

Lyman Estate Landscape Guide



The Vale in the early twentieth century.

The Lyman Estate, established in 1793 by wealthy Boston merchant Theodore Lyman, is a rare example of late eighteenth-century garden design, fashioned after the great park-like setting of English aristocratic country homes. Called The Vale because of its low-lying situation alongside a stream, the estate was one of several pastoral retreats built by Boston merchants outside the city. Typically, these estates combined a mansion and pleasure garden with a working farm. The Lymans used The Vale primarily as a warm weather retreat and resided on Boston's Beacon Hill the rest of the year.

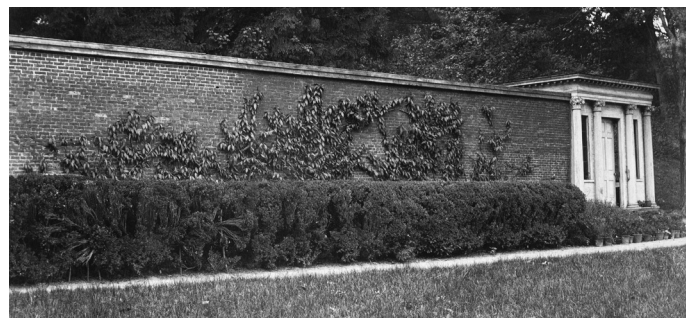
To create grounds that complemented the Federal-style mansion designed by Samuel McIntire, Lyman engaged landscape gardener William Bell, a recent immigrant from Great Britain. The landscape design featured rolling pastures, lawns, winding paths, and ponds characteristic of the picturesque style. Groups of trees framed scenic vistas while work areas, like the kitchen and cutting gardens and outbuildings, were screened from view. The original approach followed a tree-lined road through the front meadow and over a stone bridge. Although the bridge was subsequently demolished, a six-hundred-foot brick wall behind the house, used for espaliering peaches, still survives. A wooded knoll beyond the peach wall contained a park with a herd of imported spotted deer. The estate made a magnificent impression on all who saw it; in 1822, poet William Cullen Bryant, who described its marvels in a letter, called it "a perfect paradise."

Lyman experimented with and promoted forward-looking agricultural practices and floriculture. In the 1820s, he imported some of the first European copper beeches to be planted in America. The estate's greenhouse complex is one of the oldest surviving examples in the country. A pit greenhouse, built in 1796, was the first, followed in 1804 by a three-part structure for citrus, figs, pineapples, bananas, and other fruits. In 1820, Lyman added a greenhouse for the cultivation of camellias, a popular pursuit among Boston's gentry. The greenhouses were further expanded in 1840 and again in the twentieth century. Today, they are renowned for their hundred-year-old camellias and grapes and their broad selection of orchids, along with choice specimens available for purchase and expert advice.

As the Victorian era advanced, the family embellished the landscape, planting flowering shrubs along the pathways, and cutting flower beds into the lawn. Behind the house, the rhododendrons, azaleas, and magnolias planted before the Civil War still light up the yard each spring. Vegetables, sheltered by a boxwood hedge, were grown in the garden along the peach wall, later replaced by annual and perennial flowers.

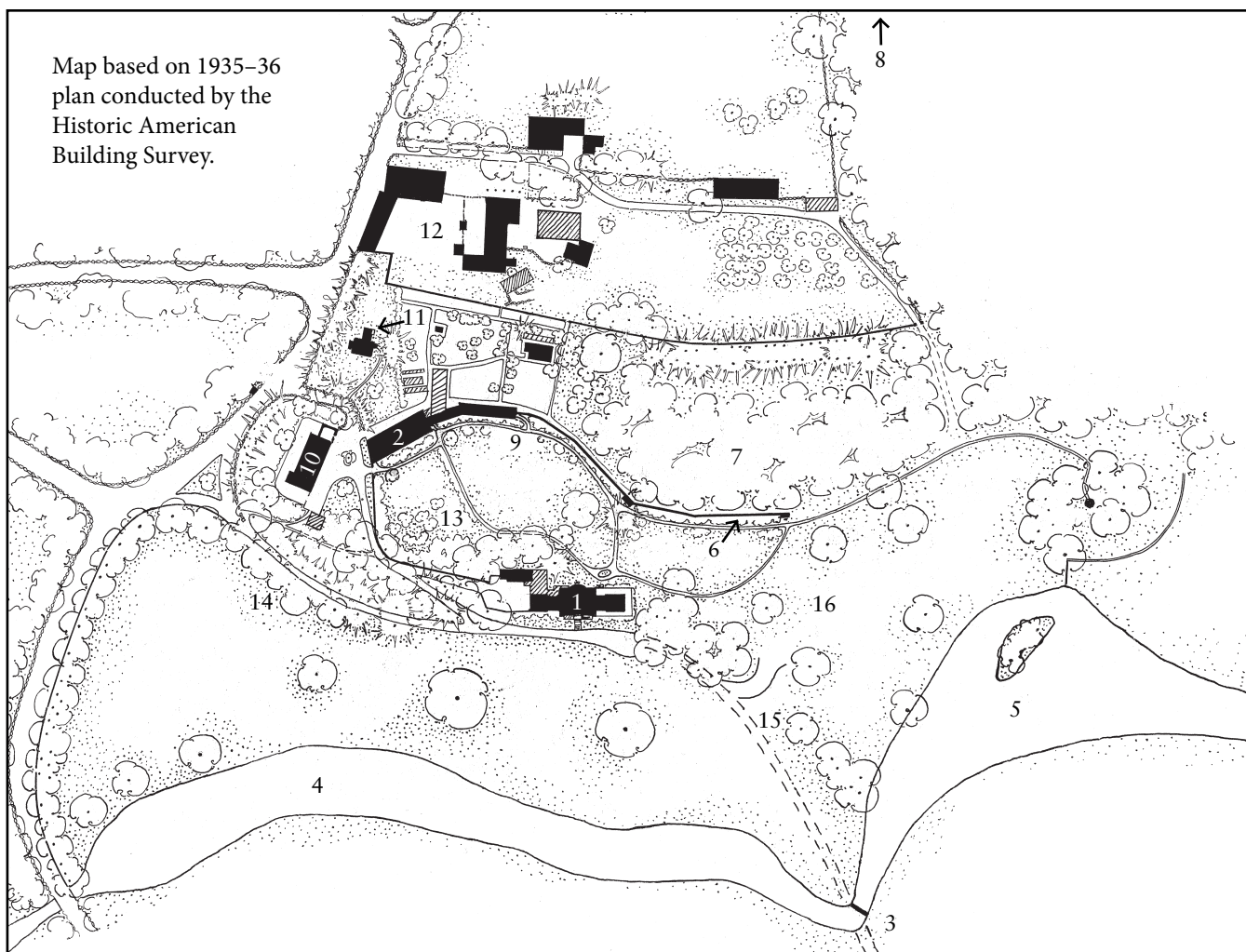
The 1938 hurricane downed many of the estate's large old trees. Today, the sugar maples lining the entrance road, the copper beech beside the camellia house, and the large tulip tree by the parking lot remain as some of the oldest trees on the property.

Historic New England is currently restoring the landscape to its appearance in the 1920s, reconnecting lost pathways and reinstalling the boxwood hedge along the peach wall garden. The restoration retains the core elements of the landscape's original English-style design while reflecting its evolution over the centuries.



The peach wall with espaliered fruit trees, c. 1890.

Map based on 1935–36
plan conducted by the
Historic American
Building Survey.



1. Lyman Estate mansion
2. Lyman Estate Greenhouses
3. Stone bridge showing original approach
4. Upper pond
5. Middle pond
6. Brick peach wall with garden house,
perennial garden, and boxwood hedge border
7. Wooded knoll
8. Deer park (now Bentley University)
9. European copper beech tree
10. Carriage house
11. Gardener's cottage
12. Farm complex (now privately owned)
13. Rhododendron, azalea, magnolia, and
mountain laurel
14. Sugar maples (lining entryway)
15. Tulip tree
16. Location of current parking area

Hours and information

Lyman Estate Greenhouses

9:30 a.m.—4 p.m.

Wednesday–Sunday, December 15–July 15

Wednesday–Saturday, July 16–December 14

Mansion

Tours offered the third Saturday of the month, with tours on the hour 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., last tour at noon. Group tours are welcome with advance arrangement.

Grounds

Open from dawn to dusk.

The Lyman Estate mansion and grounds may be rented for private events. For more information, please call 617-994-5912 or visit HistoricNewEngland.org.