# 6

## Pedagogy and Place

### The Legacy of the Landscape at Vassar College

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One's arrival at Vassar College is initiated by the arched stone entrance gate on axis with Main Building (Figure 6.1). This gate is the portal to one of America's most refined academic parks, known for it rich selection of tree types; its subtly orchestrated topography; its spatially articulated paths, outdoor rooms, and individual gardens; and its ecological preserve and working farm. This campus was not generated from a single grand vision, as was the case with Thomas Jefferson's Academical Village at the University of Virginia. Vassar's development followed an evolutionary process that began with its founder, Matthew Vassar, and subsequent presidents, faculty, students, and alumni actively engaged with his vision to develop both interactive and interdisciplinary relations between the pedagogy and the landscape.

Several themes emerged from this engagement that have shaped the direction of the college. First, the monumental task of creating the first endowed college for women in the nation required intelligent and cooperative leadership. This tabula rasa condition demanded that the college's physical and intellectual goals be developed simultaneously. Second, because of that simultaneity, the design of the landscape and the early curricula became closely aligned. The possibility that this alignment would continue over time strengthened several disciplinary paths, especially those in environmental studies. Third, the insular quality of this small, secluded campus intensified its need to develop its internal spaces during the early years of its formation. The early landscape projects were initially driven by aesthetic considerations, but, as opportunities arose, the college found numerous ways to exploit these transformations by creating parallel pedagogical opportunities. As the campus landscape matured, the college extended its attention to include the larger Hudson River valley region. This legacy has developed

FIGURE 6.1

Vassar College entrance portal looking west. Photograph by Spencer Ainsley/Vassar College.

over Vassar's 150-year history and has been an influential force in the creation of the ethos of the place and its graduates.

Vassar College was named after it founder, Matthew Vassar, a nineteenth-century English immigrant who had inherited his father's brewery in Poughkeepsie, New York. After rebuilding the business after a damaging fire, and having developed other business associations, Vassar prospered and became a prominent citizen and community leader. Wishing to found a philanthropic institution to preserve his name, he established the first endowed women's college in America in 1865. Vassar first considered funding a hospital for Poughkeepsie, but his niece Lydia Booth suggested an alternative plan. A teacher by training, she encouraged Vassar to be the first person to endow a women's college.[1] Once convinced, Matthew Vassar gave full attention to his new enterprise.

Vassar chose a 198-acre site in Poughkeepsie, New York, located three miles east of the Hudson River. This former racetrack site included several creek beds and a pond; it was located in an isolated area away from the traffic of the river and the town, and it was thus deemed appropriate for a female college of that era. Having no direct relationship to the town of Poughkeepsie, the campus grew as a secluded enclave, enclosed by stone walls, streambeds, and a prominent entrance gate. Vassar hired the well-known architect James Renwick to design what would become the largest enclosed interior building space in America (until the United States Capitol was completed in 1868).[2] A five hundred-foot structure designed in the Second Empire style, Main Building was to house most of the college's functions, including classrooms, exhibition galleries, student lodging, and administrative offices. Its construction was a formidable beginning for this first female college, and its typology was modeled after such examples as Guy's Hospital in London and the Tuileries in Paris, both of which Vassar admired and noted to Renwick.[3]

The positioning of Main Building was controversial. Matthew Vassar wanted to align it perpendicular to the local entry road, Raymond Avenue, but Milo Jewett, the college's first president, convinced him that placement along the cardinal points would serve as an "educating force," a lesson in geography. Main Building, therefore, was oriented directly west, toward but not in view of the great Hudson River. In this very first building orientation decision, there was a purposeful intention to create an educational opportunity out of the site planning strategy. This initial impulse to use the landscape as a tool for teaching would reemerge in many of the future campus developments. In fact, the Braislin rendering of the campus site plan was created by the Class of 1878 under the direction of Professor Priscilla Braislin (Figure 6.2). The orientation of Main Building was to remain an important force, not only in the development of this initial section of the campus but also in associating the college with its larger habitat, the Hudson River valley. All of the buildings located on the flat plain near Main Building would follow this initial alignment (Figure 6.3).

Later, as the college expanded, additional buildings would be sited along the slopes of the existing local creek beds, Casper's Kill and Fonteyn Kill, taking advantage of the scenic qualities of this rural setting (Figure 6.4). These two contiguous systems are today seamlessly joined by the arboretum plan that has evolved incrementally and has been largely created by the Vassar community itself.

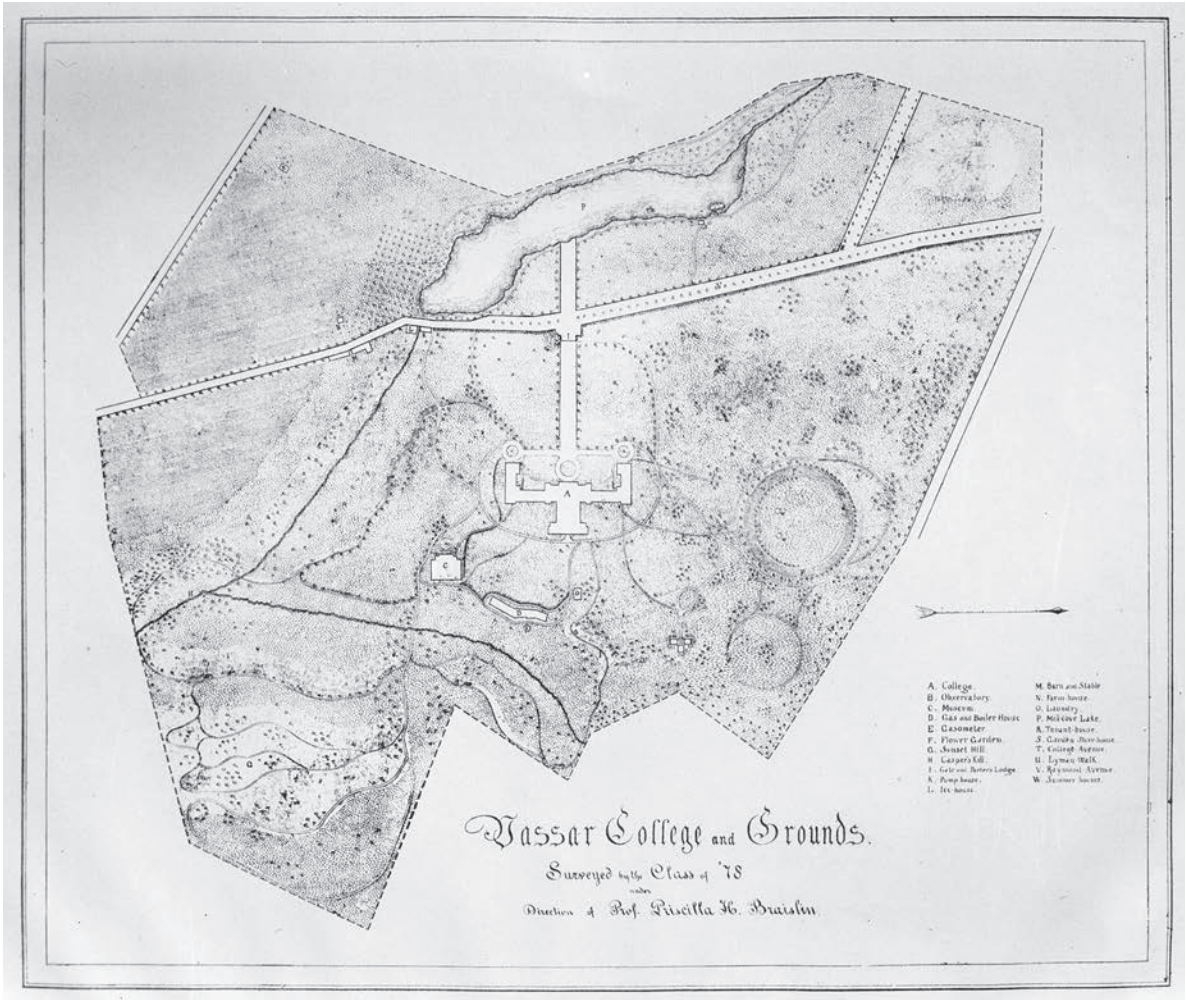


**FIGURE 6.2**
Rendering of Vassar College and grounds, drawn by the Class of 1878 under the supervision of Professor Priscilla Braislin. Archives and Special Collections, Vassar College Library, Poughkeepsie, N.Y.

Matthew Vassar's earlier association with the prominent landscape architect Andrew Jackson Downing informed his knowledge of and enthusiasm for landscape architecture and aesthetics. Both men were Hudson River valley natives, and Downing had designed the house and gardens for Vassar's river estate, Springside, located only a few miles away in Poughkeepsie (Figure 6.5). Downing's well-known book, *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening Adapted to North America* (1841), earned him a national reputation and significant career opportunities. In 1850, he partnered with Calvert Vaux, an English architect whom he had met while traveling abroad. Upon their return to the United States, they designed several Hudson River estates. Downing, a horticulturist by training, was fluent in plantings and their environments. In the general design of country grounds, Downing wrote that "the two most forcible and complete expressions to be found in that kind of natural scenery which may be reproduced in Landscape Gardening, are the Beautiful and the Picturesque."[4] He went on to define these terms: "The Beautiful is nature or art obeying the universal laws of

FIGURE 6.3

Plan of Vassar's main campus, showing the building orientation aligned with the cardinal points. Drawing by Karen Van Lengen Architects, 2016.

FIGURE 6.4

Plan of Vassar's main campus, showing buildings aligned with the local topography. Drawing by Karen Van Lengen Architects, 2016.

ENTRANCE TO SPRINGSIDE.

FIGURE 6.5
Entrance to Springside, from Benson John Lossing, *Vassar College and Its Founder*, 1867. Archives and Special Collections, Vassar College Library, Poughkeepsie, N.Y.

perfect existence (i.e., Beauty), easily, freely, harmoniously, and without the *display* of power . . . The Picturesque is nature or art obeying the same laws rudely, violently, irregularly, and often displaying power only."[5]

Downing's premature death in 1852 prevented his direct involvement in the design of the campus, but his influence is clearly seen in the early planting schemes. Vassar had worked closely with Downing on the design of Springside, where, as Vassar emeritus professor Harvey Flad noted: "Downing and Vassar combined nature and art in happy harmony."[6] The concepts of the "beautiful and the picturesque" became abundantly evident in the campus landscape. The topography, with both its flat plains and hilly rugged sections, was especially appropriate for these two concepts to be harmoniously united in a coherent garden plan.

James Renwick held the contract for the building design, and he was later instructed to complete the site and landscape plans as well. During the design process, Vassar, who

FIGURE 6.6
Vassar College, 1865. Archives and Special Collections, Vassar College Library, Poughkeepsie, N.Y.

was very interested in the campus landscape, engaged Renwick along with other outside landscape architects to formulate the initial landscape concepts. Renwick made drawings of roads, paths, tree groupings, and the gatehouse design.[7] Vassar referred to this planting plan in his June 1865 address to the board of trustees, announcing: "The park has been laid out and graded, seeded and planted with requisite shrubbery, shade-trees, and evergreens. The principal drives and foot-paths have been carefully studied and properly prepared."[8] Looking at the early renderings and photos of the college grounds, we can see how this academic park began to emerge just as he had described it to his fellow trustees (Figure 6.6). This first phase of the campus plan was driven by the desire to create a harmoniously "Beautiful and Picturesque" setting for the new college, not unlike Downing's work at Springside.

By the time the college opened in 1865, Matthew Vassar was known to have overseen the planting of over one thousand new trees on the barren landscape and to have personally participated in the actual tree planting activities. He doubled the size of the Mill Cove Lake (Vassar Lake) and set aside seventy acres for the purpose of ornamental planting that would embellish the initial layout of this now mature institutional campus. In his letter to the board of trustees in that opening year, Vassar wrote: "I also understand it to be the desire and purpose of our President to introduce into the College course, a liberal supply of outdoor instruction, such, for instance, as geological excursions, the study of trees, plants, and flowers in living examples, drawing from

nature, etc."[9] Vassar's encouragement to use the living environment as a context for education would remain a significant aspect of the college's future. At this early date, Vassar foresaw the possibility of weaving together the pedagogical goals of the college with its emerging landscape plan—an opportunity that did not present itself in a like manner at other women's colleges of that era. Wellesley College, which was founded in 1875 by Henry and Pauline Durant, was situated on the grounds of their own country estate in Wellesley, Massachusetts. Working with landscape architects prior to the opening of the college, the Durants had already crafted an aesthetically prominent landscape, so early Wellesley women were not charged with the task of its beautification. Smith College was conceived in a more urban fashion. The founder, Sophia Smith, along with her advisor, John Morton Greene, agreed that the college should be located in the town of Northampton, Massachusetts, where it would be possible to shape its mission within an urban context.[10] As we shall see, Vassar's "hands-on" approach to landscape development was both necessary and important in establishing an interactive partnership between aesthetics and outdoor studies.

Matthew Vassar was also involved in the creation of the initial curriculum for the college. He considered science to be an important area of study if women were to compete with men. The early curriculum, therefore, stressed not only language and the arts but also science. There were two courses of study, the "Classical Course" and the "Scientific Course," and four out of the original eight professors were scientists.[11] To support these two courses of study, Vassar gave two important collections to the college. The first, the Magoon Collection, included over four hundred paintings with an excellent representation of the Hudson River school, including one of Asher Durand's finest works, *Where the Streamlet Sings in Rural Joy*, now prominently displayed in the Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center. The second collection, the Cabinet of Natural History, included over ten thousand minerals, rocks, and fossils as well as models, relief maps, sections, and landscape drawings (Figure 6.7), and was considered to be the best collection of its kind in America. Both collections were housed in Main Building during the early years of the college and can be understood as providing the material foundations for what would become two of its strongest academic traditions, the history of art and environmental studies. In making these initial gifts to the college, Matthew Vassar had recognized the value of the artifact, which could aid in the synthesis of abstract and experiential learning.

The emerging science curriculum was shaped by the early faculty. Maria Mitchell, professor of astronomy, was the college's first science professor and the first woman to be elected to the National Academy of Sciences. In 1868, James Orton, the author of *The Andes and the Amazon*, joined the faculty as a professor of natural history, after returning from a Smithsonian-sponsored trip to the Amazon. He initiated the first discussions on ecology and land conservation at the college. Orton took his geology students on yearly field trips to the Pennsylvania coal mining district, where the Vassar women ventured deep beneath the earth's surface to directly experience the mines.[12] John Burroughs, one of the country's early naturalists, served as an advisor and mentor to the college for more than thirty years during this early era. He lived in West Park, a town located twelve miles away and across the Hudson River. Among his many activities, he became

FIGURE 6.7
Rendering of the Cabinet of Geology and Mineralogy, from Benson John Lossing, *Vassar College and Its Founder*, 1867. Archives and Special Collections, Vassar College Library, Poughkeepsie, N.Y.

the advisor for the Vassar Wake Robin Club, a student organization devoted to the study of the natural world. His advocacy for the regional riches of the Hudson River valley would be deeply appreciated by the many students he mentored.

The early curricular objectives had been an important focus for Matthew Vassar in the early years of the college, but they would need to be carried forth by others as the college began to develop. Just three years after the opening of the college, Matthew Vassar suddenly died, while reading his annual address to the board. The trustees later invited Fredrick Law Olmsted Sr. and Calvert Vaux to visit the campus in order to establish a location for a statue of the founder. It was noted that they made "an outline sketch of new roads, paths & other improvements."[13] However, no drawings have been found from that visit, and there is no actual evidence that any substantive planning resulted from it. Additionally, no statue of Matthew Vassar was located on the grounds until the year 2006.[14] In fact, for much of the college's history, the administration engaged prominent planners and landscape architects, but it was not until the end of the twentieth century, during Frances Fergusson's presidency (1986–2006), that the college directly deployed

these comprehensive campus planning designs. In 1987, Fergusson hired the landscape architecture firm of Sasaki Associates to develop a ten-year plan that would be utilized in their continuing campus restorations and additions. The early years were different, however, as the Vassar community largely orchestrated the college's physical transformations in direct consultation with the board, faculty, students, and alumni. In 1914, President James Monroe Taylor wrote: "No institution should enter upon building without a thorough study of the possibilities for fifty years. Built without such a plan, the Vassar campus is a fortunate result on the whole, gained by the steady hold of a few men and women who worked many years together, on a half recognized vision and with a whole-hearted and unselfish purpose."[15] That "half recognized vision" had been created from within the college community itself. A more detailed history of campus development will illuminate how the pedagogical opportunities grew along with the landscape plan.

In 1867, the early college women began their own landscape program when they planted ivy on Main Building to soften the appearance of the grand and imposing structure. The ivy soon died, however, so the next two classes chose to plant trees, first a great swamp oak and then a weeping elm near the front yard of Main Building. Each class thereafter has contributed or adopted a class tree, thus initiating one of Vassar's most important traditions—the tree ceremony.

Early photos of these ceremonies demonstrate not only their importance to the development of the landscape but also their significance in creating a profound connection between the land and the college community (Figure 6.8). The grounds superintendent, the faculty, and the administration all helped in the designation of tree locations, planting different sections of the campus at different times. These early rituals culminated in the burial of class records and relics next to the tree—a tradition that linked these women to the landscape. This part of the ritual died out early, when the class records became too large to bury, but the ceremonies flourished. By the early twentieth century, they had become cultlike nocturnal events, held in secret, with elaborate costumes, dances, and student poems designed to worship the tree. For example, in 1913, the sophomore class dressed up as sun worshippers wearing white gowns with gold bands. The ceremony culminated in choreographed dances around the tree. In an effort to outdo the previous classes, the sophomores in 1915 carried doves, "which, when released, flew up from every part of the circle as it closed, and fluttered among the branches of the tree."[16] These spectacular ceremonies at the beginning of the twentieth century paralleled a growing national trend toward the appreciation and preservation of the American landscape, prominently celebrated by the establishment of the National Park Service in 1916.

This profound attachment to the landscape would foster alumni support for its care and development. The arboretum endowment, given in 1925 by the Zehe family and the Class of 1875 at their fiftieth reunion, is one of the most influential examples of these contributions. With the receipt of this endowment, President Henry MacCracken (1915–46), began a long-term planning project to develop the arboretum. He consulted with the botany department and the superintendent of grounds, Henry E. Downer, a well-known English botanist and lecturer at the college. Downer had trained at

FIGURE 6.8
Tree ceremony, 1907. Archives and Special Collections, Vassar College Library, Poughkeepsie, N.Y.

the Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew before moving to the United States. At Vassar, he worked directly with MacCracken to develop the plan. The Olmsted Brothers firm was then hired to complete the drawings, which were then used as a general guide for the emerging arboretum. On the arboretum description, President MacCracken wrote: "It will be seen that, as outlined, a continuous belt of planting from the Vassar Lake to beyond the Euthenics group would be established, on land hardly likely to be taken for building sites. The development of what is now mostly rough along these lines would have great educational value in the study of plant material as well as produce good landscape effects."[17]

When Henry Downer taught his botany courses, he used the arboretum as his classroom (Figure 6.9). These trees have names and identities, and they have become familiar neighbors to those who live in the community. The landscape was understood to be a dynamic and integral part of the educational and emotional experience of the college. The tree selection process and ceremony have changed over the years, along with the college's emerging culture and students. After World War II, tree day became less important to undergraduate life, though it did continue in a modified way. Today, it seems to be having a new renaissance in the current culture of environmental awareness. For the past fifteen years, senior class representatives have worked with Vassar's arborist, Jeffrey Horst, to select their class tree. Horst begins the process by selecting possible locations and tree types to embellish the arboretum plan. He then meets with the student leaders

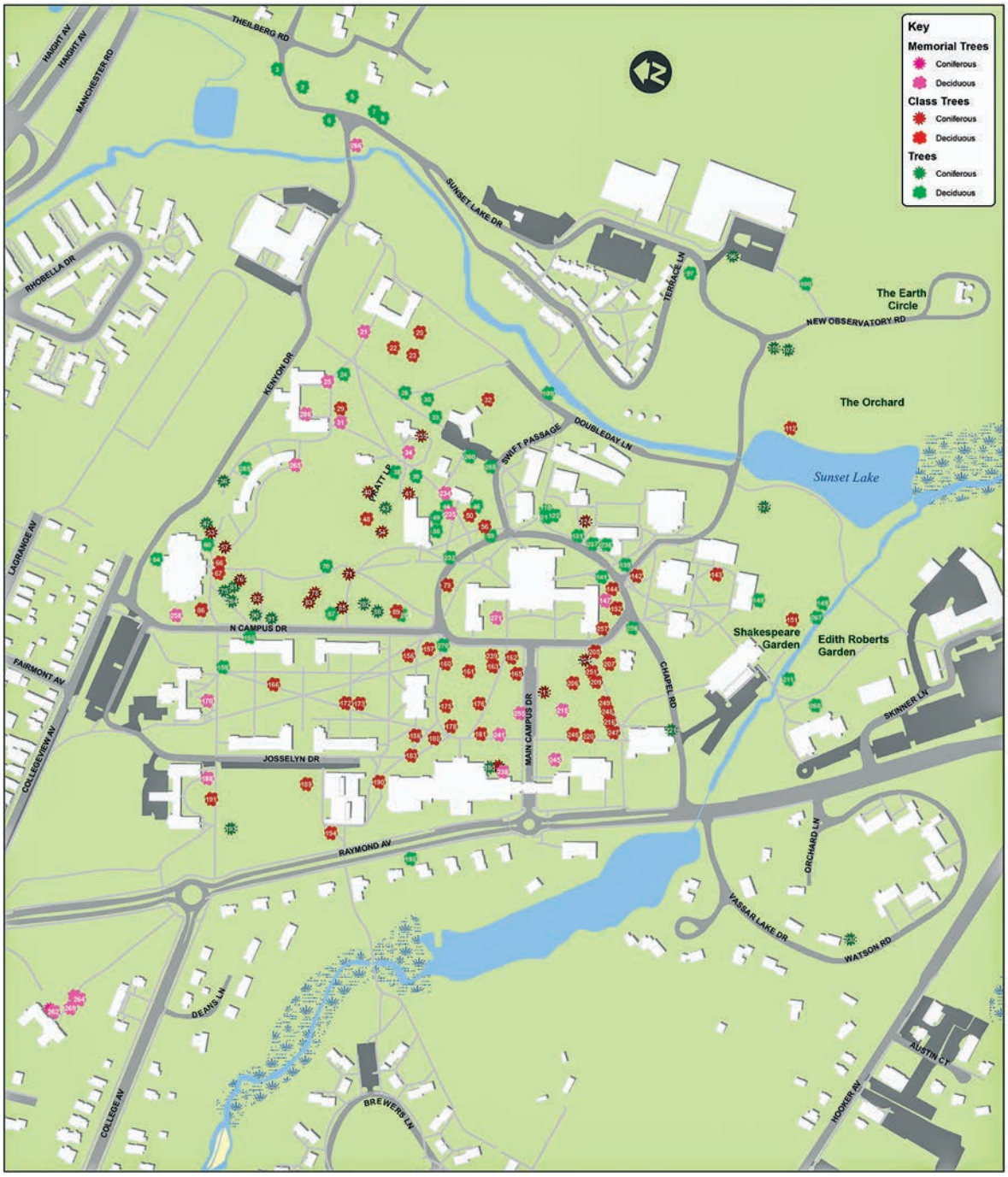


FIGURE 6.9

Arboretum plan, 2015. Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, N.Y. Map by Mark Schlessman.

to discuss the selections. Horst reported that in spring 2005, over half of the graduating class attended the planting of their American elm tree near the chapel.[18] The tree ceremony is alive and well, and the arboretum remains one of Vassar's most important landscape features, covering the entire main grounds with over two hundred species of native and introduced trees. In his autobiographical book, *The Hickory Limb*, President MacCracken recounted a conversation he once had with a student's mother, who said, "All I needed was just to walk around the Vassar grounds, in order to make my choice. Any college that is so kind to its trees is sure to be kind to my daughter."[19]

While the arboretum has given an overall structure to the campus, it also frames numerous individual gardens that have emerged over the college's history. These special gardens supported the academic themes that have encouraged this collaborative spirit across and between different disciplines. One of the earliest examples of these gardens is that of The Circle, which was laid out during Matthew Vassar's time as the daily exercise area for the college women. Dr. Alida Avery, professor of physiology and hygiene and resident physician, organized the Floral Society, in which students used The Circle to create their own gardens, turning exercise into a useful and aesthetic mission. Flowers became so important to the early quality of life that the college built a greenhouse for their growth and distribution to all of the school's public rooms in 1886.

These late nineteenth-century landscape transformations parallel the beginnings of the ecology movement. Ernst Haeckel, a German disciple of Darwin, first used the word "Oecology" in 1866 to classify the study of living organisms in relation to their environment.[20] This emerging awareness would influence both the landscape development and the college's related disciplines.

One of Vassar's most distinguished alumnae from this period was Ellen Swallow Richards. Following her Vassar graduation, Richards became the first female graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; a renowned chemist, she developed new testing methods for food and drinking water. She is now considered one of America's pioneers in the field of ecology, as well as the founder of the euthenics movement defined by her as "the betterment of living conditions through conscious endeavor, for the purpose of securing efficient human beings."[21] Richards was a longtime advocate for healthier public and private environments, a passion she extended in her service to the college. In 1894, as a college trustee, she oversaw the design and development of a new sewage treatment facility. The college had been dumping its sewage into Casper's Kill, where it drained into the neighborhood water system before flowing to the Hudson River. In response to the concerns of area residents, the college was poised to accept an expensive plan to pipe its sewage a six-mile distance to the river. Richards reacted to this plan by saying, "it seems to me that an educational institution should lead rather than follow."[22] She proposed and oversaw the design of a new waste treatment facility, in the form of extended filter beds, designed by the Boston engineering firm of Noyes & Hazen (Figure 6.10).[23]

The facility needed a large expanse of land for the effective operation of these filter beds. Due to the lack of space on the main grounds of the college, the trustees first leased and then bought available farm property located to the northwest of the college

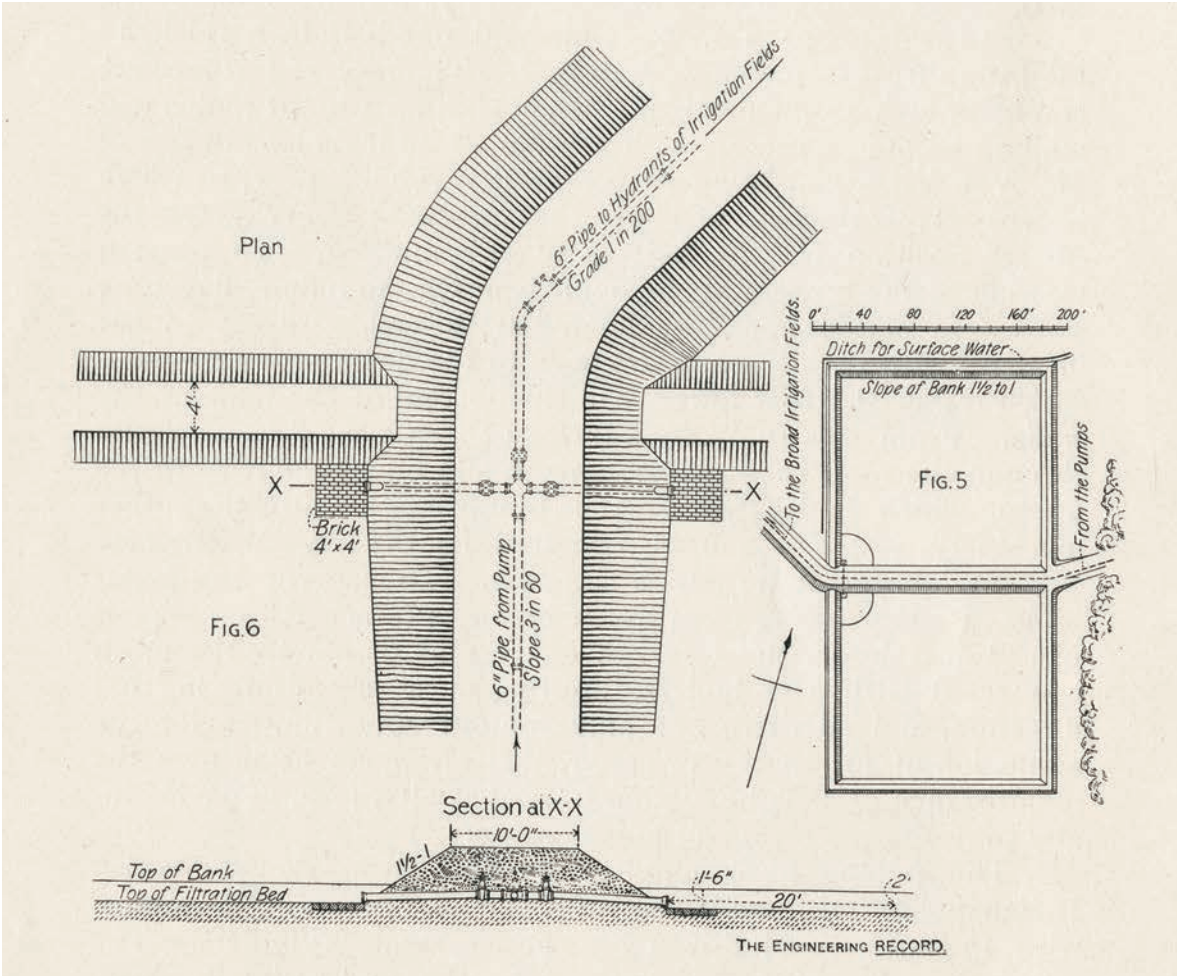


**FIGURE 6.10**
Plan and section of the sewage treatment facility, designed by Noyes & Hazen, ca. 1894. Archives and Special Collections, Vassar College Library, Poughkeepsie, N.Y.

grounds. The sewage was piped directly from the central campus to a concrete and brick screening chamber, where the solid matter was separated and removed from the liquid, then drained, dried, and transported to the nearby boiler house to be burned. The remaining effluent flowed to a circular holding chamber with a capacity of forty-four thousand gallons. From here, the liquid drained into two sandy filter beds (approximately one acre each) located adjacent to the holding tank. An additional set of filter beds was added to the summit of the property in the form of radial ditches that could filter overflow sewage without the screening process. These beds were also used on a rotating basis as crop fields, using the sewage as fertilizer. Upon the completion of the facility, Richards personally tested the creek water samples, collected by professor Charles Moulton, for any signs of pollution. The facility was celebrated as a success, and clean water once again flowed through the streams into the larger neighborhood of Poughkeepsie at a cost of less than half of the original scheme to pipe the sewage to the Hudson River. This system was effective for many years, until a city water and sewer infrastructure was added to the Town of Poughkeepsie in the early twentieth century.

FIGURE 6.11
"Farmerettes" plowing the fields on the Vassar Farm, ca. 1918. Archives and Special Collections, Vassar College Library, Poughkeepsie, N.Y.

Richards's interests were reinforced by many others, including Helen Clark Putnam, who taught physical education in the 1870s and who later gave Vassar a conservation fund of nearly $500,000 that was specifically intended for the establishment of an academic program on ecology and conservation. Over the following century, Vassar would become a leading liberal arts college in the field of environmental studies and it would use its own landscape to develop that mission.

By the early 1900s, the campus had grown to over six hundred acres, half of which were devoted to the Vassar Farm, located to the west and south of the main campus. The 1918–19 college catalogue states that the farm included "a model dairy and poultry farm, greenhouses, stables, storage barns and farm houses."[24] It produced most of the food and milk for the early college, and it continued to play an active role throughout the life of the institution by involving the students in its operations. The active participation of female students began in summer 1917, when the deployment of men in World War I prompted them to step in to help out (Figure 6.11). These female students, known as the "farmerettes," worked full-time during this summer, as they engaged in all of the operations of the farm: "They chopped wood, milked cows, ploughed fields and hoed the rows. Because of its novelty, the Vassar farm Unit was invited to present a 'live exhibit' at the first Eastern States Exposition, a ten-state agricultural fair in September 1917, and

five girls were excused from class for ten days to demonstrate their farming skills before 138,000 visitors."[25] The farm continued to feed the college's students until well into the 1950s, when it was deemed economically inefficient. Yet even then, the college persisted in its commitment to provide land for the cultivation of food. The administration designated property to the south of the main campus for faculty, community, and student gardens. In 1999, in a collaborative arrangement between the college and the city, the Poughkeepsie Farm Project began. The city initially leased three acres from the college to develop community gardens. This garden plot eventually grew to twelve acres and included five hundred households over the next decade. By 2015, the garden was so successful that it donated 34,555 pounds of food to needy families while also training community members about healthy eating practices.[26] This is an accomplishment under any circumstances, but when we consider that Vassar only has 2,450 students and 300 faculty members, it becomes even more impressive.

Vassar Farm would also use its resources to support other connections with the local community. In 1983, a retired English professor and alumna, Barbara Swan, endowed a natural history program for community children at the farm. This program has offered local elementary school children the opportunity to directly engage with the ecology of the region and the environmental sciences. The program is flourishing today, having sponsored activities for over forty-five thousand children over these past thirty-five years.

In addition to the farm, many other kinds of landscape projects began to emerge in the early twentieth century, augmenting the aesthetic experience of the campus while also providing direct learning opportunities. The creation of Sunset Lake in 1912, by damming Casper's Kill at its intersection with Fonteyn Kill, had been a desire of Matthew Vassar as well as President Taylor. The lake was created to be an informal recreational space as well as a skating pond in the winter (Figure 6.12). Designed by the college's landscape architect, Loring Underwood, it would become one of the most cherished features in the landscape plan of the college, with its emphasis on the "picturesque." Underwood was known for his design of the first outdoor municipal playground with a swimming pool in the United States, located in Belmont, Massachusetts. He was also the author of *The Garden and Its Accessories with Explanatory Illustrations* (1907).[27] This publication, on the design of American gardens, was an illustrative text with practical examples. Underwood stressed principles of individual expression in the creation of gardens and advocated its thoughtful integration with the specific site and context. This sensitivity to both the site and planting selections can be evidenced in the design of Sunset Lake. In fact, so coveted was this landscape that in fall 1969, when the college planned to build the vice president's house on its banks, the students vandalized the foundations and excavations by filling in the displaced earth in the middle of the night. After severe protests from students, the administration moved the house to another site, allowing Sunset Lake to remain untouched. Aside from its aesthetic qualities, the lake would be used to anchor the next project: the shaping of the outdoor amphitheater.

President MacCracken began the amphitheater project on the west bank of the lake soon after his presidency began. Loring Underwood was the designer; he used

FIGURE 6.12
Sunset Lake. Photograph by Tamar M. Thibodeau/ Vassar College.

the existing topography and the natural plantings of the hill to carefully shape this space. Canadian hemlocks and Norway spruces define the backdrop, and a row of Japanese yews borders the gully between the stage and the audience. The placement of the amphitheater, with its tree-lined stage overlooking Sunset Lake in the distance, extended the view perspective past the performance area to another spatial layer beyond.

Franklin D. Roosevelt, a trustee of the college from 1923 until his death in 1945, encouraged the addition of the majestic pine trees adjacent to the amphitheater and lake as a practical demonstration of the principle of reforestation. Government reforestation programs had begun around the turn of the nineteenth century, following the Organic Administration Act of 1897, which "provided for the establishment of national forests to improve and protect forests to secure favorable conditions of water flows and to furnish a continuous supply of timber."[28] Roosevelt championed the opportunity to demonstrate this process on the campus so that students would be reminded of the value of maintaining their natural resources for future generations.

The amphitheater soon became the primary outdoor gathering space for the college, and it served its emerging (and now highly respected) theater department, sponsoring spring and fall performances that brought the entire student body together in an outdoor, constructed landscape. One of the highlights of any academic year is the commencement ceremony, when graduates and their families face the podium with Sunset Lake in the distance. As the graduates move forward to receive their diplomas, they must cross the bridge looking east over the constructed gully in this final rite of passage (Figure 6.13).

FIGURE 6.13
Graduation at the amphitheater, 1952. Archives and Special Collections, Vassar College Library, Poughkeepsie, N.Y.

Another significant outdoor learning environment, on a much smaller scale, is the 1939 open-air classroom located near Ely Hall. The classroom was created after Russell Leffingwell, a Vassar trustee, led an open discussion on undergraduate life with students to discuss changes in policy. Henry MacCracken described this event:

> The Trustees, on their turn, established a Committee on Undergraduate Life and discussed the general college policy quite frankly with them. It was after one of these sessions that Russell Leffingwell, formerly Assistant Secretary of the United States Treasury, and an active trustee, expressed himself as so delighted with students' maturity in dealing with these questions that he wanted to signalize the day in some way. Thus was built the open-air classroom, with its praise (by Pericles, of course) of free discussion, and of the value of action after it. For we Athenians have the peculiar honor of thinking before we act and of acting too.[29]

Leffingwell, so impressed by this meeting, donated the funds to build the open-air classroom, which was designed by alumna Molly Drysdale. The three-quarter circular

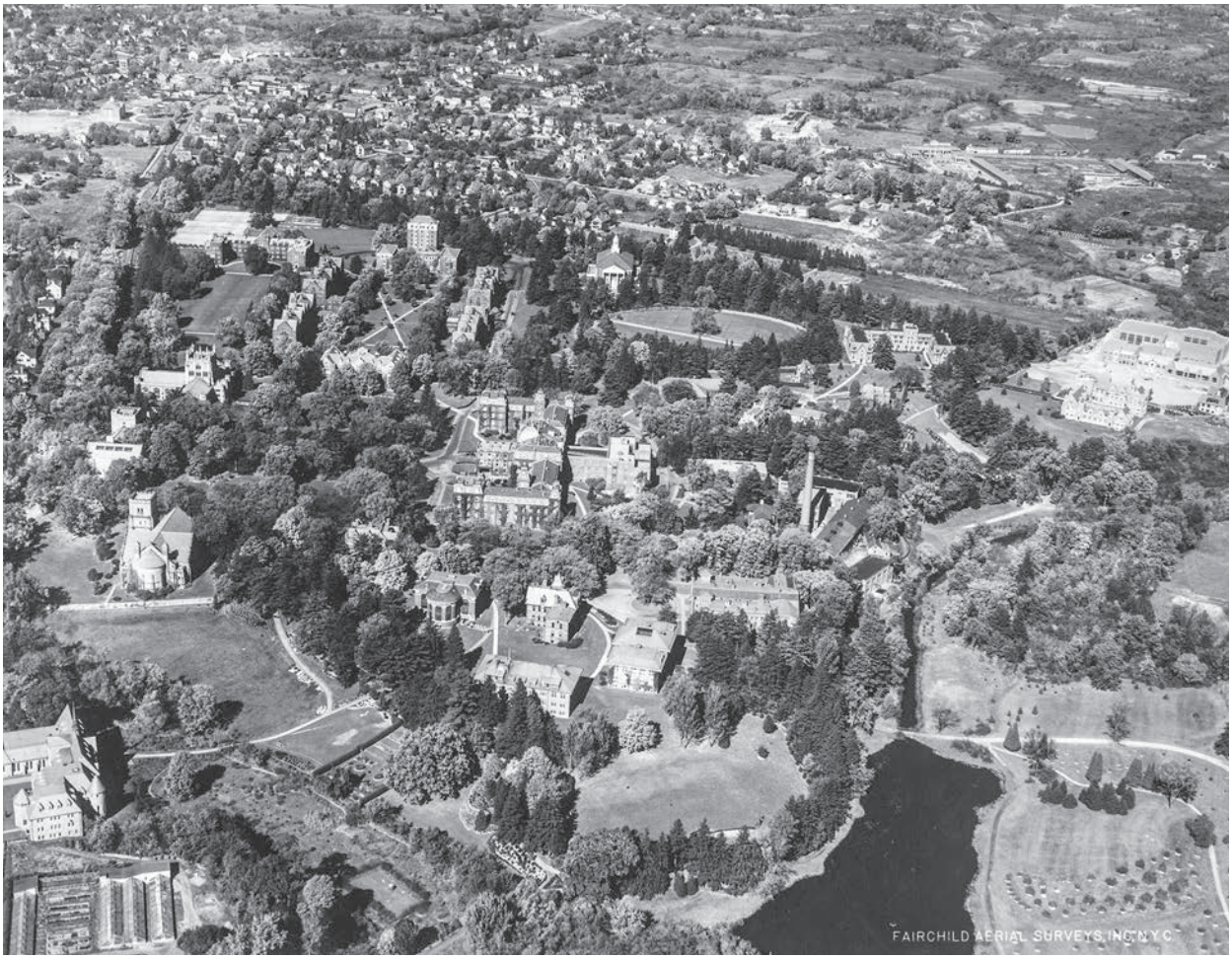


**FIGURE 6.14**
Aerial view of campus, 1933. Archives and Special Collections, Vassar College Library, Poughkeepsie, N.Y.

landscaped enclosure and bench accommodates about twenty people; set into the campus plan in a central yet quiet and shaded location, it is appropriate for group discussions and seminar classes.

The genesis of several other new garden additions in the early twentieth century may be attributed to the students and faculty themselves (Figure 6.14). The Shakespeare Garden is an excellent example. Located in close proximity to the amphitheater, this garden was the brainchild of English professor Winifred Smith and botany professor Emmeline Moore, who wanted to commemorate the tercentenary of Shakespeare's death (April 23, 1616) in 1916. The English students prepared a complete list of plants, flowers, and shrubs mentioned in all of Shakespeare's plays and, along with their colleagues in the botany department, they procured the seeds from both alumnae and the Shakespeare Garden at Stratford-upon-Avon.[30] The botany department laid out the grounds in the style of an English Elizabethan garden, and students worked during their spring vacation for 18.5 cents per hour to prepare the garden for plantings (Figure 6.15).[31] The garden became a must-visit spot on any campus walk, as well as a favorite venue

FIGURE 6.15
Students preparing the grounds for the Shakespeare Garden, 1917. Archives and Special Collections, Vassar College Library, Poughkeepsie, N.Y.

for weddings and Shakespearean scenes performed by the English department.[32] It has been renovated more than once due to building projects that have altered this section of the campus.

To the south and east of the Shakespeare Garden is another historic garden—the Dutchess County Ecological Garden—from the same period. Edith A. Roberts, the author of *The Role of Plant Life in the History of Dutchess County* (1938), came to Vassar as an associate professor in 1919; she would soon become the legendary chair of the botany department and a deeply influential force in the culture of Vassar College (Figure 6.16). Having studied with Professor Henry C. Cowles, a botanist with a specialty in ecological succession at the University of Chicago, Roberts initiated the first course to be taught in ecology at Vassar.[33] This course was a study of regional plant associations and their characteristics in relation to the environment. Roberts rigorously studied the habitat of the Hudson River valley, creating an extensive archive of plants, scrubs, and ferns. Her combined fieldwork and teaching would shape the direction of the botany department for almost three decades. In 1922, not long after her arrival, she created the Dutchess County Outdoor Ecological Laboratory, the first of its kind in the nation. It was a four-acre site in which trees, shrubs, herbs, and ferns were planted in groupings to

FIGURE 6.16
Edith A. Roberts, ca. 1930. Archives and Special Collections, Vassar College Library, Poughkeepsie, N.Y.

recreate their natural habitat and growth patterns. In an article on the new laboratory, she noted the importance of creating a synergistic relationship between the classroom and the landscape:

> The idea of an out-of-door laboratory was conceived in response to the need in the study of ecology, of bringing together the observations made in experimental ecology carried on in a glass laboratory and observations made in the open. This required a laboratory with situations which would make available the plant associations of the surrounding territory and their transitions and in which further studies could be made upon the plant members and the environment

> factors. Such an out-of-door laboratory affords a place in which the results of the in-door lab can be checked, by experiment, against those prevailing under natural conditions.[34]

Roberts would come to work closely with Elsa Rehmann, a landscape architect who also taught at the college. Together, they wrote the popular book *American Plants for American Gardens* (1929), making the case that native plants should be used in the creation of residential gardens and grounds. The use of native or "wild plants" had been in vogue for some time. In 1895, Eugenius Warming had written a treatise on the study of plant communities entitled *Plantesamfund*.[35] Other ecologists, such as Henry C. Cowles, later developed these ideas. As a former student of Cowles, Roberts was closely associated with this branch of ecology as well as with the general Prairie style of landscape architecture that favored native plants. *American Plants for American Gardens* presented various landscape associations along with planning and maintenance guides for gardens that conformed to the natural landscape. They advocated for the sense of "place" that would result from this approach.

Roberts's ecological garden was maintained for many years by faculty and students, but in the 1960s, as the college turned its attention to the outside world, the garden fell into disrepair. In 1992, biology professor Margaret Ronsheim discovered a section of the ecological garden while taking walks along the creek's edge. She researched the history of the garden, which had once contained 675 identified species of shrubs, vines, flowers, ferns, and mosses. Since that time, as the Edith Roberts Garden project director, Ronsheim and her colleagues have again developed the area into a teaching and research opportunity, while also directing its comprehensive restoration (Figure 6.17).[36]

Today, there are several ongoing research initiatives in this landscape related to water health and other special topics. In 1995, Priscilla Bullitt Collins, an alumna and cofounder of the Bullitt Foundation, which was devoted to the environmental protection of the Pacific Northwest, funded an elevated walkway and a restoration of the site. In the Vassar tradition, this walkway now includes information explaining the ongoing research projects located within the garden as well as information about the region's plant life.

Edith A. Roberts collaborated with many sympathetic colleagues during her long tenure at Vassar. One such person was Dr. A. Scott Warthin, professor of geology from 1929 to 1969. He promoted conservation through the direct study of the environment using the campus arboretum, the ecological garden, and the Hudson River valley. He established the first conservation courses, which would lead to the Graduate Division of Conservation. He was also very active in regional and national organizations, serving as chairman of the Dutchess County Water Conservation Committee and founder of the Hudson River Conservation Society. Among his many contributions to teaching and environmental advocacy, he promoted the idea that all citizens needed to become stewards of their landscapes and natural resources. His class field trips to upstate New York sites supported his passion and belief that learning comes from a direct participation with the landscape. One of his most outstanding accomplishments is tied

FIGURE 6.17
Professor Margaret Ronsheim with students, 2014. Photograph by Karl Rabe, courtesy of Margaret Ronsheim.

directly to his mentorship of two students, Liz Cushman Titus and Martha Hayne Talbot. Titus had been interested in the maintenance problems facing the national parks and forests. She speculated that student volunteers could simultaneously study these environments and maintain the parks. Warthin suggested that she pursue this idea as a senior thesis, in collaboration with younger student Talbot.

In 1957, just a few years after their graduation from Vassar College, Titus and Talbot founded the Student Conservation Association, an organization that engaged young people in the stewardship of the environment. Since that time, more than seventy-five thousand young people have joined the association, providing more than twenty-eight million hours of hands-on service to the National Park Service.[37] The founding and success of this organization is a testament to Warthin's advocacy and his mentorship of his students. The A. Scott Warthin Museum, located on the central campus, now houses the geology collection and is an open resource for the college and the public.

This growing, interactive educational model was soon augmented by a major endowment for conservation education. Dr. Helen Clark Putnam, Class of 1878 and founder of the American Child Health Association, believed in the strong relationship between mental health and an ongoing engagement with the landscape. Her 1941 endowment gift was earmarked for a new graduate program in conservation and drew on an interdisciplinary group of faculty and departments. Upon his acceptance of this gift, President MacCracken wrote:

> Thus a new correlation is suggested, which will add greatly to the many bridges that are being built between the different branches of study in our curriculum, by emphasizing the human values to be derived from applications of the sciences of the earth and its life. The conservation of the American landscape (by which term we mean to imply the order and design of the whole environment) is thus seen to be important not only for its economic results, but also for its results in human well-being. We hope to obtain knowledge, which will enable us to build soundly for the future in directing the attention of the student body of Vassar to their responsibility as American citizens for making their country a land of which they may be able to say with truth. It is good for us to be here.[38]

The 1942 course catalogue of the following year stated that "basic scientific problems within the field of conservation may be studied in their geographic, economic, social, and political aspects, as well as in the aspects which derive immediately from the scientific fields included in the division."[39] In this description, we can understand the initial framework for Vassar's emerging environmental studies courses and programs. Environmental studies would always be understood from both cultural and scientific perspectives. Putnam's gift became an important resource in funding the emerging Graduate Division of Conservation, which supported master's-degree students between 1940 and 1960. In 1951, a new interdepartmental course in conservation, staffed by geology, zoology, and plant science faculty would become the forerunner to "The River" course at Vassar College.

Vassar's seventh president, Alan Simpson (1964–77), would also utilize the Putnam gift to establish the college's influence in its regional context (Figure 6.18). When Simpson began his term, he faced a very challenging period of American academic leadership. Amid a time of great social and political upheaval, from the Civil Rights movement, Vietnam War, and the women's movement to the commencement of a coeducational program at Vassar College,[40] Simpson brought a passionate commitment to the stewardship of the environment. On the heels of Rachel Carson's groundbreaking book *Silent Spring* (1962) and other important ecology texts, Simpson advocated for a leadership position in guiding future environmental programs and policies. In an article in the *Vassar Quarterly*, he stated: "Politics is not the only realm in which the price of liberty is eternal vigilance. For a generation now—since Nagasaki and Hiroshima—we have got used to the idea that we need a new wisdom to match our technology if we are to escape total destruction. But we are only beginning to discover that if the number one problem is how to keep world peace, the number two problem is how to build a civilized environment fit to live, work, and play in."[41]

New York governor Nelson Rockefeller had appointed Simpson to the Hudson River Valley Commission, which was founded to promote the rejuvenation of the Hudson River. Simpson, in response to this directive, established a new course entitled "The River" at Vassar College. He solicited a diverse faculty group along with environmental advocates to commence the new course in 1966. Of this initiative, he wrote:

FIGURE 6.18
President Alan Simpson and "The River" course students, ca. 1966. Archives and Special Collections, Vassar College Library, Poughkeepsie, N.Y.

> Any study of man's relation to his environment involves so many difficult questions about our use of resources, natural and otherwise, that no one field of knowledge is competent to deal adequately with them. So "The River" is, of necessity, an interdisciplinary course. This semester fourteen members of the faculty from the social and natural sciences and from art are relating their specialized knowledge to a common problem: the protection and development of the resources of the Hudson Valley for the increased well-being of its inhabitants.[42]

"The River" was another Vassar initiative that would actively engage with the larger landscape. The invention of such a novel, interdisciplinary, and site-specific course was a natural progression from the earlier research and engagement with the Hudson River habitat. Roberts had brought the river habitat to the college, and now Simpson would bring the college to the river (Figure 6.19). As a small institution of approximately 1,600 students in the mid-1960s, it was both nimble and eminently qualified to sponsor such an innovative program. Today, we see the influence of those early efforts, not only in the reduced pollution of the Hudson River but also in the renaissance of the river towns that overlook it.

FIGURE 6.19
Map showing the Vassar College campus in relation to the town of Poughkeepsie and the Hudson River. Drawing by Karen Van Lengen Architects, 2017.

In 1971, one year after the initial celebration of Earth Day, Vassar began its first interdepartmental major in ecology and conservation, bringing together courses in chemistry, mathematics, and the social sciences. Fieldwork was an integral aspect of the program, as it used the ponds of the county and the Hudson River as well as took occasional trips to the Marine Biological Laboratory at Woods Hole.

Other institutions at this time were also developing programs and schools to address ecological issues. For example, the College of the Atlantic, in Bar Harbor, Maine, was founded in 1969 to address the theme of "human ecology," which "integrates knowledge from all academic disciplines and from personal experience to investigate—and ultimately improve—the relationships between human beings and our social and natural communities."[43] Warren Wilson College, which was founded in the late 1970s, emphasized environmental engagement through its requirement of work participation in the care of the school. The introduction of these new, environmentally focused institutions reflects the period's emerging culture. However, Vassar's environmental programs had grown incrementally over a century in the context of a college that had used the landscape as its laboratory.

In 1976, Vassar's board of trustees designated 276 acres of the Vassar Farm as an ecological preserve, in order to increase the college's ability to use the landscape for experimental learning and research. In 1978, the first field laboratory station was established there; it was updated and enlarged in 1995. In 1995, a new wave of curricular innovation emerged when the college introduced a plan for a new program of environmental studies directed by Daniel Peck, the John Guy Vassar Professor of English. Begun in the academic year of 2000–2001, this program was completely multidisciplinary, as it was based on the long-standing belief that environmental questions are best approached through a diversity of perspectives. Students take natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities courses that are structured around major environmental themes, then are brought together in field work and a final senior seminar. Drawing on the strengths of the faculty, this multidisciplinary approach has defined a clear identity for this program. The associated Environmental Research Institute has augmented the program's research opportunities. These initiatives not only support the college's educational mission but also explicitly engage the Poughkeepsie community, using the farm and the ecological park to accomplish their goals. These new community-based programs offer new growth opportunities for both the region and the college. At Vassar, these community engagements have been accomplished through the auspices of the Vassar landscape itself.

At the regional scale, the college has also launched the Environmental Cooperative at the Vassar Barns. The cooperative "brings together regional environmental organizations, community groups, educators, the Vassar College community, and residents to increase our impact and expand conservation efforts in the Hudson Valley." It is another demonstration of Vassar's leadership in addressing complex and diverse regional environmental challenges.

In conclusion, Vassar College exemplifies an unusual union of place and pedagogy that has significantly grown and transformed over the past 150 years. From its early period, marked by the creation of its own landscape structure, to the pedagogical gardens of the early twentieth century, to the study of the regional landscape and the flourishing farm research and community programs of today, Vassar has become an extraordinary example of this interactive concept. The question of its future in a global environment is a prescient one, worth considering as one contemplates how this approach will continue to thrive and reinvent itself in a globally interconnected world. Can the emphasis on native landscapes continue to thrive as human diversity and multiculturalism grows? If we look at the increase in the college's environmental studies research projects over the past twenty years, as well as at the tripling of student majors in these associated disciplines and the growing engagement with the community, Vassar's example is thriving. Even in a world of global interchange, the study of these microclimates and regional landscapes remains critical in relation to the larger networks.

Poughkeepsie's economic and physical regeneration may require a unique kind of energy in order to bring it back to life so that it may join other Hudson River towns that have experienced a strong renaissance in the past twenty-five years. The three-mile corridor that now separates the college from the river could become a transformative series of landscapes shared by the community, the college, and the region. New forms of urban

farming and food production might sustain a major growth economy for Poughkeepsie and its neighboring region. There are many possibilities that can emerge based on Vassar's long history of innovative landscape engagement. Matthew Vassar would certainly be pleased if he knew that the college's continuing development could influence a rejuvenation strategy for Poughkeepsie as well as linking the college, through a working landscape corridor, back to the river that he had so dearly loved.

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