

FENWAY COURT, CARRIAGE HOUSE
(Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum)
280 The Fenway
Boston
Suffolk
Massachusetts

HABS MA-1334-A
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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS
FIELD RECORDS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

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FENWAY COURT – CARRIAGE HOUSE

HABS NO. MA-1334-A

Location: 280 The Fenway
Boston, Suffolk County, Massachusetts

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Significance: The carriage house is significant as a part of Fenway Court (The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum) for its association with the life of Isabella Stewart Gardner and as an example of an American residence designed to house a museum collection.

Description: The carriage house is a three story, masonry load-bearing structure entirely constructed of buff colored brick with a wood-framed roof. It is an 85'-0" x 25'-0" rectangular shaped building, 62'-0" in height to the peak of the red clay tile shed roof. The foundation walls are approximately 1'-0" thick random-coursed granite. The first floor is supported on steel truss framing.

The detailing of the facades is an eclectic mix of architectural styles and materials. The focus of the symmetrical north elevation is a Baroque-style frontispiece with cast concrete scrollwork, cornice molding, and an ornate acroterion. A large board and batten lancet arch door is flanked by a pair of fixed oblong windows with a wood-framed balcony and two multi-light fixed windows above. The edge of the frontispiece is defined by projecting brick pilasters. A small board and batten lancet arch door on the east end of the facade is flanked by a pair of rubble coursed stone piers.

The symmetrical south facade of the carriage house consists of matching decorative wrought iron grilles. The west grille covers a single-pane fixed window. The elevation has a corbelled brick cornice with a red clay tile roof. A contemporary metal screen extends to the west of the carriage house and a contemporary, single story, wood-framed lean-to is connected to the east elevation.

The east facade of the carriage house has a projecting first floor volume with a corbelled brick cornice. A contemporary metal door is located at the center of the first floor level. The upper two floors of the building have paired multi-light fixed windows at each floor level. A chimney volume projects from the north end.

The west elevation of the carriage house contains a large, board and batten carriage door on the ground floor with configuration of narrow, two-over-two double-hung windows on the second and third floor levels. A concrete staircase, with brick half wall and limestone coping, gives access to a lancet arch opening with vestibule beyond.

Improvements in mechanical systems and modifications to achieve compliance with accessibility codes have affected the integrity and altered the plan of the carriage house. Heating and air conditioning, plumbing, and electrical systems within the structure have been upgraded. Added duct work, pipes, and conduit have been left exposed and surface mounted to historic brick and plaster surfaces. Three staircases lead to the upper floors. A wood-framed, single run stair is located at the center of the south wall and leads to the second floor. An enclosed, metal-framed, open-tread spiral staircase is located against the north wall and provides direct access to the third floor apartment. Located against the west wall is an exterior brick and concrete staircase that connects to an interior “U” shaped staircase on the second floor.

Numerous doorways open onto the plan of the first floor. The main entrance is a double door at the east end of the building. The space is primarily used for property-related maintenance and has exposed brick exterior walls with wood-framed and masonry partition walls to subdivide the space.

The second floor of the carriage house consists of offices on either side of a double loaded corridor. Partition walls are constructed of either painted gypsum board or plaster. The second floor rooms have original plaster ceilings. Upgraded duct work, plumbing pipes, and electrical conduit were surface mounted to the plaster walls and ceilings.

The third floor of the carriage house is a one bedroom apartment with studio used by artists and guest scholars in residence. Wood floors and plaster walls and ceilings have been retained throughout most of the apartment.

History:

Isabella Stewart Gardner was born in New York City on April 14, 1840. Throughout her childhood she expressed an affinity for cultural endeavors such as art, music, and gardening. On April 10, 1860, she married John (“Jack”) Lowell Gardner, Jr. (1837–1898) and moved to Boston. The couple’s son, John L. Gardner III, was born in 1863 and died of pneumonia two years later. To help overcome her depression and illness that followed his death, Mrs. Gardner traveled with her husband throughout Scandinavia, Russia, Vienna, and Paris, initiating a lifetime of travel that led to the development of her museum collection. In December 1898, John L. Gardner died, and in the same month Mrs. Gardner purchased land in the Fenway area of Boston for construction of Fenway Court.

Isabella Stewart Gardner was an exuberant personality who supported cultural institutions, young artists and musicians, and social service groups. She entertained such international figures as Sarah Bernhardt, Pablo Casals, William Butler Yeats, John Singer Sargent, James McNeill Whistler, Henry James, and others.¹ In addition to her interests in art and architecture, Mrs. Gardner was a skilled gardener and landscape designer.

¹ http://www.gardnermuseum.org/the_museum

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Fenway Court was designed by architect Willard Thomas Sears FAIA (1837–1920) with extensive input from Isabella Stewart Gardner. Sears was a well known Boston architect who helped found the Boston Society of Architects in 1867. His partnership with Charles A. Cummings (1823–1911) produced many examples of Gothic Revival and Renaissance Revival design. After 1895, Sears worked as a sole practitioner, designing the Chapel in Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge and the Pilgrim Monument in Provincetown, Massachusetts (1898) as well as Fenway Court. Mrs. Gardner moved into the fourth floor quarters in Fenway Court in 1902, and formally opened her museum to the public on January 1, 1903. Following completion of the house, Sears designed the carriage house constructed south of the Palace in 1907. The structure was originally used for storage of Mrs. Gardner's carriage and maintenance equipment pertaining to the Fenway Court buildings and gardens. A furnished guest artist studio apartment on the third floor has served as the temporary home for artists-in-residence since the building's completion.

Upon her death on July 17, 1924, Mrs. Gardner created an endowment of \$1 million with stipulations for the support of the museum.² The museum was willed to the city of Boston with authority given to the museum trustees. The museum has occupied the property and the trustees have maintained the Fenway Court structure and grounds since that time.

Under museum trustee direction, alterations have been made to the surrounding property and use of the carriage house. In 1927, an agreement was reached with the City of Boston to permit removal of the alley that had been located south of the carriage house, to connect that portion of the site with the museum lot.³ The first floor of the carriage house was adapted into a gardener's shed with the addition of a wood-framed lean-to on the north facade. The second floor was subdivided into additional office space for museum office staff.

Sources:

A. Architectural drawings:

Copies of architectural drawings from original construction are included in the attached Supplemental Material. The original drawings and other archival drawing documentation are in the collection of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum archives.

B. Early views:

Copies of selected early and historical views of the carriage house are included in the attached Supplemental Material. The original photographs and other archival photographic documentation are in the collection of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum archives.

² Ibid.

³ *Annual Report and Report of the Director*, various years.

C. Bibliography:

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Metcalf, Nelson C. "Mrs. Gardner's Fenway Court: The Former Music Room Converted into a Tapestry Room and Spanish Cloister." *Boston Transcript*, November 1917.

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Stewart, Arlene. "Feasting at Isabella's Table," *Victoria* 12, no. 12, December 1998.

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Withey, Henry F. and Elsie Rathburn Withey. *Biographical Dictionary of American Architects (Deceased)*. Los Angeles, California: Hennessey & Ingalls, 1970.

D. Supplemental Material:

All historic drawing and photographs were obtained from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum archives. Original drawings and selected archival photographs are included as Supplemental Material. Approximate dates and original source of the material are supplied if known.

1. Drawing of Fenway Court, annex, and carriage house first floor plan, 1931.
2. Drawing of Fenway Court, annex, and carriage house ground floor plan, 1955.
3. Drawing of Fenway Court, annex, and carriage house ground floor plan, 1971.
4. Drawing of Fenway Court, annex, and carriage house ground floor plan, 1982.
5. Photograph of Fenway Court and carriage house, construction phase of carriage house, view from southwest, ca. 1907.

Additional archival photographs of the buildings and a detailed chronology and historic photographs of the museum landscape are available from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum archives.

Historian:

The Fenway Court Historic American Building Survey (HABS) documentation project, including the carriage house, was sponsored by the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum and completed during the summer and fall of 2008. The project was completed by personnel from the Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Northbrook, Illinois, offices of Wiss, Janney, Elstner Associates, Inc. (WJE). Deborah Slaton served as project historian and Michael Ford assisted in development of the historical narrative.

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Kristin Parker, Archivist, and Shana McKenna, Archives Assistant, of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum contributed to the development of the HABS documentation.