibraltar.

**Money:** Interest in Gibraltar must be renewed, and public awareness and financial support reinvigorated. The public interest that fueled the restoration in the late 90's is needed again. In the early years of the restoration time and money were no object, and the project moved forward with great speed and intensity. However, after a year and a half, many people mistakenly concluded that the restoration was complete — thus public interest and donations waned. Instead, the garden is very much a “work-in-progress,” and funding is urgently needed for continuing restoration and maintenance efforts.

## HOW TO HELP

The public can help secure Gibraltar's future by

- Helping to spread the word about this genuinely spectacular historic garden.
- Donating money to Preservation Delaware — earmarked for Gibraltar — to fund its restoration and maintenance supplies, equipment and activities
- Funding all or part of the salary of a gardener and or staff-person: presently, the garden can only afford to pay the salary of one gardener.
- Finding a volunteer to assist with archiving the history of the garden.
- Volunteering to assist in the development and implementation of a plan to “market” the garden including the development of a strategic plan. Participating in publicity and fundraising efforts, which will generate awareness of the financial support, needed for the Marian Coffin Garden at Gibraltar.

### Readings

Coffin, Marian. *Trees and Shrubs for Landscape Effects*. NY: Scribners, 1940

Fleming, Nancy. *Money, Manure & Maintenance: Ingredients for Successful Gardens of Marian Coffin, Pioneer Landscape Architect 1876-1957*. Ed. by Anne Swanson. Weston, MA: Country Place Books, 1995

### Websites

[www.preservationde.org](http://www.preservationde.org)

[www.gardenscapes-gibraltar.blogspot.com](http://www.gardenscapes-gibraltar.blogspot.com)

### Site Address

The Marian Coffin Garden at Gibraltar

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