

# Life at Mastlands: Rose Standish Nichols and the Cornish Art Colony

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## Introduction

This paper summarizes research conducted in the summer of 2014 in pursuit of information relating to the Nichols family's life at Mastlands, their country home in Cornish, New Hampshire.

This project was conceived with the aim of establishing a clearer picture of Rose Standish Nichols's attachment to the Cornish Art Colony and providing insight into Rose's development as a garden architect, designer, writer, and authority on garden design. The primary sources consulted consisted predominantly of correspondence, diaries, and other personal ephemera in several archival collections in Boston and New Hampshire, including the Nichols Family Papers at the Nichols House Museum, the Rose Standish Nichols Papers at the Houghton Library at Harvard University, the Papers of the Nichols-Shurtleff Family at the Schlesinger Library at the Radcliffe Institute, and the Papers of Augustus Saint Gaudens, the Papers of Maxfield Parrish, and collections relating to several other Cornish Colony artists at the Rauner Special Collections Library at Dartmouth College. After examining large quantities of letters and diaries, a complex portrait of Rose Nichols's development emerges. These first-hand accounts reveal a woman who, at an early age, was intensely drawn to the artistic society of the Cornish Colony and modeled herself as one of its artists. Benefitting from the influence of her famous uncle Augustus Saint Gaudens, Rose was given opportunities to study and mingle with some of the leading artistic and architectural luminaries of her day in Cornish, Boston, New York, and Europe. Inspired by the pervading interest in gardens and garden design in Cornish, but also spurred by her own spirited determination, Rose Nichols

dedicated herself to launching a career as a garden architect and scholar. Once established, Rose used her growing influence to bring various personalities and potential clients to Cornish, contributing to the vibrancy of the community while simultaneously bolstering her reputation.

### Rose Nichols and the Cornish Art Colony

Before acquiring Mastlands, the Nichols family's usual summer home was Rye Beach, New Hampshire where Arthur Nichols ran a summer medical practice for over thirty years. This routine might have continued undisrupted but for Elizabeth Homer Nichols's sister Augusta Homer's marriage to the sculptor Augustus Saint Gaudens in 1877. In 1885 the Saint Gaudenses began spending summers in Cornish, New Hampshire where Augustus Saint Gaudens set up a summer studio.

Rose's particular interest in Cornish certainly began at this time. A letter preserved in the Nichols Family Papers at the Nichols House Museum may pinpoint the beginning of her knowledge and interest in Cornish; the letter is from Rose's uncle Thomas Homer and was sent from Windsor, Vermont in 1885. Windsor was the location of the post office nearest to Cornish, and letters written to and from the Cornish Colony often carry this postmark. In this letter Thomas describes his trip to the towns of Dublin and Cornish, New Hampshire, where he stayed with his sister Augusta and her family. Thomas's letter recounts a climbing expedition to Mount Ascutney, the iconic mountain that dominates the landscape around Cornish. Thomas was accompanied on his trip by Evarts Tracey—nephew of New York senator William Evarts, whose family owned significant tracts of land in Vermont near the New Hampshire border.<sup>1</sup> Evarts's daughter married Charles Beaman of

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Homer to Rose Standish Nichols, September 6, 1885. Nichols Family Papers, Box 1, F16. Nichols House Museum.

New York who subsequently amassed roughly 1,000 acres of land in the area of Plainfield and Cornish, New Hampshire. It was at the urging of Charles Beaman that Augustus Saint Gaudens spent his first summer in Cornish, renting an eighteenth-century inn called Huggin's Folly. Saint Gaudens returned to the same house for several subsequent summers, eventually purchasing the inn and extensively renovating it, renaming the estate Aspet (figure 1).

The informal grouping of artist's summer homes that gradually coalesced around Saint Gaudens in Cornish came to be known as the Cornish Art Colony. Among the first artists to settle in Cornish after Saint Gaudens were painters Thomas Wilmer Dewing and his wife Maria Oakey Dewing; painter and muralist Henry O. Walker and his wife, painter and poet Laura Walker; artist and architect Charles Platt, and painter George de Forest Brush. These artists were friends and colleagues, and shared a common background of study in Paris. Many taught at the Art Students League in New York and were members of the Society of American Artists, an exhibition group that formed in 1877 in opposition to the conservative National Academy of Design. They were all among the leading lights of what is now regarded as the American Renaissance movement in art.

As the first wave of artists brought their friends to Cornish the colony gradually expanded. Stephen Parrish and his son Frederick Maxfield Parrish, Henry Prellwitz and Edith Prellwitz, and Kenyon Cox were among the next to arrive, and soon after the colony grew to include musicians such as composer Arthur Whiting, playwrights Louis Shipman and Percy MacKaye, writers and publishers Herbert Croly and Norman Hapgood, and novelist Winston Churchill. Although it grew in size, the Cornish Colony distinguished itself from contemporary art colonies in its lack of insistence on formal organization. It was not centered on an art school, nor was it structured as communal living experiment. Although Cornish Colony members valued the Arcadian qualities of

their surroundings, the artists were not necessarily landscape painters, not were they in search of a rustic atmosphere. These artists lived comfortably, if not lavishly, and took advantage of the respite from city life to work unimpeded.<sup>2</sup>

Elizabeth Nichols and her daughters first came to Cornish in July 1886 on an extended visit with the Saint Gaudens family. In a letter to her husband Arthur, Elizabeth recounted their enchantment with the area:

Today [...] Margaret has pronounced the best day yet and she says she wishes we had a house like this; she does not see why we do not live in the country all the time. As for myself I grow if anything more enthusiastic daily and [illegible] wish you were here to share the pleasure.<sup>3</sup>

Rose Nicholas was especially fixed on the idea of owning a home in Cornish and cultivating a summer life there. In 1892 Arthur Nichols addressed her—presumably emphatic—proposals to purchase an estate in Cornish in a letter written from Rye Beach, where he still worked in the summer. Arthur was loathe to leave his summer practice and pointed out the impracticality of settling so far from Boston, stating that for “those, like myself, obliged to go back and forth to business, the long, dusty journey and the great waste of time involved marks the place almost impracticable.”<sup>4</sup> Although he eventually gave in to pressure from Rose and the rest of the family, an entry in his diary from October 1895 underlines his initial misgivings:

The important event of this year has been my definitive withdrawal from Rye Beach, where I have spent the summer each year when not in Europe since 1862. The loss of this lucrative practice involved a material reduction in professional income which cannot be made up by

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<sup>2</sup> For a thorough discussion of the character of the Cornish Colony and the culture of its residents, see Debora Elizabeth Van Buren, “The Cornish Colony: Expressions of an Attachment to Place, 1885-1915.” PhD diss., George Washington University, 1987.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Nichols to Arthur Nichols, July 11, 1886. Papers of the Nichols-Shurtleff Family (A-170, Folder 29). Schlesinger Library.

<sup>4</sup> Arthur Nichols to Rose Nichols, July 20, 1892. Papers of the Nichols-Shurtleff Family (A-170, Folder 19). Schlesinger Library.

any work done in Boston. I consider it a great piece of fortune, however, that the family have had the benefit of the salubrious air of this sea shore during so many years. Cornish offers a more capacious, better furnished house, greater seclusion, more entertainment and more congenial society; but on the other hand it entails continuous heavy outlay, new cares and responsibilities and the possibility of vexatious complications in the distant future.<sup>5</sup>

Arthur Nichols purchased a property in Cornish known as the Chester Pike farm in 1892, and soon after the house was modernized, remodeled, and renamed Mastlands (figure 2). The Nichols family enjoyed their life in Cornish, praising the serenity of the country, the bracing air, the wild scenery, and the many outdoor activities, which included tennis, golf, and tobogganing in the winter (after purchasing Mastlands the Nichols family often spent time in Cornish in the winter months). Margaret Nichols, the most athletic member of the family, especially enjoyed visits from Harriot Sumner Curtis and Margaret Curtis of the Curtis family who lived at 28 Mount Vernon Street, across from the Nichols family home in Boston. Both Curtis sisters were accomplished golfers and tennis players—Margaret Curtis won the 1908 women’s National Championship in doubles partnered with Evelyn Sears, another Nichols family friend and also a frequent guest at Mastlands. The Nichols family had a tennis court built at their Cornish home in 1898.<sup>6</sup>

Family correspondence, paired with evidence from the guest log the family kept at Mastlands indicates that their social life in Cornish often extended to the nearby town of Dublin, New Hampshire, about sixty miles southeast of Cornish, the home of the Dublin Art Colony. Twentieth-century art historians have established an oppositional relationship between the Cornish and Dublin art colonies, characterizing them as contrasting environments despite their relative

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<sup>5</sup> Arthur Nichols Diary, Volume V. Arthur Howard Nichols Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

<sup>6</sup> “I believe this covers the real estate report except for here, where the only especial work going on is laying out a tennis court in the field north of the house and east of the large pine there.” Elizabeth Nichols to Arthur Nichols, August 18, 1898. Papers of the Nichols-Shurtleff Family (A-170, Folder 39). Schlesinger Library.

proximity to one another. In broad terms the Dublin Colony was seen as more liberal, countercultural, and stereotypically “bohemian” than their more genteel Cornish neighbors. However, the Nichols family and many of their friends appear to have moved smoothly between the two social scenes, with the Nicholsons enjoying an especially close friendship with the noted geologist Raphael Pumpelly and his family who lived in Newport, Rhode Island and summered in Dublin. Rose and Marian were especially close with the Pumpelly daughters, and accompanied the family on an extended trip to Europe that lasted from late 1893 into 1894.

For Rose, the “more congenial society” that Arthur mentioned in his diary was probably the chief attraction in Cornish. She was “Uncle Gus’s” favorite niece due to her artistic aspirations and her assertive, intelligent manner, which was much like his own. The seeds of their close relationship were sowed during the summers she spent in Cornish. As a young woman she was devoted to her art studies and the nascent artist’s colony in Cornish offered not only the opportunity to commune with serious, nationally renowned artists, but also to cultivate a network of intellectual, cosmopolitan, cultured friends and mentors of similar artistic temperaments. In 1890 at the age of eighteen Rose spent a month in Dublin where she took art lessons. These included private tutelage under a “Mr. Smith,” probably the painter Joseph Lindon Smith who lived in Dublin.<sup>7</sup> She also took lessons from George de Forest Brush in Cornish, at times drawing or painting live models.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> “Mr. Smith is the most obliging creature you ever heard of he asks me to begin my lessons at half past two or earlier and we never stop till six. He is giving me quite a history of his life. I took a lesson today and he asked me to go out sketching with him tomorrow.” Rose Nichols to Marian Nichols, July 2, 1890. Papers of the Nichols-Shurtleff Family (A-170, Folder 85). Schlesinger Library.

<sup>8</sup> On Rose’s lessons with George de Forest Brush: Rose Nichols to Grandma Homer, June 20, 1892: “I am expecting Mr. Brush now any moment to give me my lesson and to see if we have any dress for his wife to wear in the new portrait which he is painting of her. He wants something very stylish which is not exactly the way Mrs. Brush is usually dressed.” George de Forest Brush and his wife were the only Cornish colony members who could accurately be described as “bohemian,” and they famously lived in a large, barely furnished house. On Rose working with a live model: Elizabeth Nichols to Arthur Nichols, June 22, 1892: “When Rose comes back from Pittsfield she is to have the model whom Mr. Brush has been using and paint or draw for her studies. It will of course cost much more than to paint landscape but

Rose was also taking courses at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston at this time, where she studied under Frank W. Benson and Edmund Tarbell. In a letter written in 1891 her friend Polly Cabot lamented Rose's absence from the MFA school (she was in Europe at the time) and provides a glimpse into the experience the young women had as art students:

I gravitated back to the Art Museum about two weeks ago and am distinguishing myself as usual. This morning I got the man's legs about two inches too short. I was afraid for a moment that Mr. Benson's temper would give way under the strain, but he was as angelic as usual.

"By the way," she continued, "I have completely lost my heart to Mr. Tarbell. If he were not quite so spherical in form I do not know what I would do."<sup>9</sup>

In part due to the social opportunities opened by her connection to the Cornish artists, by the time Rose entered her early twenties her social world began to tilt away from Boston and toward New York. In January of 1895 on a return trip to Boston after several months in Europe, she stayed for a time with the Saint Gaudens family in their New York home on West 45<sup>th</sup> Street. While there she visited her friend Lucia Fairchild Fuller,<sup>10</sup> a noted artist who trained as a muralist before taking up miniature painting. For a short period Rose and Lucia Fuller shared a rented art studio in Boston; Elizabeth mentions the studio in a letter she wrote to Rose later that year, in which she describes visiting the studio in search of furniture to send up to Cornish.<sup>11</sup> Fuller was among the group of

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Augustus said it is more important work." Papers of the Nichols-Shurtleff Family (A-170, Folder 32). Schlesinger Library.

<sup>9</sup> Polly Cabot to Rose Nichols, November 17, 1891. In the letter Cabot also relates an anecdote about female models in the life drawing class fainting "in the most harrowing manner." Rose Standish Nichols Papers (MS Am 2656 (2) Folder 1). Houghton Library, Harvard University.

<sup>10</sup> "This afternoon I am going to see Lucia Fuller and perhaps to the Arnolds and Mrs. Hardans." Rose Nichols to Marian Nichols, January 26, 1895. Papers of the Nichols-Shurtleff Family (A-170, Folder 89). Schlesinger Library.

<sup>11</sup> In the letter, dated May 22, 1895, Elizabeth describes visiting the empty studio in search of supplies and furniture to send to Cornish for the summer. She adds that "Miss Fuller was not there but there were paints, an apron and several canvases about." Papers of the Nichols-Shurtleff Family (A-170, Folder 54). Schlesinger Library.

artists selected to paint decorative murals for the Women's Pavilion at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, a group that included Mary Cassatt, sisters Lydia Field Emmet and Rosina Emmet Sherwood, Mary MacMonnies, and Amanda Brewster Sewell. Fuller's contribution, a mural titled *The Women of Plymouth* is the only one of these artworks known to still exist. It is installed at the rear of the stage in the Blow-Me-Down Grange in Plainfield, New Hampshire, just over the town line from Cornish. According to local history Fuller's husband, the painter Henry Brown Fuller, lent it to the grange in 1900.<sup>12</sup> The Fullers purchased property in Cornish and began summering there in 1897, possibly at Rose's recommendation.

In the winter and spring of 1896 Rose spent several months with the Saint Gaudenses in New York where she reportedly studied at the Art Students League, all the while attending luncheons, teas, dinners, and various other social occasions with the artistic personalities that came to define the Cornish Colony – including Kenyon Cox, Thomas and Maria Dewing, Henry and Edith Prellwitz, and William Howard Hart.<sup>13</sup>

Later that year Rose visited Paris and Rome, where in addition to sketching and taking formal art lessons she also met some of the leading artistic personalities of the time, including the famed Pre-Raphaelite painter Marie Stillman and sculptor Hendrik Christian Andersen, with whom she was evidently quite taken.<sup>14</sup> Rose became close with the painter Rosina Emmet Sherwood, one

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<sup>12</sup> For more information on this mural and Lucia Fairchild Fuller, see Charlene G. Garfinkle, "Lucia Fairchild Fuller's 'Lost' Woman's Building Mural," *American Art* 7:1 (Winter 1993): 2-7.

<sup>13</sup> Rose Nichols to Marian Nichols, 1896 (otherwise undated). Papers of the Nichols-Shurtleff Family (A-170, Folder 85). Schlesinger Library.

<sup>14</sup> On meeting Marie Stillman see Rose Nichols to Marian Nichols, January 15, 1896. Papers of the Nichols-Shurtleff Family (A-170, Folder 85). Schlesinger Library. Rose first mentions Andersen in a letter to Marian written on February 26, 1894. In a letter dated January 15, 1896 she wrote "Last evening, we took dinner with the Baggs'. I sat next ethereal young sculptor named Anderson [sic]. He had a good deal of charm in manners and of appreciation and sense of beauty it seemed to me." (Schlesinger Library). She and Andersen corresponded, and in a diary entry probably written ca. June or July 1896 Rose recounts receiving a set of photographs he sent to her from Italy, and a conversation she and



of the Lucia Fuller's fellow muralists for the Women's Pavilion at the Chicago Exposition. Through Rosina, Rose was introduced to other members of the artistic Emmet family, including Ellen "Bay" Emmet Rand, Lydia Field Emmet, and Jane Erin Emmet. The Emmets were part of a larger social circle of American artists settled in Rome and Paris that included Saint Gaudens and several of his friends, associates, and former students, including sculptor Frederick MacMonnies.<sup>15</sup> Ellen Emmet Rand painted a portrait of Augustus Saint Gaudens in c. 1904 that was included in a memorial exhibition for the recently deceased sculptor held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1908.<sup>16</sup> Rose found camaraderie and acceptance among the Emmets, who requested that she call them by their first name and offered invitations to their studios.<sup>17</sup>

Rose Nichols's legacy is that of a garden designer, author, society matron and activist for world peace and international understanding. But as her diary entries and letters show, as a young woman she envisioned herself chiefly as an artist. The Cornish Colony was the ideal place for her to seek instruction, validation, and inspiration from fellow artists and mentors. She kept a studio in a renovated outbuilding on the Mastlands property. As Rose's interests and career evolved, however, the studio's primary use shifted, becoming her business office and writing study in the late 1890s and early 1900s.

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Augustus Saint Gaudens had about him. See Rose Standish Nichols Papers (MS Am 2656), Houghton Library, Harvard University.

<sup>15</sup> Information on Rose's activities in Rome can be found in several letters written to her sister Marian in the winter of 1896. See Papers of the Nichols-Shurtleff Family (A-170, Folder 85). Schlesinger Library.

<sup>16</sup> For information about this portrait and its acquisition by the Metropolitan Museum, see Thayer Tolles, *Augustus Saint Gaudens in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2009), 77.

<sup>17</sup> Rose Nichols to Marian Nichols, 1896. Papers of the Nichols-Shurtleff Family (A-170, Folder 85). Schlesinger Library.

In Cornish, when not busy with her own work or studies, Rose—accompanied with various female friends or chaperones— kept up a consistent round of studio visits to neighboring artists’ homes. She found herself part of a network of young women often tapped as artist’s models, prized for their youthful looks and refined, elegant appearances. In a diary now kept in the Rose Standish Nichols Papers at the Houghton Library at Harvard University, Rose recounts a visit she made to the painter Abbott Handerson Thayer’s studio in Dublin. She was accompanied on this trip by Marie Saint Gaudens (Augustus Saint Gaudens’s niece) and friends Elise Pumpelly and Lottie Cabot. Elise Pumpelly had posed for Thayer’s painting *Caritas*, finished in 1895, and during their visit Rose and her companions discussed this work with Thayer. They also examined another painting still in progress that Thayer intended to serve as a memorial to the Scottish poet Robert Louis Stevenson, who died in 1894. He later renamed this painting *My Children (Mary, Gerald and Gladys Thayer)*, (1897). Referring to this work, Rose wrote “the Stevenson memorial was not in very good condition as Gerald’s head had just been moved and was covered with stripes of bright yellow. The best part of the picture was the head of Gladys.”<sup>18</sup>

Rose herself posed, along with her sister Marian, for Thomas Wilmer Dewing’s 1897 painting titled *A Reading* (figure 3). Rose discussed the matter of posing for Dewing with Augustus Saint Gaudens in a series of letters, as Saint Gaudens was in Paris at the time it was painted. He was initially opposed to her modeling for Dewing, perhaps because he and the other artist had a somewhat tumultuous relationship. Eventually Saint Gaudens wrote to Rose apologizing for his initial rebuke, attributing it to a “stupid preachy streak [...] that I cannot tolerate myself for.” He gave his blessing, adding:

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<sup>18</sup> See diary in Rose Standish Nichols Papers, (MS Am 2656), Houghton Library, Harvard University.

if you pose for Dewing I am deeply interested in what occurs and what you think of what occurs. You are so different from Marion [sic] that her sitting for him and your sitting for him is an entirely different thing. I would not have thought twice about her going there I think a thousand times of your going, however, I have said all I have to say about probably a quite deal too much.<sup>19</sup>

Elizabeth wrote to Rose after seeing the painting on exhibition at Copley Hall in 1898. Expressing her typical sense of propriety, she assured her daughter that “I think no one will connect you with it who does not know that you help out.”<sup>20</sup>

Rose obviously considered herself an integrated member of Cornish Colony, but nevertheless it is tempting to imagine how the artists of Cornish perceived her and the rest of the Nichols family. Frances Grimes, a sculptor who worked as a studio assistant to Herbert Adams and Augustus Saint Gaudens, recorded many of her memories of the colony for posterity, providing a glimpse into the social character and attitudes of the Cornish artists. She recalled the faint resentment the artists felt toward the “philistines,” referring to the wealthy, hospitable neighbors who came to Cornish for its artistic society and atmosphere but inevitably missed the point of the colony itself—that it was meant to function as a retreat from the pressures of high society, critics, and wealthy art patrons. Speaking of Rose, Marian, and Margaret Nichols specifically, Grimes recalled the sisters as elegant young women who “wore long, brilliantly colored scarves which floated from the carriage as they drove by.”<sup>21</sup>

A glimmer of insight about the Nichols family in Cornish comes from an entry in a diary kept by Lydia Austin Parrish, the wife of artist Maxfield Parrish. The diary, now contained in the

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<sup>19</sup> Augustus Saint Gaudens to Rose Nichols, August 7, 1897. Rose Standish Nichols Papers, (MS Am 2656 (5) Folder 2 of 10). Houghton Library, Harvard University.

<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth Nichols to Rose Nichols, March 14, 1898. Papers of the Nichols-Shurtleff Family (A-170, Folder 56). Schlesinger Library.

<sup>21</sup> Frances Grimes, “Reminisces,” Frances Grimes Papers, Rauner Special Collections Library, Dartmouth College.

Papers of Maxfield Parrish in the Rauner Special Collections Library at Dartmouth University, includes a lengthy digression about each member of the Nichols family. This includes several insights passed on to Parrish from her friend Ellen Biddle Shipman, a Cornish resident and successful landscape gardener in her own right, who was a former classmate of Marian Nichols during her time at Radcliffe. Although many of Parrish's observations about the Nichols family may be categorized as gossip, she does single out Rose as "the interesting, clever one of the lot," describing her as "so keen that you admire and at the same time are almost afraid of her. I can see how each year she has gained in poise, breadth and power." Perhaps recognizing a fellow inquisitive, artistic temperament in Rose, Lydia writes that "Rose's analysis and keenness does not stand her in good stead in family combats of which there are many," noting that something about Rose (or more specifically, some quality shared by the rest of the Nichols family) "prevents them from taking her seriously."<sup>22</sup>

Lydia Parrish's assessment of Rose's relationship with the rest of the Nichols family, which positions Rose as somewhat misunderstood and, at times, possibly undermined by her parents and sisters, is at times on display in family letters. When addressing Rose's private art lessons with Joseph Lindon Smith when she was eighteen, Elizabeth wrote to Rose saying "[t]he long afternoons with Mr. Smith seem to me a little doubtful and I should prefer another pupil as I suppose he would."<sup>23</sup> Elizabeth likely had decorum in mind when writing to her daughter, as the unmarried Smith was

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<sup>22</sup> Lydia Parrish Diary, January-June 1904. Box 8, Folder 32. Maxfield Parrish Papers, ML-62. Rauner Special Collections Library, Dartmouth College. Among other observations, Lydia notes that "If Jane Austen could only have been alive today I am sure she should have found wonderful material in that family, such contradictions as they all show."

<sup>23</sup> Elizabeth Fisher Homer to Rose Nichols, July 3, 1890. Papers of the Nichols-Shurtleff Family (A-170, Folder 51). Schlesinger Library.

almost a decade older than Rose. But her message also carries an implied skepticism regarding Rose's capability and seriousness as an art student.

Rose's strong personality, interest in people, and artistic disposition set her apart from her family and it is likely that at times she felt more at home among the artists of Cornish. Her upper-class upbringing and social standing allowed her to feel equally comfortable with the elite so-called "philistines" of the colony as well, including Annie Lazarus (sister of the poet Emma Lazarus) whose Cornish estate "High Court" designed by Charles Platt was a center for artistic social gatherings. Together with Lydia Parrish and Mabel Churchill, the wife of novelist Winston Churchill, Rose founded a women's discussion group in Cornish in the same model of those she ran in her Boston home. This discussion group, which benefitted from the attendance of First Lady Edith Bolling Wilson, whose husband Woodrow Wilson used Cornish as the location of the "summer White House" has been recognized as a forerunner to the Foreign Policy Association.<sup>24</sup>

Frances Grimes credited Rose Nichols with elevating the national profile of the Cornish Colony over the years by bringing various illustrious guests to visit. An early example of such a visitor was poet Mildred Howells, daughter of novelist William Dean Howells, whom Rose befriended and brought to Cornish to spend two weeks at Mastlands in July 1896. Writing about Howells in her diary, Rose reflected:

During her visit to me at Cornish I have become very fond of her and have grown to feel a great admiration for her character. Notwithstanding her shrinking sensitive nature, she is brave enough to run the risk of incurring dislike rather than give in to the temptations which few would take pains to resist. She has wonderful self-control and tact in her relations with people. I have never seen anyone show so much thoughtfulness and consideration of others. She told me that she had learned to be patient by force of circumstances. Her gentleness and great strength of character have made a deep impression on me.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Southard Menzel, "Sketches on the Life and Character of Rose Standish Nichols, Artist, Collector, Social Reformer, Museum Founder," in *Rose Standish Nichols As We Knew Her: A Tribute to a Friend* (1986), 13.

<sup>25</sup>Diary in Rose Standish Nichols Papers, (MS Am 2656). Houghton Library, Harvard University.

During her visit to Cornish Howells modeled for Augustus Saint Gaudens who eventually produced a portrait medallion depicting her in profile, as well as a dual portrait of Mildred and William Dean Howells. The Mastlands guestbook records that Howells made several subsequent visits to the Nichols home in Cornish over the following years.<sup>26</sup>

Another account of Rose's ability to bring people of varying backgrounds but similar interests together in Cornish comes from a letter written by Ellen Axson Wilson – the first Mrs. Woodrow Wilson – to her husband in August of 1913. Ellen Wilson was a trained painter who studied at the Art Students League before her marriage, and during a dinner Rose hosted for her at Mastlands she was re-introduced to her old instructor George de Forest Brush. As Wilson described the scene to her husband:

I broke it to him gently that I was an old pupil and he was much interested. Mr. Hart [painter William Henry Hart, another Cornish Colony resident] about whom I was writing, the other day, then mentioned that he also was a pupil, and it turned out that we were there at the same time [...] I found out today that Mrs. Prellwitz [painter Edith Mitchill Prellwitz, wife of painter Henry Prellwitz] was also there then.<sup>27</sup>

### Rose Nichols and the Cornish Gardens

By the 1890s the gardens in Cornish were becoming almost as important and well known as the artists who lived there. Thomas and Maria Oakey Dewing are credited with starting the gardening craze in Cornish, as Maria desired a substantial flower garden to provide subjects for her

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<sup>26</sup> Rose mentions Howells posing for Saint Gaudens in a letter dated July 18, 1896 (Papers of the Nichols-Shurtleff Family (A-170, Folder 85). Schlesinger Library).

<sup>27</sup> This letter is quoted from Virginia Reed Colby and James B. Atkinson, *Footprints of the Past: Images of Cornish, New Hampshire and the Cornish Colony* (Concord: New Hampshire Historical Society, 1996), 436. It is reprinted from Arthur S. Link, ed., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), Vol. 28 (1913).

floral paintings. Thomas Dewing reportedly experimented with various plants to test out their hardiness in the New Hampshire climate. As the interest in gardens and gardening grew in Cornish, the colony became a unique place where residents shared an aesthetic appreciation for landscape, architecture, and the melding of the two into an almost dream-like setting upon which their carefully orchestrated artistic activities were staged.

Charles Platt was the most significant colony member to embrace this collective emphasis on the designed landscape, transforming himself into a noted architect and garden planner through a mixture of self-study and sheer talent. Trained as a painter rather than an architect, Platt was nonetheless interested in the integration of built environments and designed landscapes, especially those derived from Renaissance models. In 1894 he published the book *Italian Gardens* containing photographs and descriptions of Italian villas and their formal gardens, drawn from his travels through Italy. Beginning with his own house and garden and those of fellow Cornish Colony members Henry O. Walker and Annie Lazarus, Platt designed homes and garden plans that combined the classical Renaissance conventions of country villa architecture popular among the American upper class at the time with the perspective of a landscape painter. Although Platt's architectural and landscape design career eventually expanded far beyond the Cornish Colony to include many public commissions and designs for wealthy clients across the country, Cornish acted as an incubator where he was able to "try out" his early ideas.<sup>28</sup>

Platt's style of formal, rectilinear gardens modeled on the Italian Renaissance eventually defined the landscape of the Cornish Colony, and as a whole this distinguished the Cornish gardens from many others of the period. The burgeoning field of landscape architecture had previously been

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<sup>28</sup> For a comprehensive overview of Charles Platt's career and his attachment to the Cornish Colony see Keith N. Morgan, *Charles A. Platt: The Artist as Architect* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1985).

dominated by a naturalistic style practiced most prominently by the firm of Frederick Law Olmstead, the most well-known landscape architect in America. However, it would be inaccurate to give sole credit to Platt for establishing the aesthetic convention of Cornish Colony gardens. Many of the Cornish artists spent significant time in Europe, and they were quick to recognize similarities between the wild, mountainous terrain of New Hampshire's Upper Valley and the landscape of the Italian countryside. In remodeling his estate Aspet, Augustus Saint Gaudens instructed his architect George Fletcher Babb to make the original Federal-style structure more Mediterranean in flavor, to which Babb responded by adding an exterior pergola with prominent ionic columns. Saint Gaudens himself designed a wide terrace for the sloping field around the house, which eventually became a formal garden.<sup>29</sup>

The interest in gardens at the Cornish Colony may be understood as an impulse on the part of the artists to remake the land to fit within their perceived notions of beauty and the classical idyllic landscape. Houses and gardens were designed to capitalize as much as possible on the impressive view of nearby Mount Ascutney. Mary French, the wife of sculptor Daniel Chester French who spent two summers in Cornish, described the view from Saint Gaudens's pergola in the following terms:

[it] looked toward Ascutney, as do most of the houses in Cornish, just as in Sicily they look toward Aetna, and in Japan toward Fuji-yama. It is a cult. When you go to visit their terraces, to eat upon their porches, you find yourself facing the sacred mountain.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Homer Saint Gaudens, *The Reminiscences of Augustus Saint Gaudens* (New York: The Century Co., 1913). Quoted in Christine Ermenc, "Farmers and Aesthetes: A Social History of the Cornish Art Colony and its Relationship with the Town of Cornish, NH, 1885-1930." MA Thesis, University of Delaware, 1981, 58.

<sup>30</sup> Mary French, *Memories of a Sculptor's Wife* (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1928), 184.



The purified devotion to aesthetics on display in Cornish led, at times, to certain eccentricities on the part of the colony residents. Several visitors remarked that many of the artists refused to install screens in their doors and windows, preferring to suffer the nuisance of flies rather than obscure the views or mar the appearance of their homes. In her “Reminiscences,” Frances Grimes recalled that:

Once when we had returned from a picnic, [Herbert] Adams said women should be careful what they wore to picnics, it made such a difference; they should wear white or bright colors [...] What was seen in the sense, the pictorial sense, was so important. Gowns that were praised there would never have been praised on Fifth Avenue. They were gowns that painters would like to paint.<sup>31</sup>

Another anecdote in this vein concerns Cornish Colony resident Emily Slade, the owner of a Charles Platt-designed house and garden known as “Dingleton House.” After learning that a friend wished to bring an unknown acquaintance to her house for an afternoon tea, Slade is said to have replied that she supposed the woman might come, but “I do hope she will wear a frock that will harmonize with the garden!”<sup>32</sup>

Much like Charles Platt, with whom Rose reportedly studied, Cornish was both the inspiration behind and the first proving ground for Rose’s garden design career.<sup>33</sup> When Arthur Nichols purchased Mastlands in 1892, it provided Rose with the raw landscape on which to plan and

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<sup>31</sup> Grimes, “Reminiscences.”

<sup>32</sup> Virginia Reed Colby and James B. Atkinson, *Footprints of the Past: Images of Cornish, New Hampshire and the Cornish Colony* (Concord: New Hampshire Historical Society, 1996), 400.

<sup>33</sup> It is unclear to what extent Rose Nichols actually studied with Charles Platt. It is certain that the two were well acquainted; Platt and his wife Eleanor appear scattered throughout Nichols family correspondence relating to Cornish and they were frequent guests for dinners and other occasions at Mastlands. However, the only direct evidence for Rose’s study with Platt comes from an interview she gave later in life, in which she states that Platt instructed her on garden layout “from the architect’s point of view.” Platt and Rose did collaborate on at least one garden commission, the design for the grounds of Ellsloyd, the estate of Leverett Thompson and Alice Poole Thompson, designed by architect Howard Van Doren Shaw in 1907.

execute her first garden. Family correspondence indicates that Rose was at work overseeing the layout of the Mastlands gardens as early as September of 1895 (figure 4).<sup>34</sup> In her mid-twenties and unmarried, and perhaps reaching the limit of her talent as a visual artist, Rose may have felt in need of a vocation upon which to focus her considerable critical faculties and creative energy. The fashion for gardens in Cornish and the success enjoyed by Charles Platt provided her with the inspiration to begin studying garden design with her characteristic vigor.

The year after she began seriously laying out the gardens at Mastlands Rose returned to Paris, and although she continued with her art training, her lessons in drawing and painting were now interspersed with lessons in architecture and a growing interest in examining gardens with an increasingly critical eye.<sup>35</sup> Back in Boston, she enrolled in horticulture courses at Harvard's Bussey Institute and studied architectural design with prominent Beaux-Arts architect Désiré Despradelle at MIT. She also took lessons in architecture and architectural drawing with Thomas Hastings of the firm Carrère and Hastings in New York.

In the 1890s landscape architecture was gradually coalescing into a recognized professional field and Rose's interest in the subject predated the existence of any formal degree programs. Her approach to educating herself by cobbling together her own program of study was the only avenue available to her, and echoed the experience of her forerunner Charles Platt. Beatrix Jones Farrand

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<sup>34</sup> "Just now Margaret has gone to drive Mother and Aunt Hannah home from Gussie's and Marian is riding horseback. Rose is superintending laying out the garden and I have just finished washing dinner dishes." Elizabeth Nichols to Arthur Nichols, September 25, 1895. Papers of the Nichols-Shurtleff Family (A-170, Folder 36). Schlesinger Library.

<sup>35</sup> In a letter to Marian written in December 1896 Rose wrote: "There was another lecture today but I went to the studio instead. I am fired by a tremendous ambition to really do some good architecture, but I am so tired that I can't use my head." RSN to MCN December 1896, Papers of the Nichols-Shurtleff Family (A-170, Folder 85). Schlesinger Library. In October 1896 Rose wrote to her mother "Mlle de Hiuant is coming to give us lessons twice a week, then the architectural teacher whom I have in view doesn't speak any English so I think our French won't suffer from our removal." RSN to EFHN, October 22, 1896. Papers of the Nichols-Shurtleff Family (A-170, Folder 84). Schlesinger Library.

and Marian Cruger Coffin, two of the best-known female landscape architects in America whose careers began at almost the same time as Rose's, both followed similar paths; Farrand came from a wealthy family and relied on private lessons and travel abroad to educate herself, much in the same way that Rose did. Coffin studied landscape architecture at MIT as a "special student" (which made her ineligible for a degree) between 1901 and 1904, and like Rose she supplemented these studies with lessons at Harvard's Bussey Institute.<sup>36</sup>

At the time that Rose was beginning her career in garden design, the culture of the United States was slowly changing to accept the idea of women entering the professional realm, albeit within circumscribed parameters. Garden design, like the fine arts or writing, retained an aura of domestic femininity and was deemed a permissible pursuit for genteel ladies of Rose Nichols's social milieu. Rose's garden clients were often drawn from her web of social connections, as was true for many of the women in her profession. These women typically had no other option, as they stood little chance of being hired by a professional office.<sup>37</sup> However, informal business practices such as these often diminished women professionals in the eyes of their male counterparts; in 1894 Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. reportedly dismissed Beatrix Farrand, now regarded as a legendary figure in American landscape architecture, as someone who was "inclined to dabble in landscape architecture."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Valencia Libby, "Cultivating Mind, Body, and Spirit: Educating the 'New Women' for Careers in Landscape Architecture," *Women in Landscape Architecture: Essays on History and Practice* (Jefferson: McFarland and Co., 2012), 68.

<sup>37</sup> When attempting to find employment with a landscape architecture firm, Marian Coffin was reportedly told "my dear young lady, what will you do about supervising the work on the ground? [meaning the men, the rough laborers]" so often that she elected to practice independently, establishing her own office in New York in 1905. See Valencia Libby, "Cultivating Mind, Body, and Spirit: Educating the 'New Women' for Careers in Landscape Architecture," 71.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Judith Tankard, "Women Take the Lead in Landscape Art," in *Women in Landscape Architecture*, 85. Originally quoted in Mary Bronson Hartt, "Women and the Art of Landscape Gardening," *Outlook* 88 (March 28, 1908), 697.

Much less is known about the specifics of Rose's garden career than is recorded about Farrand's or Coffin's. Rose's friend and Cornish neighbor Ellen Biddle Shipman, who also took inspiration from Charles Platt and founded her own landscape architecture practice in New York, is better known to history due to her large number of commissions (close to six hundred in all) and the preservation of many of her business papers and designs at Cornell University. In the absence of extant professional papers or designs, the lack of which will continue to hinder a true comprehensive study of Rose's work as a garden architect, it is difficult to accurately contextualize the scope, breadth, and quality of her designs. While study into Rose's life and relationships at the Cornish Colony does not provide definitive resolution to this issue, it does allow for some insight into the growth and progress of her career.

One of Rose's earliest professional garden jobs was a design for Thomas and Hildegard McKittrick who owned a large summer estate in Dublin, New Hampshire. Hildegard's sister Ruth Sterling was a painter and a friend of Rose's, and her name appears in the Mastlands guestbook in 1897 and 1898. On a trip to Dublin in August 1898 Rose visited Ruth Sterling and the McKittricks and was asked to "look over her lot with my [Rose's] professional eye."<sup>39</sup> Although Rose evidently did not begin work on the garden design until at least 1901<sup>40</sup>, this was one of the first instances in which her reputation as a garden expert preceded her. It also demonstrates what may have been a

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<sup>39</sup> Rose Nichols to Marian Nichols, August 12, 1898. Papers of the Nichols-Shurtleff Family (A-170, Folder 86). Schlesinger Library.

<sup>40</sup> In October 1901 Elizabeth wrote to Arthur "Rose is going to Dublin today at the request of Mrs McKittrick who has asked her advice regarding a garden." Elizabeth Nichols to Arthur Nichols, October, 1901, Papers of the Nichols-Shurtleff Family (A-170, Folder 42). Schlesinger Library. As early as 1898 Rose knew that Mrs. McKittridge was interested in having her plan a garden for her, but wrote "Ruth Sterling's sister has decided not to have her garden laid out till next year and I am glad because I am afraid it might have been too much trouble for me this summer." Rose Nichols to Marian Nichols, July 22, 1898. Papers of the Nichols-Shurtleff Family (A-170, Folder 85). Schlesinger Library.

typical route through which she won garden commissions, wherein a friend recommended her to a wealthy relative or colleague and a partnership was formed.

As early as 1898 Rose was developing her reputation as a garden expert. In a letter to Marian written in July of that year Rose recounts praise for the Mastlands garden given by “Mr. Watson,” stating that he “was very enthusiastic about our garden and seemed to think I was quite capable of laying out a park system.”<sup>41</sup> This praise presumably came from Benjamin M. Watson, an instructor of horticulture at Harvard from whom Rose was taking lessons, referenced by her mother in a letter written later that year.<sup>42</sup> Watson’s words carried great weight for Rose, who went on to say “he advised me to make big charges, I want to get rich so as to buy a Stevenson and a Diana for myself, when I have earned enough for that I shan’t charge anything.” The “Stevenson” and “Diana” that she refers to are sculptures by Augustus Saint Gaudens; the Stevenson is a seated profile portrait of Scottish writer and poet Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894), and the Diana a scaled down, commercially cast edition of Saint Gaudens’s sculpture of the Roman goddess Diana, the original of which was designed to stand atop the tower of Madison Square Garden. The fact that Rose considered the ability to purchase a pair of her uncle’s sculptures as a signifier of career success provides some insight into her priorities and her concept of financial security at the age of twenty-six.

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<sup>41</sup> Rose Nichols to Marian Nichols, July 22 1898. Papers of the Nichols-Shurtleff Family (A-170, Folder 85). Schlesinger Library.

<sup>42</sup> Elizabeth wrote to Rose “If you think a few days longer will make your stay in N.Y. more complete so that you will feel better satisfied, I see no objection to it. The additional expense will not amount to much, and it is very likely that if you come back on purpose for Mr. Watson’s lesson you will feel so disgusted at having done so that you will not profit much by it.” Elizabeth Nichols to Rose Nichols, March 20, 1898. Papers of the Nichols-Shurtleff Family (A-170, Folder 56). Schlesinger Library.

As Rose's career expanded, Mastlands became an important place for her to entertain future clients and colleagues. The family's Cornish guestbook shows that many of Rose's garden clients were visitors to Mastlands, including Margaret Upham (in 1897, 1899 and 1901); Franklin and Emily Eames MacVeagh (1898), Elizabeth Robinson (1905 and 1908), Jeanne N. Guth Colt (1906), William Lee and Mary Louise Cushing (1908), Edward L. and Mary Mitchell Ryerson (1909 and 1912), Cora Weld Peabody (1911) and Alice Poole Thompson (1923).<sup>43</sup> Irving Gill, the architect Rose collaborated with on the design for the home and garden of Ellen Mason in Newport, Rhode Island, visited Mastlands in 1904.<sup>44</sup> Joseph E. Chandler, an architect and authority on colonial architecture (and probably the architect for the Peabody home) visited several times, including once alongside Rose's horticulture instructor Mr. Watson.<sup>45</sup> Rose included several photographs and descriptions of Chandler's homes in her *House Beautiful* articles "Friendly Doorways" (1910) and "Local Color in Architecture" (1911). Allan H. Cox, the architectural designer who provided the measured drawings for Rose's book *English Pleasure Gardens*, visited in 1902 as did the architect William Edward Putnam, who had designed a dining room expansion at Mastlands three years earlier. Later that year the two architects partnered to form the firm Putnam and Cox, and were awarded a contract to design a new building for the Boston Athenaeum, which was slated to move to a new site at Arlington and Newbury streets in Boston's Back Bay. The proposal was never carried out, and according to local tradition Rose was instrumental in forming an opposition to the

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<sup>43</sup> For a comprehensive listing of Rose's known garden clients and commissions, see a list compiled by B. June Hutchinson, "Rose Standish Nichols, Landscape Clients," available for download on the Nichols House Museum website.

<sup>44</sup> See Rose Standish Nichols, "A Newport House and Garden," *House and Garden* (April 1905).

<sup>45</sup> "I am feeling better. Mr. Batchelder is coming here next week, then Mr. Watson and Mr. Chandler, and possibly the Bennetts." Rose Nichols to Marian Nichols, July 9, 1898. Papers of the Nichols-Shurtleff Family (A-170, Folder 85). Schlesinger Library.

plan. It is possible that Putnam and Cox's visit to Cornish put them firmly under the thumb of Rose Nichols.

Visitors to Mastlands were greeted with the sight of Rose's carefully laid out garden extending from the colonnaded piazza with Mount Ascutney looming above. Although Rose's Cornish garden was rather humble compared to the grand plans she provided for her wealthy clients, its design, set within a low stone wall built of rough local stone, was characterized by a "charming, half careless grace" that communicated a sense of "quietness and repose," or so it was described by Frances Duncan in an article for the *Century* magazine.<sup>46</sup> Photographs of Rose's Cornish garden and an illustration of its plan were published in a 1902 book titled *American Gardens* by Guy Lowell, then the head of the landscape architecture program at MIT. Hers was the only garden included in the book that was designed by a woman. As Rose's public profile grew in conjunction with the publication of *English Pleasure Gardens* in 1902, her clients sought her out not only for her expertise in planting and design, but also for her ability to provide a worldly, scholarly credential to their gardens. Rose's designs, with their self-conscious references to historic European gardens, appealed to the cultured American elite who traveled in Europe and appreciated the references.

Rose's clients who visited Cornish were also treated to the social life of the lively, artistic colony members. Known for her intense interest in meeting new people and making introductions, and especially fond of bringing larger-than-life personalities together (perhaps to a fault),<sup>47</sup> Rose must have delighted in showing off the artistic lights of the Cornish Colony to her potential

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<sup>46</sup> Frances Duncan, "The Gardens of Cornish," *Century* 72:1 (May 1906), 17.

<sup>47</sup> In a note added to Lydia Parrish's diary, her son Maxfield Parrish Jr. described Rose Nichols as a "collector of famous people." See Maxfield Parrish Papers, ML-62. Rauner Special Collections Library, Dartmouth College.

customers. Architects who visited Mastlands were doubtlessly impressed by the colony's architectural credentials. The homes and gardens designed by Charles Platt garnered national attention, largely thanks to the praise they received by fellow Cornish resident Herbert Croly, then the editor of the *Architectural Review* (and the owner of a Platt-designed house). Knowing that they would be captivated and inspired by the lofty surroundings, Rose must have calculated that a weekend at Mastlands was an excellent way to secure clients and collaborators.

As she grew older and her career kept her busier, the leisurely Cornish summers of Rose's teenage years and twenties became less a constant feature of her life. Although the Mastlands guestbook and family letters indicate that she visited Cornish often and frequently entertained guests there, her attachment to the particular society of Cornish gradually faded. At the same time, the Cornish Colony as an entity slowly disbanded in the years following Augustus Saint Gaudens's death in 1907, despite the fact that several artists and their families remained in Cornish for many years. Through the nineteen-teens and twenties Rose continued to visit periodically, utilizing it as a writer's retreat while working on some of her later books. After the death of Elizabeth Homer Nichols in 1929 Mastlands was inherited by Margaret and Arthur Shurtleff and ceased to be Rose's particular place of retreat.





Figure 1. Aspet, Augustus Saint Gauden's Cornish home. Now the Saint Gaudens National Historic Site.  
Photographed by the author.



Figure 2. Mastlands, the Nichols family home in Cornish.  
Nichols Family Photograph Collection, Nichols House Museum.



Figure 3. Thomas Wilmer Dewing, *A Reading*, 1897. Oil on canvas. 20 ¼ x 30 ¼ inches.  
Smithsonian American Art Museum.



Figure 4. Rose Nichols (facing the camera), Margaret Nichols (far left), and three unidentified women in the garden at Mastlands, designed by Rose Standish Nichols. Date is probably ca. 1896. Nichols Family Photograph Collection, Nichols House Museum.