



Landscape Architect Fletcher Steele's Work at  
The George Doubleday Estate, 1929-1935  
Ridgefield, Connecticut

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## Introduction

The image on the cover was taken in 1929 looking north from the back terrace at Westmoreland, George Doubleday's main house on his Ridgefield, Connecticut estate.

About halfway along the winding path and to the right was the Doubleday "Casino", a gathering place for social activities such as cards, fundraisers and other entertainments. A formal flower garden was in place adjacent to the east side of the Casino.

At the end of the winding path was the estate's large vegetable garden, somewhat visible off in the distance. A greenhouse, built in 1928, is out of view to the right of the vegetable garden in this photograph.

George Doubleday hired renowned Boston-based landscape architect Fletcher Steele in 1929 for two primary projects: 1) an addition to the existing greenhouse, and 2) to design a recreation complex around the Casino. This document is about those two projects.

The northwest end of today's Westmoreland Homeowners' Association parking lot is where the greenhouses were located. The association's recreation area was the site of Steele's recreation complex. Remnants of his design work in that area still remain.

Doubleday's Westmoreland house is today home to Congregation Shir Shalom of Westchester and Fairfield Counties. The steps and pillars in the cover image are still in place, but the sweeping view is not, blocked by trees that have grown tall over time.

Fletcher Steele is considered by many to be the essential link between the formalism of nineteenth-century Beaux Art design and modern landscape design.



George and Alice Doubleday bought Francis M. Bacon's Ridgefield estate, "Nutholme", in 1915. Bacon was head of Bacon and Company, a dry goods and woolen firm in Manhattan. The Doubleday's proceeded to acquire much of the neighboring land mostly to the west and eventually totaling nearly 300 acres. They named the main house, pictured above, "Westmoreland".

Alice Doubleday died in 1919 at age 42. She was the sister of Lucy Lynch who with her husband John Lynch owned West Mountain Farm in Ridgefield, now the site of Ridgefield Academy.

Alice and George Doubleday had four children: Marguerite, George Chester, James M., and Alice. George Doubleday hired Mary May White as his personal secretary and household assistant in 1920. They were married in 1937. George was president and chairman of Ingersoll-Rand. Mary was active in many organizations in town including St. Stephen's Church. She was a past president and active member of the Ridgefield Garden Club from 1922 until her death in 1968.





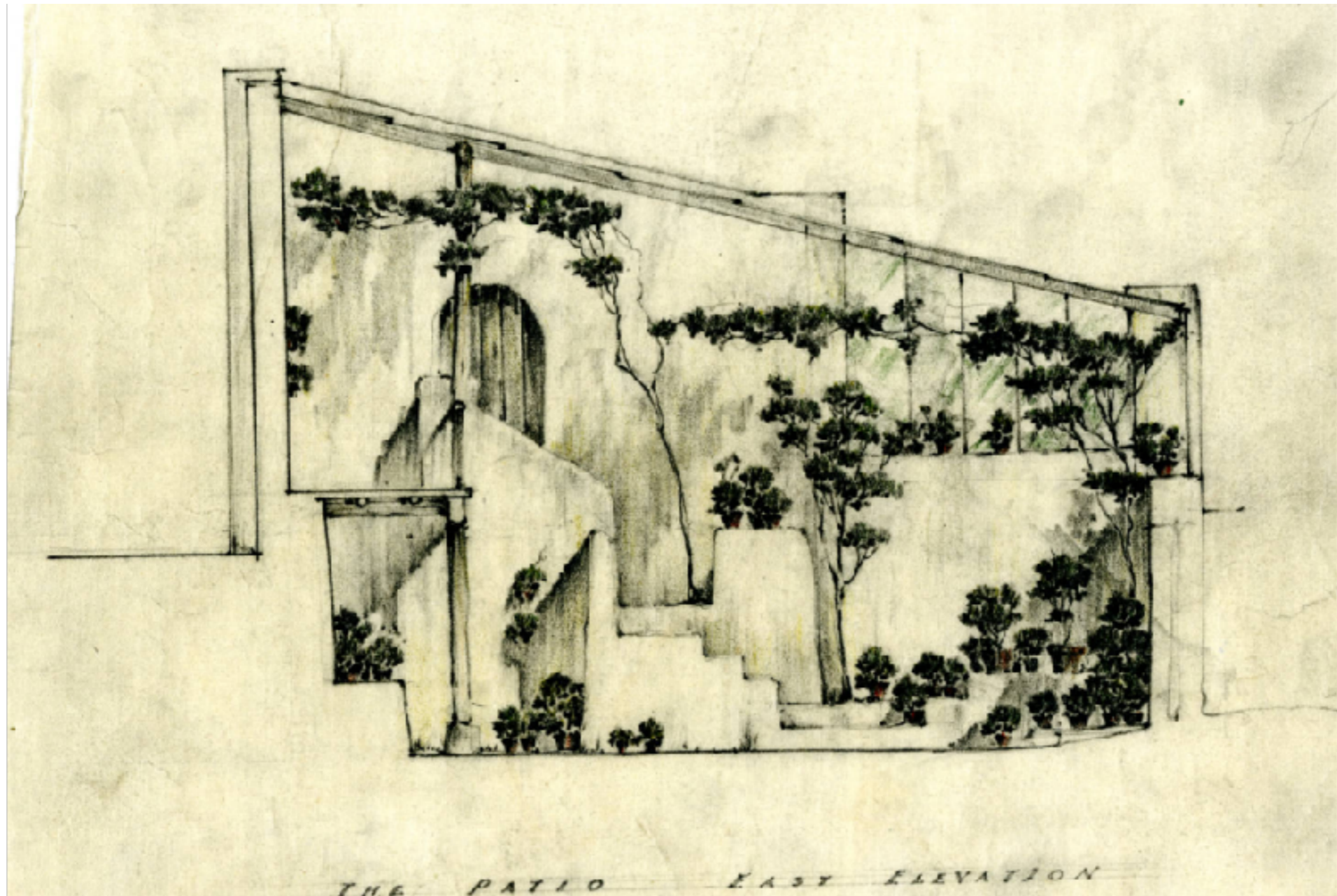
Fletcher Steele



George Doubleday hired landscape architect Fletcher Steele when Steele was nearly 20 years into his 60 year career. Steele's mentor was Warren H. Manning who designed the landscape for the Fraser estate in Ridgefield. Both men were regular speakers at Ridgefield Garden Club meetings in the early-1920s.

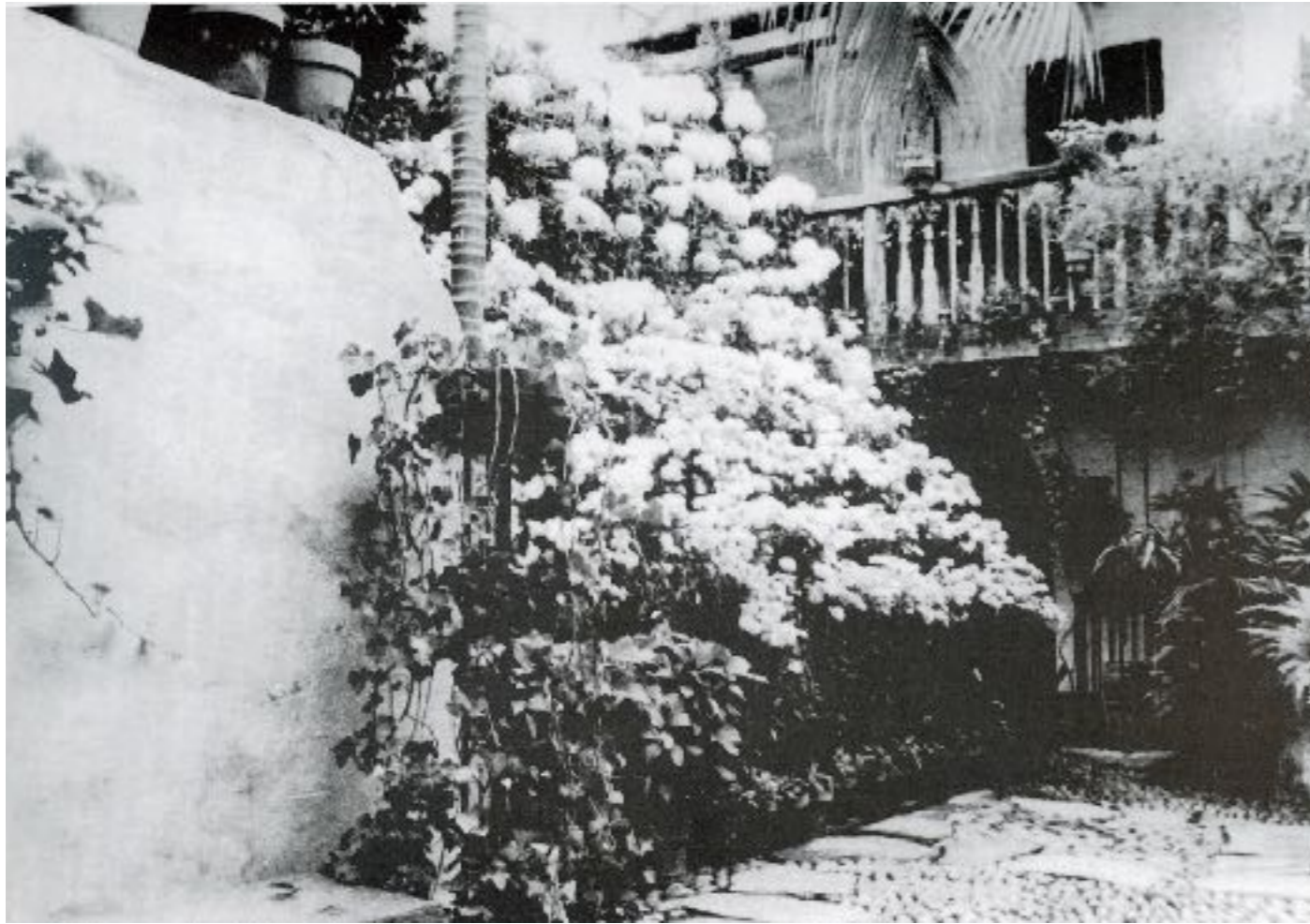
One of the first projects Steele completed for George Doubleday was a desired addition to the 1928 greenhouse pictured above which couldn't accommodate tall plants such as bay tree, oleanders and hibiscus in the winter. George Doubleday didn't want the estate's landscape marred by more rooflines, and conceived the idea of a winter greenhouse, two-thirds of which would be underground. His children suggested a fireplace to make it a cozy retreat in the winter, and George imagined if he were to sit in there, the sound of dripping water, always music to his ears, would be a great addition.





Called simply "The Patio", Steele's design for the sunken greenhouse consisted of stairways, ramps, a balustraded balcony, arched entryways, iron-grated windows, an old slate Spanish plaque, marble shelves, a fireplace and a dripping waterfall. The plaster interior walls of The Patio were irregular and painted variegated colors of yellow, blue, pink and purple.





Steele's memories of Cordova and Seville were rustically expressed at The Patio as captured in these two photographs of the greenhouse interior. The Patio housed a variety of different sized plants, and was a perfect place for horticultural experiments.

Mary May White Doubleday wrote a piece about The Patio for The Bulletin of The Garden Club of America in November, 1941. The piece is included with this document.

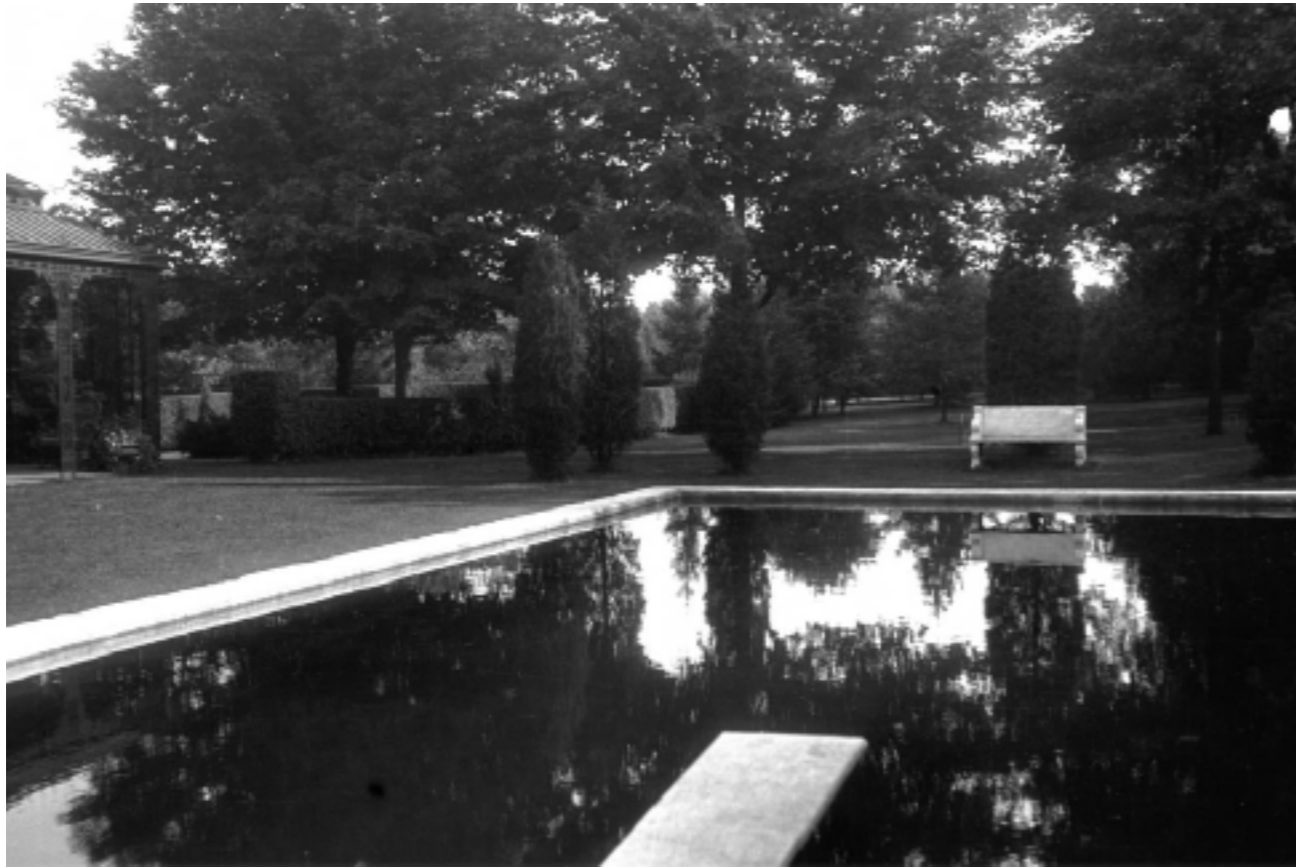






Steele designed a small terrace covered with a rustic grapevine arbor at the west end of The Patio. Named Georgio's Place, the terrace included a weathered oak table and bench that was a favorite place to sit in the summer. A small stone-walled vestibule painted a blue color seen in Italy separated the terrace from The Patio. A rough oak shelf supported a canary-yellow Carboni bowl converted into a wash basin. As Mary wrote in the paper for the GCA Bulletin, "... you are sure you have been transported to a quaint corner of Spain."





The second project Doubleday asked Steele to design was a recreation complex around the existing Casino building, partially pictured on the left of the top image, and the large formal flower garden to its east, part of which is pictured in the lower image.

The Casino was the site of many Ridgefield Garden Club meetings, fundraisers, luncheons, dinners, and flower shows over the years. It was undoubtedly used for many other social functions, too. The building dated to Francis Bacon's ownership of the property, but Doubleday had modified it over time. (The building was still in place in the early-1990's, long after the estate had been subdivided in the late-1960's. The Westmoreland Homeowners' Association later replaced the building, only keeping the original fireplace and chimney in place. Today, the flower garden is the site of the association's swimming pool.)



Steele's design plan for the recreation complex centered on a long vista that originated at a small stage on the west (laterally adjacent to the bowling green), that then ran the length of the pool (primarily a reflecting pool but deep enough at one end for a diving board), an outdoor ballroom, and a pine allée, terminating at a fountain over 400 feet away from the small stage.

Steele's finished pool is pictured in the top image (it is now the site of the association's kiddie pool).





The outdoor ballroom immediately to the south of the Casino included a large rectangular dance space with an orchestra platform and demi-lune wood benches with wrought iron supports on either side of the dance space (some of the benches are visible above under the umbrellas in this image from 1935). Today's Westmoreland Homeowners' Association basketball court occupies the space.

The entrance to the ballroom was a double-sided wrought iron structure, 32 feet long by 10 feet high and 4 feet wide, pictured above with a vertically-striped top in 1935. Beyond the structure in this image is the reflecting pool. The bowling green for croquet and other lawn sports is just beyond the pool.



Steele's entrance to the ballroom, the double-sided wrought iron structure, consists of 20 wrought-iron panel supports, each housing four iron-casted diamond motifs. Wrought iron bars and other cast iron motifs span the top of the panels and support a gable shaped wrought-iron top that originally included a copper cornice. Chains hanging from the top were connected to the horizontal bars. Finials topped the structure. Today it is commonly referred to as a pergola.

The reflecting pool beyond the pergola was designed with several spray fountains along its perimeter.





Steele designed a pine allée at the far end of the vista, to the east of the outdoor ballroom, with a large hexagon-shaped fountain at the very end of the allée. The fountain completed his long vista that started with the small stage and bowling green, and continued to the reflecting pool, pergola, outdoor ballroom, pine allée and fountain.





Above: the pergola in 1991 at Westmoreland and below in 1993 at Ballard Park



Above: the pergola in Ballard Park today

The Westmoreland Homeowners' Association created a neighborhood recreation area after the Doubleday estate was subdivided. It included the Doubleday tennis court and Steele-designed pool. They later added the basketball court and larger pool, and renovated the Casino. They eventually replaced the Casino with a newer building, keeping only the chimney and fireplace with its elaborate mantel in tact. Photographs of the fireplace and mantel are included at the end of this document.

The pergola remained in its place until 1991, situated between the Steele-designed pool and what was by then a basketball court. The Ridgefield Preservation Trust moved it to Ballard Park in 1992 where more members of the Ridgefield community could enjoy it. The pergola sits at the north end of the park's historic parterre perennial garden that has been underwritten and maintained by the Ridgefield Garden Club since 1982.

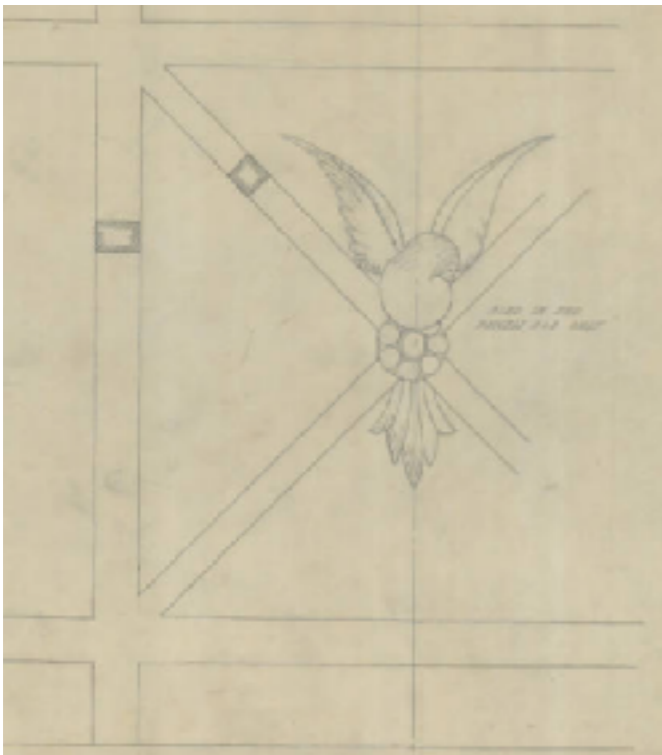




Some parts of Steele's work at the Doubleday estate are still recognizable today. Four of the demi-lune benches with Steele's wrought iron supports and bird motifs are still in place along one side of the basketball court. The concrete steps from the benches down to the ballroom are still in place as is the brick wall on the east end of the original ballroom space in the near part of this photograph.

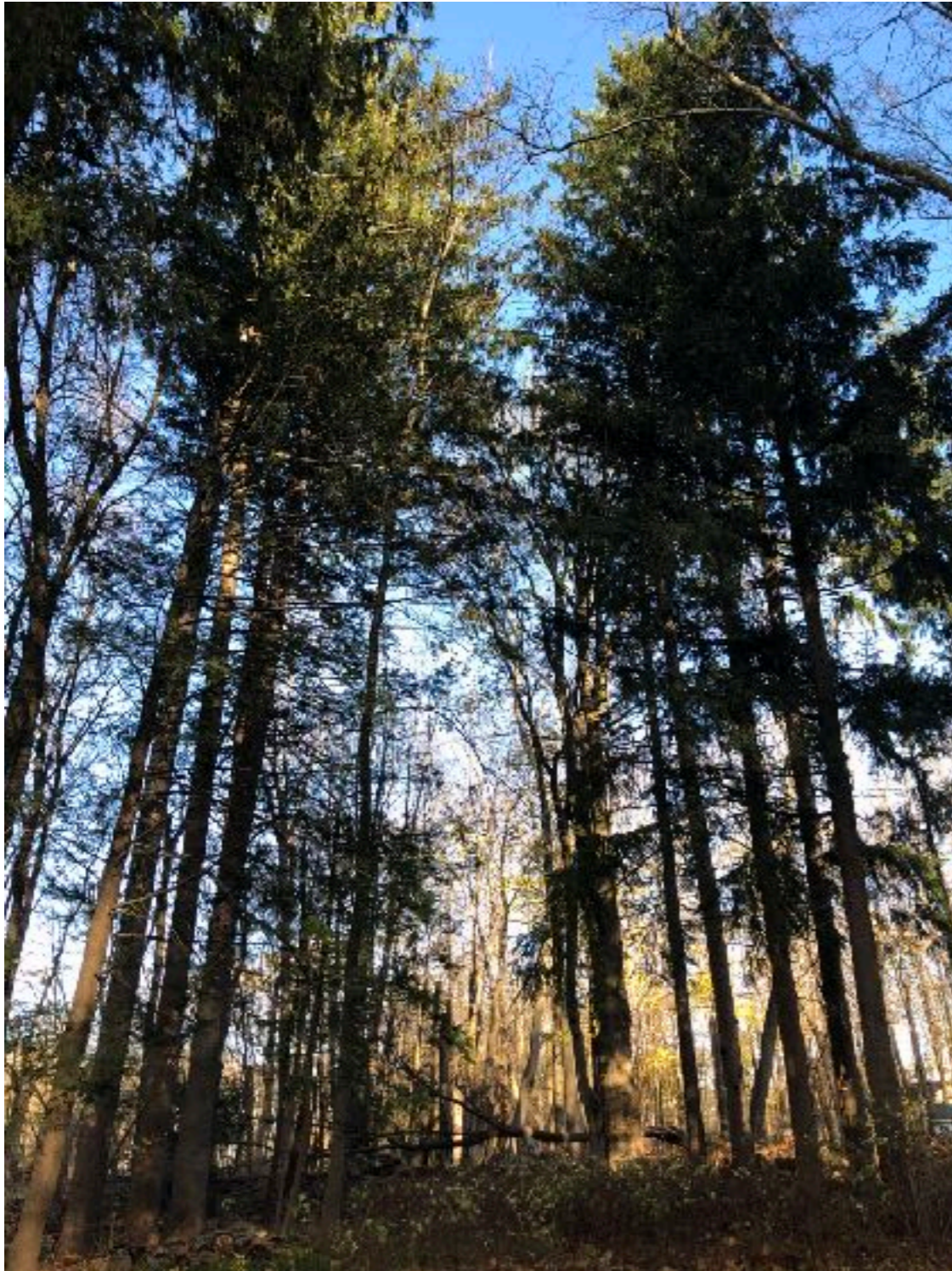
Past the basketball court and barely visible in the photograph is Steele's reflecting pool which is now used as a kiddie pool.

The building on the right of the photograph replaced the Doubleday Casino but is in roughly the same location as the Casino that dates to Francis M. Bacon's time.





Steele's pine allée is still somewhat visible today as shown below. Remnants of the fountain and its pump house beyond the allée are still in place but have been overgrown with thick vegetation.



Nothing remains of The Patio, Steele's addition to the 1928 greenhouse. It would have been located at the far end of the above parking lot. But the short stone wall at Georgio's Place, the wine terrace designed by Steele, can still be found behind trees and brush at the far end of the parking lot. A past resident of the neighboring house remembers grapes growing prolifically along the wall one summer in the 1970's.







The end of the Westmoreland back terrace today, now the back of Congregation Shir Shalom.

This document was prepared for the Ridgefield Garden Club's digital archive. It is available to anyone who is interested; simply contact Terry McManus. Thank you to the following: Margaret Eustace; Jack Sanders; Doug Cuny; Laura Morris and the Congregation Shir Shalom of Westchester and Fairfield Counties; Betsy Reid and the Ridgefield Historical Society for the 1991 image of the pergola at Westmoreland; The Garden Club of America Archives; and Robin Karson and Jonathan Lippincott of the Library of American Landscape History. All sketches and black and white images are from the Fletcher Steele Collection at the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry Archives. More plans, sketches and images of Fletcher Steele's work at the Doubleday estate can be found at this link: <https://cdm16694.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16694coll25/search/searchterm/doubleday>.

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## A Patio Greenhouse

MRS. GEORGE DOUBLEDAY

*Ridgefield Garden Club*

It started to be a hole in the ground, it ended in being a Patio Greenhouse, original, useful and charming. For some years, when autumn came, the question arose as to where the tall plants, such as bay trees, oleanders and hibiscus should spend the winter. It was a much discussed problem, with the usual suggestions of old farm barns, sheds, semi-root cellars and as a last resort, the neighboring florist's greenhouse. The lovely plants, that enjoyed their summers out-of-doors, giving so much pleasure, were always badly treated during the winters. Invariably they languished, grew weak and some died. The winter care of these tall growing and semi-tropical plants was a serious responsibility. A place was required, in which to house them from late September to early June. This need was sympathized in by all members of the family, children as well as grown-ups. Conversation at dinner often turned to the garden and everyone regretted that, in the tiny greenhouse, installed the previous year, there was no room for our tall friends.

With a husband who loves trees and dislikes to have the landscape marred by roofs, it was out of the question to suggest an addition to the present greenhouse. That couldn't happen for, you see, the roof would have to be not high, but higher. Suddenly this husband had a happy inspiration of a hole in the ground. He would design his own greenhouse for tall plants, and two-thirds of it would be below the level of the ground. It would be a deep excavation, roofed over with glass. It could extend at right angles from the potting shed of the small greenhouse. Both units could be heated by one furnace. What a happy thought!

From the moment the idea was conceived, it grew by leaps and bounds. It would be ideal for tall plants, but why should this hole in the ground be ugly? If it were to accommodate large plants, could it not also house smaller ones in bloom? From usefulness to plants, the idea turned to the comforts and pleasures of the family. It might be made a lovely place in which to sit and rest among flowers after a long trudge in cold, snowy weather. The



children added their wish for a fireplace, so nice for winter picnic lunches. No one was more full of imagination about this unusual greenhouse than the designer himself. If he were going to sit in it, there would have to be the sound of dripping water, always music to his ears. And so the plan evolved.

An architect was called in to execute the fulfillment of all the family desires. He had travelled widely, he loved adventure, wasn't afraid to try all suggestions, clever in design and a genius in artistic details.

As this Patio Greenhouse was being excavated, the walls built of Connecticut stone, the familiar glass greenhouse roof was being put in place and plastering inside was being done, the artisans working almost blindly, for none could understand what the designer, or architect, were trying to create. The workmen simply carried out specifications. They were like the tapestry weavers, unable to foresee the result of their labor. Great was their surprise and admiration when they beheld the beauty of the completed building.

And now, may I invite you to stroll with me down a long, straight, grassy, garden walk, past an old-fashioned flower and vegetable garden to the Patio, for that has become its established name. Unsuspectingly, you will find yourself entering a small gravelled court over which a rustic arbor supports vines, hanging heavy with luscious grapes. Here a weathered oak bench invites you to rest and to enjoyed a cold drink of water from the brown jug on the table nearby. This Court has been named Georgio's Place and is a favorite place to sit in summer time.

Georgio's Place is at the west end of the Patio. From it, through an ordinary sized door, you enter a small vestibule and look through a second door, directly opposite, into the Patio itself. The walls of the vestibule are painted a strong blue color, so often seen in Italy. A small window, on your left, cut out of the eighteen inch stone wall, lets in light from the north. In the corner, between the north wall and inside Patio door, a rough oak shelf supports a large, gay, canary-yellow Carboni bowl converted into a wash basin. Above it, Spanish tiles fill a space to a mirror set in the wall. The basin is most decorative and is used constantly. On the opposite wall of the vestibule, a black iron bar provides a convenient place on which to hang heavy coats in winter.



Already a foreign feeling begins to take possession of you and upon entering the Patio proper, you are sure that you have been transported into a quaint old corner of Spain. Immediately inside the door, a flight of cement steps leads down to the floor below. Let us not be lured in that direction, tempting as it is. Remaining on the level of the ground and turning a bit left, we proceed along a two foot wide cement ramp, built up from the floor of the Patio, which runs the full length of the high solid north wall. To keep one from falling off this ramp, an eighteen inch wide cement wall stands three feet above the brick floor of the ramp. On top of this wall innumerable pots of lilies, tulips, chrysanthemums, cacti and other plants have their seasons. When walking along the ramp, we pass first a solid oak door in the northwest corner of the building. A peak over the door and a small section of wall around it, painted soft yellow, instantly suggest the entrance to a small house.

Recessed in the center of the north wall is a large, oblong, old slate Spanish plaque. On it in tones of white, grey and yellow are painted designs of scrolls, birds and flowers around a center motif of a small angel holding a cloth which bears the face and head of Christ wearing a crown of thorns. A black marble shelf is inserted in the wall at the base of the plaque. On this shelf there are always pots of flowering plants and none seem so appropriate or beautiful as the white calla lilies.

This ramp along the north wall leads you to a balcony which extends across the entire east end of the Patio. A roof, which covers the balcony, is made of small round poles, giving an open, slat effect. Over this roof a jasmine rambles in profusion, intoxicating you with its sweet and delicate fragrance. From the center of the balcony a solid oak door opens into the potting shed of the adjacent greenhouse. A peak over the door makes you feel that you have found another dwelling. At the north end of the balcony there is a small window with iron grating which is for ventilation, and from the south end of the balcony, a flight of cement steps leads to the floor below. Across the front of the balcony runs a balustrade with heavy, weathered oak rail and irregular spindles, as though during many past years the original ones had been broken and replaced by makeshift odd ones. Iron rings placed at irregular intervals on this balustrade hold pots of flowering begonias, fuchsias, geraniums, nasturtiums, air plants, and vines.



As we stand upon the balcony, leaning casually over the balustrade, we see the entire design of the interior of the Patio. It is an area about twenty-five feet running east and west by twenty-two feet north and south. Two-thirds of it is below ground, with a distance of twenty-five feet from the floor to the peak of the glass roof. The high ramp runs along the north wall. The graceful balcony extends across the east end. The entrance door from Georgio's Place through the vestibule is at the west end of the building. Two flights of cement steps descend to the floor below, one in the northwest corner, the other in the southeast corner. Both flights have landings and turn toward the center of the room. The three solid oak doors, the one leading into the potting shed, the one on the north wall, which is for a shallow closet, and the one opening into the vestibule, each with a picturesque gable above it, creates the amusing and delightful impression of dwellings.

From our position on the balcony, looking down, we see the floor paved with round river stones. These are broken by flat stones which make paths for easy walking and to facilitate work.

The steps from the balcony are veritably hung into the south wall, and by grooves on their outside edges, in a mysterious way water drips slowly, falling into a pool beneath. This pool, made of cement, extends wider than the steps, and one can easily imagine people of a whole village coming here to draw water.

Except for the flight of steps and a cement ledge built three feet wide and about two feet higher than the floor, the south wall is open, for here live happily all winter our beloved oleanders, hibiscus, tree ferns, palms and orange trees.

The west end of the Patio is important because of the much wished-for fireplace. It has given warmth, cheer and pleasure through many years, for a blaze is always burning on cold days to welcome any passer-by.

You must, by this time, be wondering how work can be carried on in the Patio. The secret is in the east end. From the balcony there is constant traffic back and forth to the potting shed and the small greenhouse. On the floor level there is a large arch beneath the balcony. This has heavy double oak doors which lead into the boiler room, from which an old-fashioned cellar door opens on the level of the ground. Through this opening, plants of all sizes can be lowered and then moved into the Patio.

So far, no reference has been made to heating and ventilation.



All mechanics of the Patio were carefully hidden by the ingenious architect. Many pipes are concealed under the ramp along the north wall. There is an iron well beneath the balcony, with an old oaken bucket hanging in it, but alas, there is only a pan of water as camouflage, for heat must enter here. Hidden in the angle of the northwest stairway is an iron grill, through which more heat passes into the Patio. The gables over the potting shed door and west door into the vestibule, are so artistically designed that strangers only admire them, never dreaming that they are vital to the entire heating and ventilating system.

The walls of the Patio are of plaster of nondescript irregular and variegated colors, yellow, blue, pink and purple. When these walls were being painted, the distinguished architect directed the workman to bring buckets of white, red, blue and orange paint. Then, he was instructed to use first red, then blue on top of it, or orange with white to make streaks. The result was a weathered, antique effect, a perfect background for plants and flowers.

A twenty-five foot palm lives all the year around in the Patio. Its tub was sunk in the floor as soon as the building was completed. Last year the tub had to be lowered, for the happy palm had pushed its head through the glass roof. A bread fruit plant came to us as a baby and now is so tremendous we hardly know what to do with it.

During the past fifteen years the Patio has been a source of never ending pleasure. It is as enchanting at night as in the daytime. Like a flowering garden, it is always changing. It continues to be interesting to both children and grown-ups. It houses a great variety of tall, medium sized and tiny plants and has proved to be an excellent place for horticultural experiments.



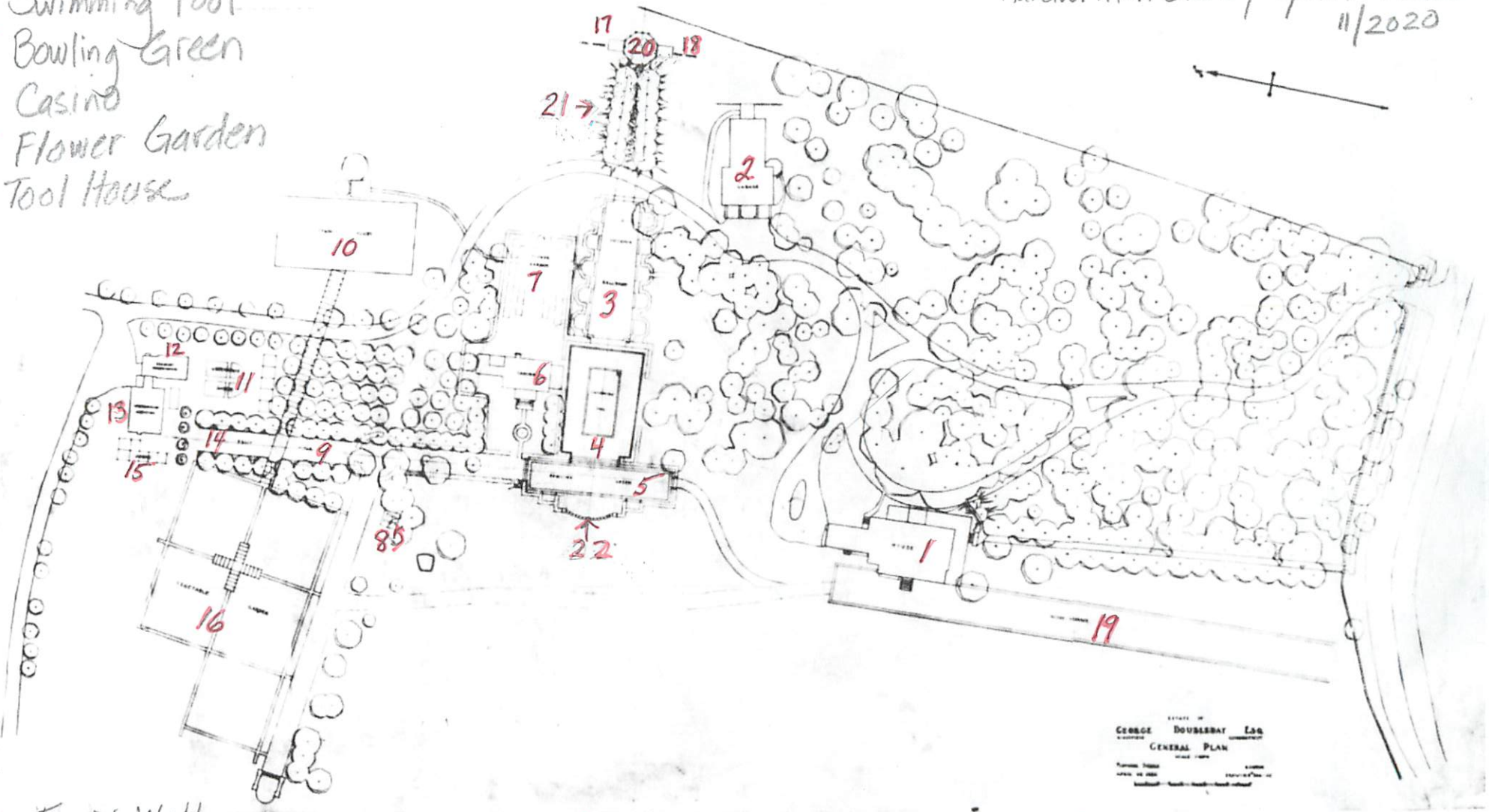


General Plan - Doubleday  
by Fletcher Steele

1935

Handwritten overlay by T. McManus  
11/2020

- 1 House
- 2 Garage
- 3 Outdoor Ballroom
- 4 Swimming Pool
- 5 Bowling Green
- 6 Casino
- 7 Flower Garden
- 8 Tool House



- 9 Fruit Wall
- 10 Tennis Court
- 11 Greenhouse Garden
- 12 Present Greenhouse

- 13 Green house Addition "The Patio"
- 14 Fruit Wall
- 15 Wine Terrace "Georgio's Place"
- 16 Vegetable Garden
- 17 Tool House
- 18 Pump House
- 19 House Terrace
- 20 Fountain
- 21 Pine Allée
- 22 Stage





The Casino fireplace mantel



Fletcher Steele had no involvement with the enormous carved Renaissance Revival mantel and fireplace surround that is still in place today at the Westmoreland recreation center. But it is such an interesting piece that it is worth a mention. When the Westmoreland Homeowners' Association eventually replaced the Doubleday Casino with today's building, they kept the fireplace and mantel. The mantel is carved in high relief, with figures wearing 16th century dress in "conquistador" style. The panels include cherubim, fruit and allegorical scenes common to the idiom. The carving is very detailed and possibly of European origin. The moldings that define the shelf and side panels, however, are executed in shallow relief, indicating they might have been added later.



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