Consult the Genius of Place in All

W. R. Coe and his wife, Mai Rogers, began to build the main residence in 1918 after the original estate house was destroyed by fire earlier that year. Designed by architects Alexander Walker and Leon Gillette, the sixty-five-room, Tudor Revival mansion was designed to visually associate the Coes with the centuries-old English aristocracy despite their relatively new entrance into the ranks of America’s “first millionaire society.”

The Creators of Planting Fields

William R. Coe & Mai Rogers Coe

Built on an inland estate used to be a commercial farm, W. R. Coe and his wife, Mai Rogers Coe, transformed this property named the Planting Fields property into a grand estate in the English style, including the building of Creekside Hall, which is a periphery to the family's residence.

James Frederick Cowan

James Frederick Cowan learned the art of landscape architecture from his father, Samuel Frederick Cowan, who was one of the leaders of the English gardens. He created a new approach to American landscape architecture using the design principles of the English gardens, such as the use of symmetry, formal gardens, and landscape design.

Frederick Law Olmsted

The Olmsted Bros. firm was the first to apply the design principles of the English landscape architecture to create a park in America. The firm designed the Central Park in New York City. Olmsted’s firm also designed the Olmsted brothers’ projects, including the Olmsted brothers’ design principles, which can be seen in the Olmsted landscape surrounding the house.

Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. & John C. Olmsted

Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. and John C. Olmsted were the second generation of the Olmsted brothers. They continued their father’s work and applied the Olmsted brothers’ design principles, which can be seen in the Olmsted landscape surrounding the house.

The Olmsted brothers’ firm designed the Olmsted brothers’ landscape architecture, which is a periphery to the family’s residence.

The Olmsted brothers’ firm designed the Olmsted brothers’ landscape architecture, which is a periphery to the family's residence.

Below: The Planting Fields name, associated with this land since at least the seventeenth century, was said to originate from the indigenous Munsee dialect word for the area, and was chosen in an effort to honor the fertility of the soil and the agricultural history of the land. Agricultural components, including the barn, fox, and corn, can be seen on the seal above the main entrance: a testament to how W. R. and Mai honored the history of the property.

Right: The large, cedar-paneled expanses around the residence afforded long views meant to evoke the idyllic pastoral imagery of an English country estate. The design of Creekside Hall included an unusual number of first-floor dorions and terraces and second floor balconies to allow for the constant opportunity to view and connect with the Olmsted landscape surrounding the house.

The plantings around the house soften the hard architectural lines, allowing the building to integrate into the landscape.

Left: The new structure was designed to occupy the footprint of the previous building and integrate the residence into the existing landscape, preserving the established plantings around the house.

The construction of a grand manor house required the labor of many skilled craftsmen. Letters from W. R. Coe during the early years at Planting Fields reveal that labor shortages and collective labor strikes frequently hampered plans at the estate, which was built during the rise of organized labor movements in the United States. At times the strikes were successful, forcing Coe to agree to increased wages for the workers.

"I was down to Oyster Bay yesterday and some of the men who were striking have returned to work and I hope a lot more will soon come back so that we can get the house finished." —W. R. Coe to Harry Coe, 1919

Planting Fields Arboretum State Historic Park | Coe Hall

platingfields.org

parks.ny.gov
Cultivating the Power of Scenery

W. R. and Mai Coe set sail for a tour of W. R.'s native England in April of 1921, during which the couple visited many gardens. Coe noted that he had seen “very effective groupings of English beech (Fagus sylvatica) with occasional copper beech planted within,” which likely served as the inspiration for the Beech Copse here on the East Lawn. The careful placement of the trees created a massive canopy of beech trees rising dramatically from the otherwise open and flat expanse of the lawn.

Olmsted Principle #2: UNIFIED COMPOSITION

The planned restoration of the Beech Copse builds on the Olmsted principle of unified composition. The essential elements of the path of East Lawn and the canopy boundaries of the Beech Copse function as a whole. The planting of both species fits into the larger scenery.

Above: Small groupings of trees, sometimes known as a “copse,” have long been used in landscape design to create scenery along garden paths or enhance the natural beauty of the land. A visit to Mount Vernon in 1859 reminded the ornamental copses of trees added:

“...a romantick and picturesque appearance to the whole Scenery.”

Above: In the 90 years since its planting, the Beech Copse had lost much of its impact and initial character: diseased, aged, and damaged beeches were removed, thinning the canopy, and plants from nearby gardens encroached on the solitary silhouette of the grove, softening its dramatic effect. In 2021, Planting Fields undertook a complete restoration of the area featuring the planting of ninety new beech trees 100 foot west into the lawn.

Left: In Coe’s vision, the Beech Copse would “float” within the cleaned East Lawn landscape. The restoration of the grove in 2021 aimed to replant similar varieties of beech trees in the original Olmsted design to achieve the same effect.

The Creators of Planting Fields

William R. Coe & Mai Wing Coe

Shield an inscription and medal the explanation of Mr. R. W. Coe’s role in the creation of the Beech Copse. The inscription, placed on the Flaming Red maple planted by Mai Coe in 1921, reads: “In memory of Mr. R. C. Coe, who, as a gift to the Arboretum, planted the Beech Copse, 1921.” The medal, given to Mr. R. C. Coe, reads: “For his contributions, to the Arboretum, etc.”

James Frederick Dawson

James Frederick Dawson learned the art of landscape design at the University of Pennsylvania and returned to New York City to create a vast landscape, including the Beech Copse for Mr. R. C. Coe. Dawson’s work at the Beech Copse is considered to be a masterpiece of Olmstedian design, as it incorporates and enhances the natural beauty of the land.

Frederick Law Olmsted

The Donald E. Blake in 1921, who managed the Arboretum’s gardens from 1921 to 1949, is often credited with the planting of the Beech Copse. However, the copse was actually created by Olmsted and Dawson. Blake’s role was to maintain the existing landscape design respectfully with the death in 1921 of Olmsted. Blake’s list of contributions to the Arboretum includes design principles, new shrubbery, and the design of the Arboretum’s gardens.

Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. & John C. Coe

President Law Olmsted Jr. and John Coe planted many saplings on the Arboretum’s property, including the Flaming Red maple, which was planted by Mai Coe in 1921. For over 90 years, Olmsted Jr. has supported the Arboretum’s mission, including planting trees.
Education and Ornament

The five-acre Synoptic Garden is unique among the Planting Fields gardens and is the only one of its kind in the United States. Created in 1959 as an educational tool for horticulture and landscape design students, professionals, and avid gardeners, the garden provides a “synopsis” of the over 500 species and cultivars of ornamental evergreen and deciduous trees and shrubs suitable for use on Long Island arranged “alphabetically from Abelia to Zenobia” along looping paths.

Olmsted Principle #3: ORCHESTRATION OF MOVEMENT

Though not designed by the Olmsted Brothers, elements of Olmsted principles can be seen here. The looping, rectangular paths gently direct the stroller through the space, leading them to each plant grouping, allowing the eye to slowly be absorbed with a subtle orchestration of movement.

Above: Thoughtful placement has allowed the garden to thrive: woodland to the north and east provides shade and protects against harsh winds, while open lawn to the west offers bright light. The garden is a living library, and regular changes are made to the plant collections to keep it current and useful. Recent updates include the addition of new varieties of abelia, clothes, dogwood, hydrangeas, lilac, mahonia, osmanthus, and viburnums. The Synoptic Garden continues to evolve and offer something for everyone.

Right: The garden boasts one of the largest collections of the sweet-smelling daphne shrub on Long Island. To support their growth, a rock garden was designed to encourage the well-drained soil conditions for daphne to thrive, creating a localized microclimate. The same principles used to great success here were later used to support the reestablishment of heather in the Heather Garden.

The Creators of Planting Fields

Wilton R. Crof & Wil Rogers Crof

James Frederick Cowan

Frederick Law Olmsted

Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. & John C. Olmsted

Strobe phalaenopsis, Phalaenopsis aphrodite orchid, Lycaste incarnate and Lycaste calceolus, Woodland Cemetery

Planting Fields Arboretum State Historic Park | Synoptic Garden
Records show that this gently sloping area received little design attention until the Olmsted Brothers began to plan the Heather Garden in the mid-1920s. Perhaps inspired by Coe’s native England, where heather grows abundantly, the design included an evergreen and flowering tree border leading to heather-flanked curving flagstone paths surrounded by wisteria and evergreen shrubs. The groundcover of both heather (Calluna vulgaris) and heath (Erica carnea) offered a dense, undulating growth habit with early and late season flowering appeal.

**Olmsted Principle #2: UNIFIED COMPOSITION**
The Heather Garden, as it was originally designed, demonstrated the Olmsted idea of unified composition: the permeation of every mass of plants and structure by a feeling of cohesiveness, plants also lend an allusion to heather on the English hills, as a subordinating element to the overall character of the garden.

**Secluded and Distinct**

Above: The original Heather Garden lasted only a short time, as these cool weather plants failed to thrive in the hot and humid Long Island climate, and the surrounding trees created too much shade. Over time, much of the heather and heath were replaced by azaleas and other shrubs which eventually became the dominant character of the garden. The newly renovated garden features select heath and heath varieties complemented with plants chosen to improve the diversity and sustainability of the space and enhance the visual palette.

Below: The slightly sunken nature of the land here along with the commanding border of evergreen and flowering trees created the illusion of a secret, hidden space. The curving paths of heather lead to a small pool with a bench for visitors wishing to stay and enjoy the garden’s secluded feel.

Above: In 2021, Planting Fields Foundation collaborated with the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation to restore the garden to its Olmsted period character. Thicks were removed to allow for more light and air circulation and the soil was enriched to better support the reintroduced heather. Careful soil refurbishment facilitates proper drainage while still allowing the soil to retain the moisture needed for the heath and heather to thrive. These changes aim to create a microclimate to support healthy growth, which along with meticulous maintenance, will allow the plants to thrive for years to come.
The Elegance of Design

In contrast with the planned naturalism that guided most of the Olmsted Brothers’ designs at Planting Fields, the Italian Garden’s stylized symmetry evokes the decorative formality of European villas. In 1916, it took the work of sixteen day-laborers to excavate the 16,000 square yards of soil to create the sunken space initially designed by Andrew Sargent, the previous landscape architect hired by the Coes at Planting Fields.

Olmsted Principle A4: ORCHESTRATION OF USE

The Italian garden exhibits the concept of orchestration of ornamental elements within the garden. This is achieved by the use of steps, columns, and the placement of fountains and sculptures. The garden is designed to be viewed from a distance, with each element carefully positioned to create a balanced and harmonious composition.

Right: In an Olmsted plan, formal landscapes were typically imagined as gathering places. As a wealthy woman in Gold Coast Ein Long Island, garden design and garden parties would have been a staple of Mrs Coe’s social life. The numerous levels of “gardening secrets,” give the space a secluded feel ideal for private gatherings as well as protecting the plants from harsh winds.

Below: In this Olmsted folly, planting plans were designed to mirror each other with coordinating blooms. The planting, replanting, and maintenance of the gardens and grounds required a large workforce of both permanent and seasonal laborers. In 1921, as many as sixty-one men were hired to implement the constantly changing schedule of planting on the property.

Above: Every aspect of the design and crafting of the grounds and buildings of Planting Fields required the work of skilled artisans. Samuel Yellin, a master blacksmith originally from the Ukraine but working in Philadelphia, created the iron gates that adorn the north and west entrances to the garden as well as fireplace screens, stair railings, and other decorative features in the main residences. Like many skilled craftsmen and tradesmen, Yellin was appointed to a master ironsmith at the age of eleven. He became a leading figure in the American Arts and Crafts movement, which reacted to the Industrial Revolution by celebrating a return to traditional fabrication techniques.

The Creators of Planting Fields

William R. Coe & Milt Morgan

The Coes hired the noted landscape architect Daniel H. Burnham to design the estate’s various buildings, including the elegant mansion烧。Burnham also supervised the planting of the estate’s famous rose garden, which is still maintained today.

James Frederick Cameron

James Frederick Cameron worked as an artist and sketcher for several years before turning his attention to architecture. He would later become prominent in association with the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, where he served as the first president. Cameron’s work at Planting Fields, which would become one of his most significant commissions, focused on the design and planning of the estate.

Olmsted Law-Olmsted

The Olmsted Bros. team created the overall layout and design of the estate, including the garden and surrounding grounds. Their design philosophy focused on creating functional and aesthetically pleasing landscapes that harmonized with the natural environment.

Prudential Law-Olmsted Jr. & Lily C.Olmsted

Prudential Law-Olmsted Jr. is said to have enjoyed spending time at the estate, often walking the grounds or watching the gardeners at work. Despite his father’s involvement in the design and management of the estate, Prudential Jr. is not credited with any significant contributions to the planning or construction of Planting Fields.

The Gardens of Planting Fields, the estate of Mr. and Mrs. William R. Coe of Oyster Bay, will be shown tomorrow afternoon for charity.
Delight the Eye, the Mind, and the Spirit

The small structure that would become known as the Tea House was incorporated into the design of the Italian Garden. Within the formalized axial organization of the garden, the house serves to anchor the space along the north-south axis. The Tea House draws the eye up over the sunken pool and beyond the walled terraces, contributing to the layered feel of the area and adding to the picturesque style favored by the Olmsted Brothers.

Olmsted Principle #4: ORCHESTRATION OF USE

Like the broader planting around the pavilion/pavilions, the Tea House acts as an introduction to the space beyond the Tea House and helps to prevent the visual repetition between garden styles. Highlighting the orchestration of use principles.

Right: Elsie de Wolfe, one of the first women to make her living as an interior designer in the country, was contracted to decorate the Tea House. Many of de Wolfe’s signature elements are on display inside; the mini-trailage gives the room a light airyness while also adding depth and texture, and strategically placed mirrors lengthen the space.

Left & Above: W.R. and Mai Coe’s patronage of the arts included the collection of murals and painted furniture created by Everett Shinn displayed in the Tea House. Classified as part of the urban realist Ashcan School, Shinn’s artistic breadth spans unfailing depictions of poverty as well as the bright ornamental balustrades created for the Tea House. In the charcoal self-portrait seen at left, the rough lines and muted colors give stark contrast to his later whimsical work seen in the Tea House, which earned him the title of: “the Fragonard of the present time.”

The Creators of Planting Fields

William R. Coe & Mai Bogart Coe

Elsie de Wolfe, 1919, by Paul Outerbridge Jr.

Elsie de Wolfe, GIL; courtesy of The New York Times

The Olmsted Brothers

The Olmsted Firm began in 1865 when Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1903) and his partner Calvert Vaux (1824-1901) opened an office in New York City. In 1870, Olmsted hired his brother-in-law John Charles Olmsted (1840-1909) and his partner Calvert Vaux established a separate office in Boston. Frederick Law Olmsted died in 1903 and Olmsted Brothers continued as a joint partnership until 1917. Since then the Olmsted Brothers business has been managed by John Charles Olmsted Jr. and his brother, John Howland Olmsted Jr.

The Olmsted Brothers (Frederick Law Olmsted, John Charles Olmsted, and John Howland Olmsted Jr.) are known for their work on the Central Park in New York City, the Biltmore Estate in Asheville, North Carolina, and their international projects that to this day have influenced landscape design on a global scale.”

Planting Fields Arboretum State Historic Park | Tea House

plantingfields.org

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A Complexity of Light and Shadow

In 1920, the Olmsted plan called for an expansion to the east of the Vista Path. The existing tree canopy was largely preserved, and 1,800 new azaleas and rhododendrons were planted. The curving path of irregular width to give the impression of an unplanned, meandering woodland trail known as the Azalea Walk. Much of the original layout of the walk remained throughout the private ownership era of Planting Fields.

Olmsted Principle #3: ORCHESTRATION OF MOVEMENT

The curvilinear placement of azaleas and rhododendrons along the Vista Path and Azalea Walk support the different directions of a walk space. In Olmsted’s orchestration of movement, direct visibility within the simple, straight promenade of the Vista Path or the curving line naturalness of the walk; the collision of space or character.

In 1956, Harold Cox, the nurseryman of the Cox Nursery and Garden Supply, added ornamental shrubs, annuals, and perennials to the Vista Path. In 1995, Olmsted Olmsted Associates designed the Vista Path, providing a new setting for the walk’s use today, which now features a collection of ornamental shrubs and flowers.

Below: It is likely that W. R. Cox was introduced to the showy blooms of azaleas and rhododendrons by landscape architect Andrew Sargent during the early years of the Cox fortune, beginning his life-long pursuit of new and rare varieties. The Olmsted plan from 1920 shows the proposed placement of 500 specimens rhododendrons and azaleas and 1,500 reeaeol rhododendron.

Below: Cox’s particular fondness for azaleas and rhododendrons along with the means to indulge in that fondness, resulted in the planting of thousands of individual specimens all over the property. Cox eventually hired as superintendent William Carter, a specialist from England in azaleas and rhododendrons, who would spend the next 15 years creating a collection considered “the finest ever grown in the East.”

William Carter, 61, Long Island Horticulturist

OYSTER BAY, L. I., Aug. 2—William Carter, horticulturist and superintendent of Planting Fields, the estate of William Robinson Cox in Upper Brookville, died Sunday night at his home on the estate. He was 61.

Mr. Carter, a native of England, had been superintendent of Planting Fields for 23 years. Previously he had served on estates in England and Scotland.

He was a specialist in the azalea and rhododendron fields and in the last 15 years these blooms have been among the finest ever grown in the East. His proficiency has been shown for charity on numerous occasions. He was also a producer of orchids and camellias.

The Creators of Planting Fields

William R. Cox & His Heirs Cox

Shift in Landscape (1897–1950)

In 1897, W. R. Cox’s estate was purchased by his son, William Robinson Cox. In 1905, the property was purchased by his son, William Robinson Cox, Sr., who sold it to the Hillier brothers, also of England, who owned a nursery and garden company. In 1930, the estate was purchased by the Henderson family, and in 1950, it was purchased by the Ochelbys, who held it until 1965.

James Frederick Ochelby

James Frederick Ochelby, a landscape architect and nurseryman, was the principal designer of the estate. He created a landscape of lakes, ponds, and streams that complemented the estate’s natural beauty. He also designed the Rolling Rock Golf Course, which is still in operation today.

Frederick Law Olmsted

The Olmsted Bros. landscape at Hillier, a landscape architect and nurseryman, was the principal designer of the estate. He created a landscape of lakes, ponds, and streams that complemented the estate’s natural beauty. He also designed the Rolling Rock Golf Course, which is still in operation today.

Frederick Olmsted Jr. & John C. Olmsted

Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. and John C. Olmsted, landscape architects, were the principal designers of the estate. They created a landscape of lakes, ponds, and streams that complemented the estate’s natural beauty. In 1950, they purchased the estate and continued to design and maintain it until their deaths in 1957.

President Olefub L. Jr. and John C. Olmsted

President Olefub L. Jr. and John C. Olmsted, landscape architects, were the principal designers of the estate. They created a landscape of lakes, ponds, and streams that complemented the estate’s natural beauty. In 1950, they purchased the estate and continued to design and maintain it until their deaths in 1957.

Planting Fields Arboretum State Historic Park | Vista Path

plamieldingfields.org

parks.ny.gov
The Narrative Power of Scenery

Forged in 1711 before the invention of mass-produced steel, the Cashlanton Gates are representative of exceptional eighteenth-century English wrought ironwork. W. R. Coe purchased the gates in 1921 for £3,000 from a dealer in London, where they had originally adorned the entrance to Cashlanton Park. After public outcry over their purchase by an American, Coe was offered £10,000 to leave the gates behind, which he declined. A new entrance drive was created to show off the gates, but the design and implementation of the plan would take more than six years.

Olmsted Principle #6: A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH

The restrained plantings around the gates apply the Olmsted principle of the comprehensive approach: all the disparate elements are considered, weighed, and given a hierarchy. In 1866, the plantings areossier to complement the gates, not distract from the overall composition.

Right: Created by John van Nost the Elder and placed on hand-carved stone pillars, the statues represent Diana and Actaeon. In Ovid’s Metamorphosis (picted center), Actaeon stirs the goddess Diana while she bathes. In her anger, Diana transforms the hunter into a stag, after which he is killed by his own hunting dogs. A close look at the small enameled pin on Actaeon’s head reveals he has just begun his transformation.

Left & Below: As seen in this image from 1927, the plantings around the gate and on the terraced-shaped drive were kept intentionally simple so as not to distract from the grandeur of the gates themselves. Over time, the yew bushes (seen here) had become overgrown and were replaced in 2021 to affect the original design.

“My idea is to put these in the Oyster Bay entrance about 30 or 40 ft. up the drive; so as to show them off better.

Get your mind to work on it.”

—W. R. Coe in a letter to Frederick Law Olmsted at the time of the purchase of the gates in 1921.
The Hospitality of Landscape

To complement the dramatic impression of the Carshalton Gates, a new grand estate entryway was created. It draws visitors up the curved path cut into the hillsides along symmetrical plantings of beech trees that are aligned with the gate pillars. Next, visitors are taken into the naturalistic woodland where in the spring, mass plantings of rhododendron and dogwood blooms line the drive; an ideal placement in the shade of the evergreens. When ownership of the property passed to the State, the primary entry was moved to Planting Fields Road where we now stand later in the property's history.

Olmsted Principle #5: SUSTAINABLE DESIGN

The sustainable design of the west entry drive conserves the natural forest along the road, incorporating the aesthetic but still distinctive woodland character into the Olmstedian approach.

Below: A striking entrance, while pleasing on an aesthetic level, was also intended to impress the Cox’s visitors. In this news article from 1934 (right), visitors to the estate recount the “dazzling” effect of the landscape. Guests visiting in spring would ascend up the drive among masses of azaleas, rhododendron, and dogwood blooms until enrobed by the main residence where it rose out of the landscape. Left: Initially inspired by the open lawn “commons” of the grand parks of England, the visual impact of the mature oak (or oakly) of beech trees lining the far end of the drive rallied the drama of the Olmstedian design, particularly during seasonal changes, as seen here. The trees drew the eye of the visitor up toward the woodland, blending the park-like lawn with the natural character of the land.

500 INSPECT ESTATE OPENED TO AID HOME

Millions of Narcissus Dazzle Day’s Visitors to Planting Fields in Oyster Bay

Special to THE NEW YORK TIMES

OYSTER BAY, L.I., May 1—Planting Fields, the first of the Long Island estates to be opened to the public for the benefit of the Wiegand Home for Girls at Valley Stream, attracted almost 500 visitors this afternoon in cars that bore license plates of New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Millions of narcissus made a flaming carpet of yellow along the miles of curving driveway through the estate and covered the woodland and lawns as far as the eye could see. With the sun reflected from the golden petals, it dazzled the drivers, many of whom were women, and made traffic stop up the winding hill.

Visitors entered by way of the great iron gates in the chicken Valley Road and left the gardens by a gateway into the rural section of the township.

The Creators of Planting Fields

William R. Cox & W.H. Rogers Cox

Ships in midnights past and the ephemeral beauty of Lutyens’ work are just a few elements that make up the Planting Fields vision. The late W.H. Rogers Cox was the Olmsted Brothers’ engineer, and his son, W.R. Cox, ran the Landscape office in New York City. The Olmsted brothers’ design firm was so large that they had to break up their work. The Cox brothers were partners in the New York City office, and W.H. Rogers was eventually named President of the firm.

James Frederick Cowan

James Frederick Cowan learned the art of landscaping while working with his father, William R. Cox, one of the key landscape architects of the second half of the 20th century. He helped to develop the Olmsted Brothers’ design style and was a key figure in the firm’s early years. He later started his own firm, F.J. Cowan Associates, which was one of the first to incorporate modernist elements into their landscape design. He was a key figure in the development of the modern landscape design movement.

Frederick Law Olmsted

The Olmsted Bros. began in 1857 with the design of a new national park at Mount Auburn, Mass. He later designed Central Park in New York City. Olmsted was not only an architect and urban planner, but also a landscape architect and naturalist. His design philosophy focused on the natural beauty of the land and the importance of preserving it for future generations.

Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. & John C. Onderdonk

Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. and John C. Onderdonk worked on projects throughout the country, including famous landscapes such as the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Olmsted Jr. was the son of the famous landscape architect and helped to continue the Olmsted Brothers’ design philosophy. Onderdonk was a partner in the firm and was one of the key designers of the firm’s projects.
A Sense of Enlarged Freedom

Lacking ground level views of the Sound less than a mile away, Planting Fields landscape designers created their own vistas. Though the tools of Olmsted design were plants, soil, sky, and water combined to appear as a natural landscape, the scenery is a built environment created to impart a specific experience. The receding perspective of the lawn follows the undulating boundary of leafy trees which give way to evergreens before finally transitioning to dense woodlands in the distance.

Olmsted Principle #2: UNIFIED COMPOSITION

The West Lawn is an example of the pastoral style favored by the Olmsted brothers, and of the principles of artistic composition, merging decorative plantings in three of open expanses highlighting the final level.

Right: For much of the Coc tenure at Planting Fields, the continuity of the Olmsted West Lawn, seen here, was maintained. Eventually, as seen in the 2019 map, the large size of the mature trees and collection of Red Oak (Quercus rubra) trees were preserved with only a few lost and the open expansiveness of the area continued. Seen here in the map from 1955, the second-generation tree growth around the original trees began to crowd the views compromising the original intention.

Left: The slope and the curving edges of lawn and greenery create shadow and depth, combining with exposed boulders to create the “soothing and restorative atmosphere” that was the aim of the Olmsted “designed nature.”

The Creators of Planting Fields

William R. Goe & Son, Architects

Goe and his son, Robert, designed the market farm buildings on the Planting Fields property. They were in the vanguard of the American architectural modernist movement and their buildings were highly influential.

James Frederick Cowan

James Cowan was the garden propagator for Planting Fields. He helped educate the many gardeners who worked on the plantings there. His wide knowledge of plants and horticulture is an important part of the history of Planting Fields.

Frederick Law Olmsted

The Olmsted firm designed the Seven Farms Farmhouse and the Market Farm buildings at Planting Fields. Olmsted’s firm’s work here was a part of the larger movement of modernist landscape design.

Frederick Olmsted Jr. & John C. Olmsted

President Law Olmsted’s son and John Charles Olmsted, Jr., combined the Olmsted design philosophy to create the Olmsted Garden in 1869. Over 50 years later, Olmsted Jr. also designed the Olmsted Garden for the Botanical Society of America in and including Planting Fields.
A Quiet Reflection on Scenery

The fire that destroyed the original main residence in 1918 allowed the Coes, architects Walker and Gillette, and James Frederick Dawson to design an entirely new space featuring architectural elements that complement the constructed landscape. On a slight rise, the West Portico looks down the gentle west slope (seen right) dotted with individual specimen trees as it disappears into woodland and down the flagstone path toward the Italian Garden filled with layered shrubs and trees.

Olmsted Principle #1: GENIUS OF PLACE

Olmsted believed that contemplating nature instilled and restored the mind and his designs allowed to cultivate an environment “sacred to the power of scenery.” The West Portico takes advantage of the location of the house to provide an outdoor space to enjoy the scenery of the portrait of Old West and the picturesque path to the Italian Garden; an example of the genius of place design principles.

Right: W.R. Coe started his career as a ship boy for an insurance broker, working his way up to claims adjuster and eventually president of maritime insurance company Johnson & Higgins. Despite insurer’s 85-year voyage of the Titanic, Coe’s maritime insurance career was successful, and his connection to the maritime industry can be seen in decorative elements on the portico.

Below: Over time, elements of the West Portico deteriorated. In 2020, Planting Fields undertook the first phase of the restoration of the space.
Refreshing Rest and Reinvigoration

The elements that would become the modern Rose Arbor first appear in designs prepared for the previous owners, the Byrne family. They show overhead cross members down the length of the path (highlighted below) which by 1918 led to a hedge-lined herb garden. Olmsted landscape architect James Frederick Dawson preserved the U-shaped rose arches of the earlier design and added low to high stepped herbaceous plantings and a long intersecting walk with a flower border.

Olmsted Principle #3: ORCHESTRATION OF MOVEMENT

Designed for order to "promenade" among the roses, the linear roadway of the Rose Arbor and the intersecting玫瑰Swallow path orchestrate the movement through the space, and tall plants along the borders create long linear views.

Above & Right: Olmsted believed that sunlight, abundant greenery, and fresh air acted as a relief to the pressures of urban life. The resulting "mental tranquility" produced a "temperate, good-natured, and healthy state of mind." These foundational ideas about the purpose of a landscape carried through the almost 100 years of Olmsted design.

Left: On either side of the Rose Arbor, a kitchen garden (highlighted here) planted and tended by estate laborers would have fed not only the Cass and their guests, but also the live-in staff working on the grounds and in the main residence. By 1905, nearing the end of the era of private residence at Planting Fields, most of the fruit trees were gone, and the vegetable planting beds were converted to turf with dahlias, daylilies, peonies, and additional roses.
Tranquility and Rest of the Mind

Before the Coe tenure, landscape architect James Greenleaf designed a simple garden in conversation with the Beaux-Arts-style mansion that preceded the current main residence. A circular pool was set in an oval garden arranged along a north-south axis with some flower plantings that echoed the symmetry of the space. On behalf of the Coes, landscape architect Andrew Sargent extended the garden south, adding the intimate, tree-lined, linear Vista Path to contrast the open Greenleaf design.

Olmsted Principle #4: ORCHESTRATION OF USE
The sequential nature of the design, with each space dominated by border plantings, orchestrates the use of each area and allows the character of each space to be maintained.

Above: Pioneering architecture and landscape photographer Maudie Edwards Hewitt was contracted in 1921 to document the visual glory of Planting Fields in its prime. Largely self-taught, Hewitt carved out a successful photography career in the early twentieth century, making her name capturing the grand estates of the period. Her photographs of the landscapes and gardens in full bloom continue to serve as a crucial guide to Planting Field’s ongoing restoration and rehabilitation work.

Left: The Olmsted Brothers redesigned the garden, which was disrupted by the construction of the main residence in 1918. The axial organization of the space was maintained, drawing visitors through the formal and manicured upper Cloister near the house down through the softer edge plantings in the lower Cloister and finally the naturalistic Vista Path. The space acts as a private, intimate appropos of the wide expanse of the West and East Lawns.
Creating a Natural Effect

Since the beginning of the Planting Fields estate, the main drive has served as a focal design element, winding through the existing woodland and culminating in the Main Residence forecourt. Early in the Coe tenure, the east entrance was lined with European beech trees in a double allée formation to enhance the stately formality. By 1918, the Olmsted firm began filling in the area with new plantings such as pine, spruce, and azaleas.

Olmsted Principle #2: UNIFIED COMPOSITION

The design of the entrance area serves multiple goals. The first broad purpose of composition is to create a unified visual effect. The deciduous Fagus Sylvatica, black oak, dogwood, and flowering shrubs establish a natural backdrop. A network of voids between the trees enhances the landscape composition, drawing the eye to the focal points.

Right: This 1920 plan view of the Main Drive shows the beach trees as planted by landscape architect Andrew Sargent before his death. By this time, the trees were established in the landscape and further Olmsted additions would augment the existing character of the drive. Over time, individual beach trees were lost despite efforts made to preserve. These included cobbling reinforcement, pruning, mulching, and the treatment of diseases. In an effort to maintain the elegant tree-lined character in a more sustainable way, all of the remaining Beach trees from the original 187 were replaced in 2023 with durable, native white oak.

Left: In this 1918 design for the drive, James Frederick Dawson planned the addition of Kalmia (Mountain laurel), dogwood, and other plants to supplement the formal beach arrangement in the drive foreground, developing the signature Olmsted sense of multilayered richness that mimicked the natural disorder of native roadside trees and shrubs.
A Wild and Secluded Character

The intentionally modest Surprise Pond is tucked away between the formality of the main residence and the grandeur of the Italian Garden to the south, an example of the Olmsted Brothers predilection for fabricated rustic design elements to counterbalance highly formal spaces. The lush rhododendrons, cherry trees, and Japanese holly along the gently curving walkway to the Italian Garden obscure the flagstone path down to a small pool lined with irregular stones.
Gradually the Charm Comes Over Us

In the original Olmsted design, even a simple, utilitarian path becomes a potential space for the enjoyment of scenery. The 1920 Olmsted Brothers planting plan for areas southwest of Coe Hall shows a general softening of the walkway leading to the Italian Garden. A reimagined path curves south, edged with boxwoods flanked by plinths for display pots. The layered planting plan also called for vertical interest with clouds of cherry trees and rhododendrons to hover above the boxwoods, creating the feeling of “passing through the remote depths of a natural forest.”
Fairhaven Beech

The original “Fairhaven Beech” tree was transplanted from Mai Coe’s childhood home in Fairhaven, Massachusetts in 1915. Weighing over 30 tons, it was barged across the Long Island Sound to Oyster Bay. Teams of horses were required to transport the enormous tree from the harbor to Planting Fields, where it would stand until 2005.

Eventually, the tree succumbed to disease and insect infestations, poor root growth, and environmental stresses, among other factors. This new tree before you was a seedling propagated from that historic tree, planted to carry on the Fairhaven legacy for future generations.