

Before Hillwood: A History of this Land

Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens covers twenty-five acres in the northwest quadrant of the District of Columbia. The former home of Marjorie Merriweather Post (1887–1973) is situated on a hill bordered by the 1,754-acre Rock Creek Park, which was designated the United States' third national park in 1890.

The earliest human inhabitation of the area now occupied by Hillwood and Rock Creek likely occurred during the Archaic Period, around 4000 BC to 1000 BC. Native Americans, including members of the Piscataway or Anacostan tribes, would have occupied transitory camps alongside the banks of Rock Creek, where they hunted, fished, and worked with wood and hides.¹

During the 1600s and 1700s, tobacco farming and slavery based on African labor developed in the Rock Creek area. Following the exhaustion of the soil due to the harshness of tobacco farming, the locals began cultivating wheat and grains. As a result, they built several mills, including a granite water mill constructed by Isaac Peirce (1756–1841) and his son Abner (1785–1851) in the 1820s at the foot of Hillwood's property. Peirce Mill, the only surviving Rock Creek mill from the 1800s, stands on what had been part of early British land patents.

Isaac Peirce, a Quaker from Pennsylvania, had settled in the area in the late 1700s and purchased the property from William Deakins (1742–1798), a local merchant and landowner, in 1794.² The large Peirce family—Isaac, wife Elizabeth, and nine children—built a working estate that by 1800 consisted of hundreds of acres.³ The property contained several buildings, including the family residence, barns, the mill, and various outbuildings. Family members, tenants, and enslaved people contributed to the success of the business, which by 1830, involved twenty-seven people, including a free Black laborer and fourteen enslaved people.⁴

During the first quarter of the 1800s, the Peirce estate, one of the largest in the area, was well known for the cultivation and sale of fruit and ornamental trees and plants. In 1823, Joshua Peirce (1795–1869), the avid horticulturist son of Isaac and Elizabeth, built himself a house on family land and called it Linnaean Hill, after Carl Linnaeus (1707–1778), the famous Swedish botanist and namesake of Linnean Avenue, Hillwood's official address. The house is today known as the Pierce-Kingle mansion. An 1861 map of the Washington region indicates that a portion of Hillwood's land had formerly been used as an orchard.

Much of the Peirce-owned land remained in the family until the late 1800s, early 1900s. Abner Peirce oversaw the property after his father's death, in 1841. The 1850 census confirms that Abner owned 960 acres, on which eighteen enslaved people worked. After his death, in 1851, the property passed to Pierce Shoemaker (1816–1891), Abner's nephew and Isaac's grandson. Twenty enslaved people were recorded on the property in 1862, shortly before President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, on January 1, 1863. After Pierce Shoemaker's death, the federal government purchased a portion of the land he had owned to include in the new Rock Creek Park.

¹ National Park Service, *Peirce Mill Complex Rock Creek Park Cultural Landscape Report*, August 2009, 2.2, <https://irma.nps.gov/DataStore/Reference/Profile/2284313>

² National Archives Catalogue, "Washington, DC, SP Peirce Mill," file, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/117692401>; Steve Dryden, *Peirce Mill: Two Hundred Years in the Nation's Capital* (Bergamot: Washington, D.C., 2009), 10–12. The surname Peirce was not standardized. In census documents, the earliest record the name as Peirce, but later ones record it as Pierce or Pearce. Most records cite Peirce. Hillwood has decided to use Peirce also, as does the National Park Service.

³ *Peirce Mill Complex Rock Creek Park Cultural Landscape Report*, August 2009, 2.4.

⁴ *Peirce Mill Complex Rock Creek Park Cultural Landscape Report*, August 2009, 2.9.

Part of the remaining Peirce property passed to the Newman family. Edwin A. Newman, a real estate developer based in Washington, married Clara Shoemaker (1859–1930), the daughter of Pierce Shoemaker and the sister of Louis Pierce Shoemaker (d. 1916).⁵

In the early 1900s, Daisy Albertine Blodgett (née Peck, 1862–1947), widow of Delos Abiel Blodgett (1825–1908), a Michigan lumber merchant and president of the Fourth National Bank,⁶ acquired two properties from the Newman family, one of which would later become Hillwood. In 1910, Daisy Blodgett took her three children—Helen (1895–1977), Delos A. (1896–?), and Mona Peck (1900–1990)—“to Europe for the purpose of giving them a French education. Her summers were spent at St. Moritz, Switzerland, and her winters at Trouville, France.”⁷ After the family returned to the United States, Helen graduated during the 1910s from Mt. Vernon Seminary in Washington, D.C. “As a gifted and well educated young lady she has taken her place as one of the social leaders of the younger set of society in the National Capital”.⁸ Helen’s sister, Mona, also attended Mount Vernon and made her societal debut in 1919. Meanwhile, Daisy settled in Washington, where she devoted her time to philanthropy and patriotic activities during World War I.

Daisy Blodgett gave both of the Newman properties to her daughters during the 1920s, and on the occasion of Helen and Mona’s marriages, the estates were renamed—Arbremont and The Rocks, respectively—and Georgian-style houses by the architect John H. Deibert added to them. The French “Arbremont,” literally “wood hill” or “tree hill,” may have commemorated or in some other way been related to the family’s time in France. The house at Arbremont, the first to be built, in 1924,⁹ became the lovely home of Helen Blodgett and her husband, Col. Henry Parsons Erwin (1881–1953).¹⁰ The mansion, featured in *Arts & Decoration* in 1931, was described as a “beautiful residence . . . furnished with many rare antiques, a number of which were assembled abroad by the owners.”¹¹ The article also acknowledges the decorators, J. G. Valiant Company; landscape architects, J. H. Small & Son and Rose Greely; and contractor, the Andrew Murray Company.

The Rocks, Arbremont’s sister house, located on a hill at 1940 Shepherd Street NW on 15.9 acres of wooded land, was built in 1926 for Mona Blodgett and her husband, David St. Pierre Gaillard (1890–1982). The couple named it after the Gaillard family’s South Carolina plantation, on which enslaved people lived and worked.¹²

In 1920, around the time of the Blodgett’s land acquisition and construction of Arbremont and The Rocks, Hattie L. Sewell, an African American woman, obtained the concession to manage a teahouse operating from the nearby mill, known as Old Pierce Mill Tea House, which operated between 1905–1934.¹³

In 1955, [Marjorie Post](#) acquired Arbremont from the Erwin family and changed the name to Hillwood, after her Long Island estate built in the 1920s and now the site of C. W. Post College, Long Island University. Post employed between 100 and 300 full-time, part-time, and seasonal staff members to maintain her three principal residences and land—at Hillwood, in Washington; Mar-A-

⁵ The couple’s daughter, Azadia Newman (1905–1999), was a Hollywood celebrity portraitist, and her husband, Rouben Zachary Mamoulian (1897–1987), a famous Georgian-born American film and theatre director, worked with the likes of Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich.

⁶ Daisy Albertine Peck was Delos’ second wife. They married in New York City in 1893.

⁷ Mabel Ward Cameron, *The Biographical Cyclopaedia of American Women*, vol. 1 (New York: Halvord Publishing, 1924), 329.

⁸ Cameron, *The Biographical Cyclopaedia of American Women*, 330. Marjorie Post was a class of 1904 alumna.

⁹ The date is according to several permits to “excavate” on the property issued to the builder, Andrew Murray, located at 729 12th Street, Washington, D.C.

¹⁰ Erwin, an investment banker and secretary of the board of trustee at George Washington University, served in World Wars I and II.

¹¹ *Arts & Decoration*, March 1931, 48–50.

¹² The family would later sell the estate to Senator John D. “Jay” Rockefeller in 1985. *Washington Post*, March 16, 1985.

¹³ For more information on Hattie L. Sewell and the tea house, see <https://www.nps.gov/rocr/learn/historyculture/adhi2e.htm>

Lago, in Palm Beach, Florida; and Topridge in the Adirondacks of New York. At Hillwood, as at the other homes, the employees were both local and foreign hires, some placed by international agencies.

Oscar Gustav “Gus” Modig (1912–2003), one of Post’s most trusted staff members, worked for her from 1948 to 1973. Born in Sweden, Modig immigrated to the United States in 1937 and became an American citizen after serving in the U.S. Army during World War II. Appointed Post’s head butler in 1959, he was deeply involved in daily household operations and overseeing Post’s renowned social engagements. During his forty-four years of service, Modig worked at Mar-A-Lago, Tregaron (Post’s first Washington, D.C., home), and Hillwood.

Post and Modig came to heavily rely on one another during their years together. One Post family member remarked, “He was devoted to her and she was to him.” When Modig underwent surgery in 1970, Post discreetly funded extra nursing care, a sign of her gratitude for his service. After Post’s death, in 1973, Modig remained dedicated to Hillwood and actively participated in the estate’s transition from a private home to a public museum to honor Post’s legacy. He retired in 1992.

A Hillwood employee of similar dedication was Henry Rhyne (1928–2012), an African American from a large family in Ellenwood, Georgia, who cared for Hillwood’s grounds from 1955 to 1994, when he retired. Raised on a farm, Rhyne brought his experience as a self-taught gardener to maintaining the estate. He was recommended to Post by his brother James (?–1971), also a gardener, who worked at Hillwood until 1967, when he left to start his own landscaping business. Two more Rhyne brothers, Jay Will and Howard, were also part of Hillwood’s horticulture staff.

The various gardeners at Hillwood were responsible for different areas of the estate. Henry Rhyne was in charge of the lawn and vista, but would occasionally assist the house staff by gathering trunks from the trunk room and transporting them to the train station or airport when Post traveled. Rhyne recalled how he enjoyed talking to Post when she stopped by the gardens: “She was easy to talk to,” he said. “She was just like an ordinary person. . . . She just talked. Sometimes I’d walk around [with her] when she wanted to show me something that she wanted done or she wanted something moved. . . . So, she was very good.”¹⁴

Post was a flower and garden enthusiast,¹⁵ as well as an avid collector. In bequeathing [Hillwood as a museum](#)—it opened in 1977—she endowed the country with a distinguished eighteenth-century French fine and decorative arts collection, her personal collection of apparel, jewelry, and accessories, and the most comprehensive collection of Russian imperial art outside Russia. Some of the artworks on display at Hillwood today were originally housed at Post’s other residences, including Camp Topridge, Post’s residence in Adirondack Mountains.

Beginning in the late 1800s, the Adirondack Mountains, in New York, became a summer retreat for wealthy Americans. The Vanderbilts, Morgans, Huntingtons, and Carnegies counted among the avid admirers of the region, and along with Post built discreet, yet luxurious, retreats constructed from local materials.¹⁶ Post acquired the 209-acre Camp Topridge, near Saranac Lake, in 1921.¹⁷ It had forty-two guesthouses and staff accommodations. The stone and wood boathouse was considered a particularly unique example of Adirondack architecture. During summer retreats at Topridge, Post retained some 80 staff members on site to manage the estate and entertain her many guests.

Post decorated Topridge with her collection of Russian and Russian-inspired folk art. The residence was also home to the extensive collection of Native American art that Post amassed during the 1920s. In her will, she bequeathed the Native American collection to the Smithsonian Institution,

¹⁴ Oral history, Archives and Special Collections, Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens.

¹⁵ Kate Markert, *A Garden for All Seasons: Marjorie Merriweather Post’s Hillwood* (New York: Rizzoli Electa, 2020), 23.

¹⁶ William West Durant (1850–1934) was considered at the origin of this new architectural fashion. He spent much of his family’s fortune developing the Great Camp Sagamore, which was completed in 1897 and sold to Alfred Gwynne Vanderbilt in 1901.

¹⁷ The Lothrop family from Washington, D.C., originally owned Topridge.

and in 1983 a third of the collection—about 190 artefacts—temporarily came to Hillwood for *In Keeping with Nature: An Exhibit of North American Indian Art*. To host the event, Hillwood erected the Indian Artifacts Collections Building, known today as the Adirondack building, constructed in a style reminiscent of Topridge. The architect Sara O’Neil Manion, who designed the structure, and William Manion, project manager for construction, traveled to Topridge to research elements to possibly incorporate in the Hillwood project. Their building received an *Award for Excellence in Architecture* at the inaugural D.C. Mayor’s Architectural Design Awards.

The display of Native objects at Hillwood, curated by the anthropologist Priscilla Rachun Linn and designed by Patricia Chester of Root and Chester Design, included rugs, quillwork, pottery, baskets, and feather headdresses,¹⁸ made by tribespeople from the Great Lakes to Alaska, with an emphasis on the Plains and the Southwest. The collection also included examples of beadwork, most of it using glass beads obtained from European traders. Post greatly appreciated Native beadwork techniques as well as the skills of male and female Native artisans who created other types of objects in the collection she assembled.

The collection returned to the Smithsonian in 2004. The Adirondack building continues to serve as a gallery space for special exhibitions. Approximately eighty staff members maintain Hillwood’s grounds, buildings, and collection in line with the standards established by Marjorie Merriweather Post so that future generations can enjoy them.

¹⁸ *Washington Post*, July 19, 1983.