Cultivating a Venerable Lineage

Catching up with Willard Hunnewell, Arboretum Member and Internship Donor

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It's a challenge to write a short profile about a Hunnewell. The family looms large in horticultural circles of New England, the founding of Wellesley, and indeed in the history of the Arnold Arboretum. I open one Arnoldia article and then another, followed by one Wikipedia page and then another—but it's far too much to condense here, and what can I say that hasn't already been said?

I'm writing at my desk in the Hunnewell Building, named after Horatio Hollis Hunnewell (fondly known to the family as HHH), one of the Arboretum’s earliest and most significant benefactors, well remembered in horticultural circles for championing rhododendrons and staging the first major exhibition of the plants on Boston Common in 1873. For inspiration, I look out my window at a cedar of Lebanon (Cedrus libani). One of its hardy Turkish siblings still lives in the Hunnewell Pinetum, given to the family by Charles Sprague Sargent in the early 1900s—a coup since nobody save Sargent believed the species would survive here. I'm swirling in facts about rhododendrons, Italian topiaries, Wellesley College and the town that shares its name, the first golf course…and then I discover something truly astonishing (at least to me). Several branches of the Hunnewell family had homes in Boston’s Back Bay in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including 303 Dartmouth Street and 151 Commonwealth Avenue. These two houses were purchased by Charles Merrill in 1957 and turned into the Commonwealth School, where I worked for 15 years prior to coming to the Arboretum in 2017. I thought I had made a big leap, but really I just left one Hunnewell building for another. I'll take it.

Willard Hunnewell (above, center) talks with Keeper of the Living Collections Michael Dosmann and Arboretum Director William (Ned) Friedman (left and right, respectively) at the spring 2018 event for members of the Sargent-Olmsted Society in the oak collection.

But the focus of this article isn't me or even Horatio Hollis Hunnewell, but 97-year old Willard Peele Hunnewell, great-grandson of HHH and a decades-long member and inveterate visitor of the Arnold Arboretum. Willard is a friendly and familiar face at Arboretum lectures, special events, tours, and even the occasional Tree Mob. Importantly, Willard and other family members continue to build on the legacy of sharing plants and knowledge established over a century ago by HHH and Charles Sprague Sargent, two friends who spent years and often their own capital to launch expeditions in search of new species to grow in Massachusetts.
While it’s wonderful to see Willard at the Arboretum, it is even more rewarding to visit him in Wellesley on the expansive estate HHH started to design in 1843, with enough acres for most of his 9 children to build their own homes and where he planted more than 2,000 trees in just four years. The family has remained engaged and enthralled with the open space on the banks of Lake Waban, preserving the land from division and development. Here Willard is surrounded by cousins and in-laws and nephews and nieces, and happily points out who lives where. George, one of his two sons, lives just down the street in Sherborn, and Willard’s face lights up when he talks about his grandson Nicholas and the plans he’s drawn up for one day making Willard’s house his own.

Willard finds nothing surprising about the younger generation wanting to stay in Wellesley to continue the family traditions. Preserving history and heritage are important to Willard, a responsibility shared in trust among the various branches of Hunnewells. And this can prove a full time job, particularly when it comes to plants.

Willard was born the youngest child of Walter Hunnewell, one of the grandsons of HHH. He and his siblings Caroline, Walter, and Jane all demonstrated a natural and profound attachment to the trees, plants, and landscapes that were and remain so central to the family—rhododendrons, orchids, magnolias, camellias, and conifers are particular favorites. Willard and his siblings always used Latin botanical names for plants, ever curious to increase their knowledge. He spent a great deal of time tending the greenhouses himself; in fact, another tradition is that the family continues to honor and practice horticulture. Their New England work ethic runs deep—they gather every year to prune the Italian topiaries along Lake Waban, and it’s not unusual to still find a Hunnewell or two pruning the roses.

Every year on Thanksgiving morning, at least two to three dozen family members gather to measure their trees, a practice that has continued for more than one hundred years. Willard notes, “I’m 97 years old and I can’t remember not measuring the trees.” With a tape measure at the ready, family members encircle the same 30 trees year after year, cutting notches in the bark so they always measure in the same place. This practice surely extends from the family’s legacy of horticultural experimentation, tracking how representative specimens were faring in regard to growth and vigor. Today the records provide real data on weather and growing conditions going back to the late 1800s.

Willard carries the mantle of a famous great-grandfather with ease. He’s at home here in Wellesley in every sense of the word, and with good reason. Aside from a stint in the Navy in WWII, when he traveled the globe as a navigator on a landing ship tank, he has mainly stayed in place where he was raised. Inheriting the family green thumb, he has spent much of his life supporting not only his family’s eminent collection of trees, but those of the Arnold Arboretum as well—stewarding the historic connection between the two landscapes and the fruits of the remarkable friendship between HHH and Sargent.

In 2000, to further honor that connection in perpetuity, Willard and many other members of the extended Hunnewell Family established the endowed Isabella Welles Hunnewell Internship Program. Named to honor the wife of HHH, the program enables the Arboretum to offer annual paid internships in collections management to those with interests in horticulture and landscape maintenance, arboriculture, plant production, and collections curation. Each year, the Hunnewell interns enjoy a field trip to the Hunnewell Estates, and later family members visit the interns at the Arboretum to learn about their annual capstone project—this year, it was a renovation plan for the Walter Street Gate and the collections there.

Willard’s strong commitment to maintaining the vitality of his family’s longstanding connection to horticulture and the Arnold Arboretum infuse every step when I join him for a walk in Boston or Wellesley. When we trek around the Hunnewell Pinetum, Willard is firmly in his element. The landscape seems to shed decades away as he ambles up and down slopes, pointing out favorite specimens and sharing their history, one tree at a time.