

# Rose Standish Nichols, A Proper Bostonian

*Judith B. Tankard*

**O**utspoken advocate of social reform, tireless promoter of international peace, intrepid traveler, connoisseur of antiques, and all-round enthusiast of the arts, Rose Standish Nichols (1872–1960) was for many decades a familiar institution to the denizens of Boston’s Beacon Hill. But she was also one of the country’s earliest professional garden designers and an accomplished writer of garden history and criticism. Her three books on historical gardens in England, Italy, and Spain, together with dozens of articles about gardens around the world, earned her a considerable reputation in her own lifetime.

However, unlike the names of her well-known contemporaries—Marian Coffin, Beatrix Farrand, Ellen Shipman—Nichols’ name long ago fell into obscurity, largely because so few of her gardens survive. Even for those few, there remain none of the plans, drawings, or client correspondence that might enable restorers to bring them back to life. The papers of Coffin, Farrand, and Shipman have been preserved in libraries or other institutions.<sup>1</sup> But Nichols seems not to have hired assistants; she had few professional affiliations; she may not even have had an office; and she herself made no provisions for establishing an archive. That may partly explain why, sometime after her death, documents related to her work disappeared.

Unlike her colleagues whose lives were devoted almost exclusively to professional design, Nichols spent a great deal of time on her many other interests, and even in her professional life she may have regarded herself primarily as a writer and connoisseur rather than a designer. The pursuit of a financially viable career—the primary goal of Coffin, Farrand, and Shipman—seems to have been of little importance to her: the number of commissions she undertook was small, and most of them can be traced to her renown as an author or to family connections.



*Watercolor portrait of Rose Standish Nichols by Taylor Greer, 1912*

Nichols was well informed in all the many fields that piqued her curiosity. To this day she is remembered by longtime Bostonians for her Sunday afternoon teas, which brought together people of diverse professions for “a friendly exchange of ideas in order to create a better understanding among people.” In 1896, “to create a feeling of neighborliness on the Hill,” she established the Beacon Hill Reading Club, and under its aegis she invited women to her elegant Beacon Hill home to discuss important books of the day and even to read drafts of their own works.<sup>2</sup> She wrote many magazine articles on the subject of antiques and prepared a book (unpublished) on American decorative arts.<sup>3</sup> Her home, located at 55 Mt. Vernon Street, is now the Nichols House Museum, established in 1961 by a legacy in her will. Furnished with ancestral portraits and antiques collected on her many trips abroad, the house museum offers

a glimpse of early twentieth-century life on Boston's Beacon Hill.

Nichols was a forthright woman who rarely stood on ceremony when she had a bone to pick. In his book *The Proper Bostonians*, Cleveland Amory described Nichols as a noted Beacon Hill spinster who did not hesitate to write directly to Washington during World War II to complain that Admiral Halsey was "a disgrace to the Navy," and—worse—"not a gentleman."<sup>4</sup> Much earlier, in 1908, Nichols and Boston poet Amy Lowell successfully opposed a controversial proposal to move the Boston Athenaeum from Beacon Hill to Back Bay. After the First World War, she enlisted the first lady, Edith Galt Wilson, to urge her husband to include a woman among the American delegates to the 1919 Paris Peace Conference. President Wilson refused, but Nichols checked into a nearby hotel and sat in on all the meetings anyway.<sup>5</sup>

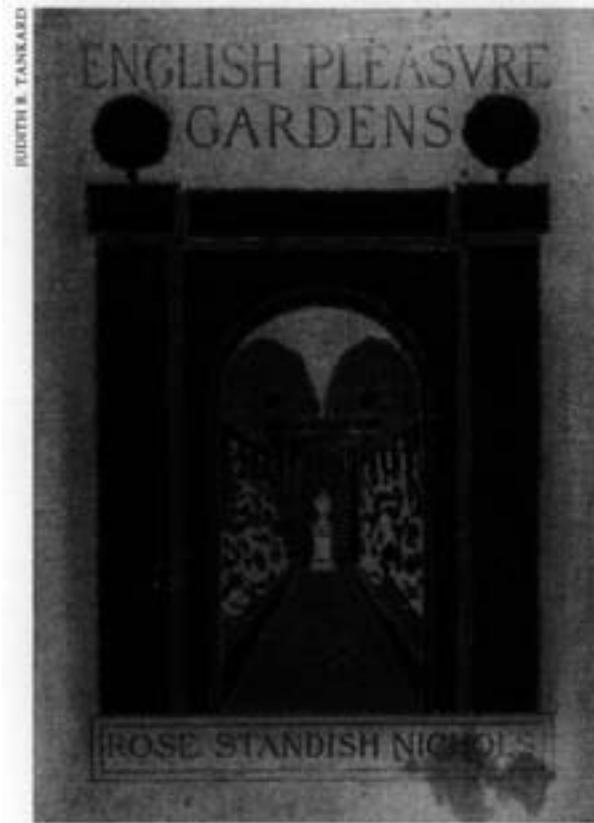
Nichols believed that the love of gardens is universal and that this shared passion could be a tool for improving international relations. For that reason she fostered friendships with influential women around the world, including Queen Sophie of Greece. In one of her articles Nichols described the queen's deep love of gardening and her remarkable garden, designed by the English landscape architect Thomas Mawson. She had been introduced to the royal family through a Beacon Hill neighbor, Gordon Allen; by her own account, her afternoon at the royal palace included "a discussion with the King about international politics."<sup>6</sup> This was typical Rose Nichols.

Nichols first became enamored of gardening as a child, when her grandfather Thomas Johnston Homer allowed her to cultivate a small corner of his garden in Roxbury. Rose and her two younger sisters Marian and Margaret grew up in Boston at 130 Warren Street, where their father, Arthur Howard Nichols, practiced homeopathic medicine. In 1885, when Rose was thirteen, the Nichols family moved to the house on Mt. Vernon Street, where she would live for the remainder of her life. Rose's mother, Elizabeth Fisher Homer, was the sister-in-law of Augustus Saint-Gaudens. In 1889, when the Nichols family spent the summer at Saint-Gaudens' home in the Cornish Colony of rural

New Hampshire, Rose immediately fell in love with the mountains. The following winter she persuaded her father to buy an old farmhouse in Cornish, where she spent many happy summers enjoying the area's renowned natural beauty and learning about gardens. It was her uncle Augustus who, because of his admiration for her garden there, encouraged her to take up garden design.

Like many garden designers, Nichols devised her own training program; the profession was still in its formative stage and few educational options were open to women. Our knowledge of her studies is sketchy. She was tutored privately by Charles A. Platt, an artist-turned-architect whom she had first met in Cornish.<sup>7</sup> One winter, while living in New York City with the Saint-Gaudens family, she studied drafting with Thomas Hastings of the architectural firm Carrère and Hastings. In January of 1899 she was admitted as a special student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Records show that she took only one course, an upper-level design studio, suggesting that she already possessed some advanced skills. The course was taught by Désiré Despradelle, a charismatic professor of architecture whose teaching methods were based on Beaux Arts principles.<sup>8</sup> It was here, she later said, that she "learned to apply architectural principles to the plans of gardens."<sup>9</sup>

Nichols also enrolled at the École des Beaux Arts in Paris where she took at least one course. Later she studied in England with "the author of *The English Formal Garden*," as she put it. It is unclear whether she meant H. Inigo Triggs, author of a sumptuous folio entitled *The Formal Garden in England and Scotland*, or F. Inigo Thomas, co-author with Reginald Blomfield of *The Formal Garden in England*. Whichever it was, Nichols' approach to design became firmly entrenched in formalism rather than in the naturalism whose best-known advocate was William Robinson, author of *The Wild Garden* (1870) and *The English Flower Garden* (1883). Nichols rarely alluded to Robinson or to naturalism in either her writings or her design work. Her allegiance to the formal garden was shared with the artists of the Cornish Colony. Years later she wrote, "All the artists in Cornish . . .



*Nichols' English Pleasure Gardens was published in 1902.*

became champions and exponents of the so-called 'formal' school. We eagerly read John Sedding's *Garden Craft Old and New* and got ideas from [Blomfield's] *The Formal Garden in England*.<sup>10</sup>

Nichols' first book, *English Pleasure Gardens*, appeared in 1902. It championed the formal garden and carefully traced the origins and history of English gardens, with emphasis on Elizabethan and Tudor walled gardens. Part of the book's charm lies in its visual materials, which include her own photographs and drawings as well as illustrations from medieval manuscripts that Nichols had ferreted out in libraries and museums. *English Pleasure Gardens* remains a useful reference for garden history even today.

An energetic traveler, Nichols made thirty trips abroad in search of gardens to write about. After World War I, she published two more books in the same format as the first, *Spanish and Portuguese Gardens* (1924) and *Italian Pleasure Gardens* (1928). For both of these

books, Nichols chose gardens that were not well known to American and English travelers. Her extensive knowledge of each country's history, decorative arts, and architectural styles enriched her books with a cultural flavor lacking in other garden books of the period. Over the course of her life she also published about fifty magazine articles on gardens in France, Germany, Ireland, Greece, Spain, Portugal, India, and China, but most of her writings were devoted to her first loves, the gardens of England and Italy.

Around 1896, while she was still pursuing her studies, Nichols designed her first garden, at Mastlands, the family's summer home in the Cornish Colony. She laid out a sunken walled garden in a clearing among the old farmyard enclosures, using the abundant stone of the area.<sup>11</sup> The garden so transformed the undistinguished farmhouse that the family abandoned their plans to build a new house.<sup>12</sup> Set in a grove of the tall pine trees that had given the property its name, it was hailed by noted garden writer Frances Duncan as "one of the most delightful gardens in all artist-inhabited and garden-loving Cornish. . . . Miss Nichols has shown herself wise beyond her years."<sup>13</sup>

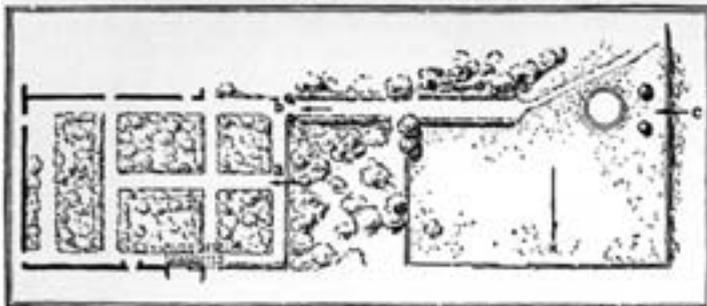
The garden, separated from the house by a sloping grass terrace and a low retaining wall, was reached by descending a few steps leading down from the terrace. The large rectangular space was divided into sixteen beds with a network of linear paths, the main one on axis with the porch—a design derived from the English walled gardens that inspired Nichols throughout her career. With its hardy New England plants, the Mastlands garden—still intact—has a personal nature that was lacking in her work for clients.

Despite the lack of archival material, some information about Nichols' professional career has recently come to light, mostly from research in periodicals. About thirty commissions have been identified, ranging geographically from California and Arizona to Illinois, Wisconsin, Georgia, and, of course, New England. The list of clients is heavily sprinkled with prominent Boston society names, such as Mrs. Gardiner Green Hammond, Mrs. Francis Peabody, and Mrs. Philip Sears.

FROM AMERICAN GARDENS, EDITED BY GUY LOWELL, 1955. LIBRARY OF THE ANGLED ARBORETUM



**A Garden at Cornish, N. H.**



- In the Flower Garden *a*  
 1 The South Path *b*  
 2 Looking from the Terrace *c*

*Two views of the garden at "Mastlands," Cornish, New Hampshire, and its plan.*

Nichols landed her first professional commission in 1904 when a Beacon Hill neighbor, Ellen Mason, asked for advice about her Newport, Rhode Island, garden. Since Miss Mason, an heiress from a prominent Boston family, embraced many causes such as Indian rights, tenement improvement, and family welfare, designer and client had much in common. In a magazine article about the Mason house and garden, Nichols claimed to have laid out the garden as a series of enclosures, including a cold-frame area, a cutting garden, fountain garden, and—near the house—an ornamental garden in a style “reminiscent of Spain.”<sup>14</sup> Curiously, she neglected to mention that the entire estate, including the garden plots, had been laid out by the Olmsted firm in 1882. Nichols’ role in 1904 seems to have been limited to planting design.

In fact, it was rare that Nichols had full responsibility for the layout of a garden; more typically her role was confined to designing planting schemes for gardens previously laid out by the architect of the house or by landscape architects such as Jens Jensen or the Olmsted firm. In Lake Forest, Illinois, an area where she completed a dozen commissions, she frequently worked with architects Howard Van Doren Shaw and David Adler. The connection to Lake Forest may have come about through her brother-in-law, Arthur Shurcliff, whose professional path crossed that of Adler.

One of Nichols’ most spectacular Lake Forest commissions was the water court at the House of the Four Winds, designed by Shaw for Hugh McBirney. Inspired by the Generalife gardens in Granada (which were illustrated in her book *Spanish and Portuguese Gardens*), Nichols’ striking but understated plantings accentuated the geometry of Shaw’s garden layout. At Haven Wood, a Renaissance-style villa designed by Shaw for steel magnate Edward

Ryerson, Nichols shared the limelight with Jens Jensen, who laid out the grounds, and Shaw, who designed the principal garden features.

A project that Nichols worked on with David Adler—a large lakeside garden in Milwaukee for Lloyd R. Smith, an executive of the A. C. Smith Corporation—illustrates Nichols' use of her extensive knowledge of historic gardens. Here, as for another commission in Augusta, Georgia, she adapted a water feature from the Villa Cicogna in the Italian Lakes, laying out a terrace garden and a long water cascade to accompany Adler's Italian Renaissance-style house. No drawings or photographs of the garden remain, but it is currently being restored based in part on the architect's records.

Through her Lake Forest connections, Nichols received a commission in 1913 from Chicago businessman Charles Blair Macdonald for his new home, Ballyshear, in Southampton, Long Island. One of the leaders in bringing golf to the United States, Macdonald had developed the National Golf Course on Long Island and built for himself a house overlooking the links, on a 72-acre property. Here, in contrast to most of her commissions, Nichols had major design responsibility. She laid out two walled gardens to the east of the house, the upper one planted with evergreens and perennial borders and the lower one surrounded by an arbor covered with grapevines. Sadly, these lavishly planted gardens were short-lived, being replaced in the 1920s for the second owner of the house, Charles Van Vleck, by an Annette Hoyt Flanders design.

The circumstances surrounding the gardens of Mrs. Gifford Pinchot at Grey Towers, in Milford, Pennsylvania, are more typical of the commissions that Nichols received. When she was approached in 1937, quite late in her career, the gardens at Grey Towers were already well developed. Gifford Pinchot, a two-term governor of Pennsylvania who is best remembered for having elevated the practice of forestry to a science, made his home at Grey Towers after 1910. His wife, Long Island heiress Cornelia Bryce Pinchot, set out to make her mark on the gardens, leaving her husband to improve the grounds. In 1918 she asked Ellen Shipman to advise her on the plantings for a one-and-one-half-acre walled garden that had been built in



Water court with replica of Giambologna's Mercury (1564) at "House of the Four Winds," Lake Forest, Illinois, designed by Howard Van Doren Shaw and Rose Standish Nichols



"Haven Wood," Lake Forest, Illinois Nichols used eastern red cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*) in place of the too tender Italian cypresses (*Cupressus sempervirens*).



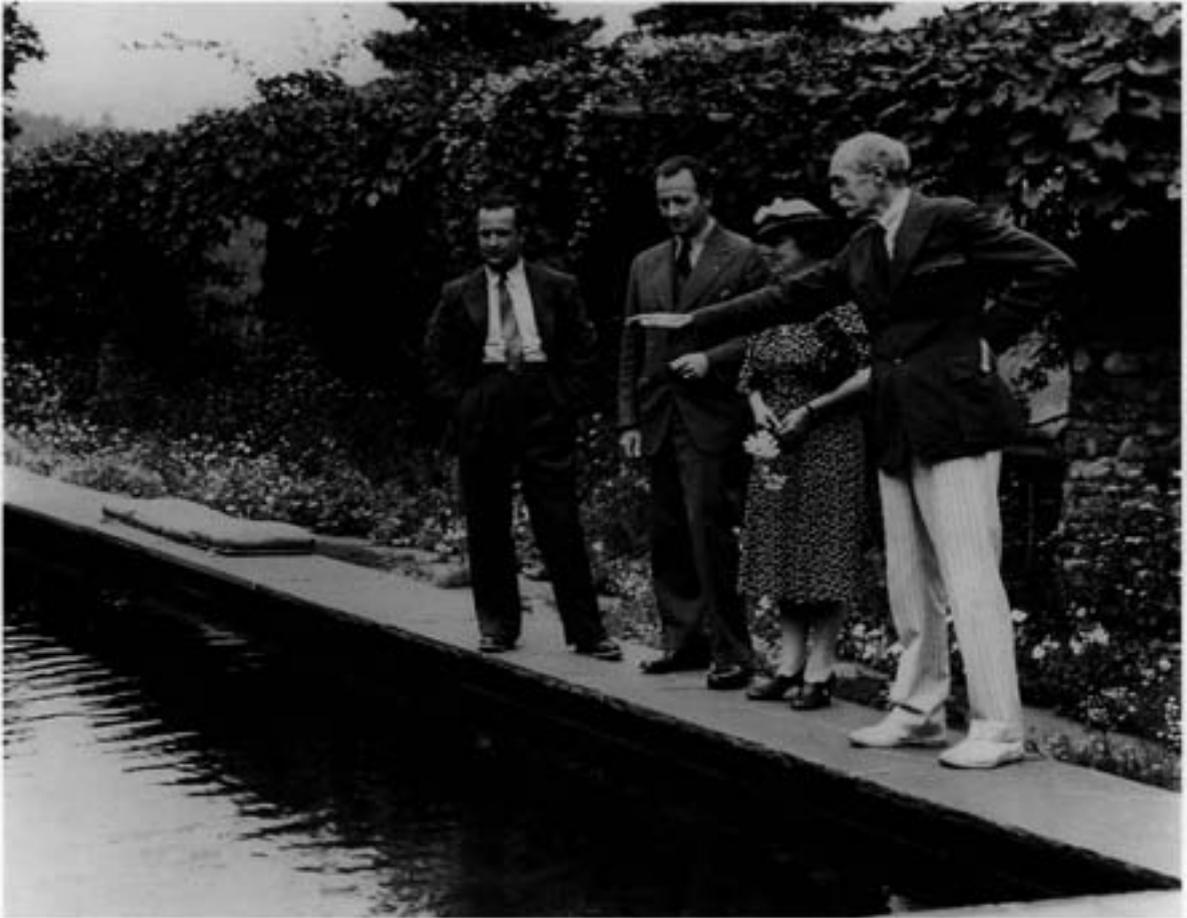
*The great water-staircase at the Villa Cicogna, Bisuschio.*



*Water-staircase at the Villa Terrace Museum of Decorative Arts, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.*



*The walled garden of perennials and evergreens at "Ballyshear," Southampton, New York.*



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, FOREST SERVICE

*Gifford Pinchot (right) and guests at Grey Tower's swimming pool. Nichols planted the walls and borders*

1889, the same year as the looming gray stone house designed by Richard Morris Hunt. Like Nichols, Mrs. Pinchot loved the traditional English walled gardens she had visited on trips abroad, and over the years she embellished the lushly planted walled garden with classical columns and terracotta vases.

By the 1930s, Mrs. Pinchot's attention had turned to borders for a new swimming pool. She first hired Harriet Kaupp to draw up a planting plan that included delphinium, lilies, canterbury bells, and iris edged with sweet william and coral bells. In 1937, when Mrs. Pinchot was introduced to Rose Nichols, she asked her to prepare another planting plan for the pool border. Nichols agreed to come to Milford: "I shan't charge anything for time spent in traveling. The cost of the plan will be reduced to the minimum because I think it would be fun to work with you in such a lovely spot."

Mrs. Pinchot replied, "What I want from you is first, a new point of view, and second and most important, the benefit of your expert knowledge and wide experience."<sup>15</sup>

Nichols' plan, which like other documents related to the property survived in the Grey Towers archives, was dated November 7, 1937. It was quickly approved. "Anything you say is one hundred per cent right," Mrs. Pinchot wrote. The plan called for five-foot-wide flower borders encircling the pool, edged by dwarf French marigolds and ageratum. Nichols proposed a succession of bloom from June through September in a palette of orange, yellow, buff, copper, salmon, and white, using lilies, gladioli, salvia, hollyhocks, and various annuals. Unfortunately, Mrs. Pinchot's dreams for the pool garden were never realized. When she sent Nichols a check the following July, she enclosed a note saying that she'd had to cut back drastically on

the upkeep of Grey Towers, even letting the longtime gardener go. "Things went rather higgledy-piggledy. . . . I'm afraid the planting plan was not adhered to."<sup>16</sup>

Although little survives of Rose Nichols' gardens, her legacy should not be underestimated. In addition to her important books and articles, it includes the gardens, which deserve—and are now getting—further study. The resurgence of interest in the golden age of American garden design has led to the rediscovery and preservation of the work by early practitioners. Mastlands, Rose Nichols' summer home in Cornish, New Hampshire, has recently become the Cornish Colony Museum and its slumbering walled garden has been replanted. The Lloyd Smith estate in Milwaukee has become the Villa Terrace Decorative Arts Museum and the water cascade is undergoing restoration. Restoration is being considered for Grey Towers (now a National Historic Landmark) along with some of its gardens. Several private gardens in Lake Forest still exist in fragmentary form or have taken on a new life under sympathetic owners who share Nichols' passion for gardening.<sup>17</sup>

#### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Coffin's archives are held at the Winterthur Museum and Library, Delaware; Farrand's are located at The College of Environmental Design Documents Collection, University of California at Berkeley; and Shipman's papers are in the Rare and Manuscripts Collection, Cornell University Library, Ithaca, New York.
- <sup>2</sup> Both quotations are from George Taloumis, "Rose Standish Nichols: Sixty Years Ago She Organized the Beacon Hill Reading Club (1896)," *Boston Sunday Globe*, 16 September 1956.
- <sup>3</sup> Entitled "New England Baroque," circa 1933, the working typescript and illustrations are held in the archives of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities in Boston.
- <sup>4</sup> Cleveland Amory, *The Proper Bostonians* (1950), 109–110.
- <sup>5</sup> Southard Menzel, "Sketches of the Life and Character of Rose Nichols, Artist, Collector, Social Reformer, Museum Founder," in *Rose Standish Nichols as We Knew Her: A Tribute to a Friend* (privately printed in Boston, 1986), 11–13.
- <sup>6</sup> Rose Standish Nichols, "A Glimpse of a Pro-American Queen and Her Gardens," *House Beautiful* (August 1922), 110–111.

<sup>7</sup> Taloumis, "Rose Standish Nichols."

<sup>8</sup> Kimberly A. Shilland, Curator, Architectural Collections, provided insight into Nichols' course of study at MIT.

MIT's short-lived landscape design program (1900–1910) was directed by Guy Lowell, who advised women not to go into landscape gardening "unless you simply can't keep out." Marian Coffin and Martha Brookes Hutcheson were among his students (From Mary Bronson Hartt, "Women and the Art of Landscape Gardening," *The Outlook*, 24 March 1908, 704).

<sup>9</sup> Taloumis, "Rose Standish Nichols."

<sup>10</sup> Rose Standish Nichols, "A Little Garden Hunt in England," *House Beautiful* (July 1923), 29. Nichols acknowledged having met Thomas "a few years later."

<sup>11</sup> Menzel, "Sketches," 10–11.

<sup>12</sup> Margaret Homer Shurcliff, *Lively Days: Some Memoirs of Margaret Homer Shurcliff* (Taipei: Literature House, 1965), 34.

<sup>13</sup> Frances Duncan, "A Cornish Garden," *Country Life in America* (March 1908), 507.

<sup>14</sup> Rose Standish Nichols, "A Newport House and Garden," *House and Garden* (April 1905), 189–194.

<sup>15</sup> Cornelia Bryce Pinchot, letter to Rose Standish Nichols, 6 October 1937, Pinchot Papers, Library of Congress, courtesy of Grey Towers.

<sup>16</sup> Correspondence between Cornelia Bryce Pinchot and Rose Nichols, 1937–1938, Pinchot Papers, Library of Congress, courtesy of Grey Towers.

<sup>17</sup> See Deborah A. Starr, "Inspirations Past and Present," *Horticulture*, February 1996, 42–47.

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