



National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Weir Farm

Self-Guiding Walking Tour



When J. Alden Weir moved to this Connecticut farm in 1882, he began a life-long love affair with the landscape and his “little house among the rocks.” Many of Weir’s friends – including the prominent painters Childe Hassam, John Twachtman, and Albert Pinkham Ryder – frequented the farm during Weir’s 37-year residence. Like Weir, these artists fell in love with the rural landscape and produced countless paintings and sketches of the area.



George Willoughby Maynard, Untitled, not dated, pencil on paper, 12 1/4" x 8", Weir Farm National Historic Site Collection.

Weir Farm continued to serve as a creative muse for two more generations of artists following Weir’s death in 1919. Weir’s daughter, Dorothy, married sculptor and painter Mahonri Young, who built a second studio here in 1932. Following Young’s death in 1957, artists and ardent preservationists Sperry and Doris Andrews purchased the Weir House, barn, and studios.

By the 1960s, development threatened the pond and woodland areas east of Nod Hill Road. The push to preserve the landscape and historic structures began with efforts by Cora Weir Burlingham and Doris Andrews, and eventually culminated in the establishment of Weir Farm National Historic Site – the only National Park Service site in the country dedicated to American painting. The site currently encompasses 60 acres of historic farmland, 16 historic structures, and miles of stonewalls.

Weir Farm National Historic Site is more than a place of artistic inspiration. It is a significant

cultural landscape – a place where we can learn how people, painters, and farmers alike have interacted with the land, and how the land, in turn, has impacted and influenced those who lived here for over 200 years.



Artist painting at Weir Farm. National Park Service image.

One cannot help but feel that wonderful something that the landscape in nature suggests, somewhat like the soul of a human being.

J. Alden Weir



The Grey Trellis, 1891, J. Alden Weir, oil on canvas, 26" x 21 1/2". Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Willard G. Clark.

To Julian Alden Weir and his fellow American Impressionists, creating art outdoors provided an intimate connection to the emotional and spiritual character of the landscape. “One must make a subject part of yourself before you can properly express it to others,” Weir wrote, and he followed this philosophy at his Branchville farm. He took ownership of his landscape and cherished its beauty. One visitor recounted:

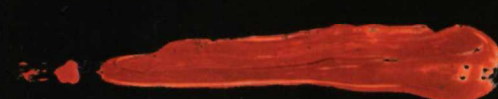
On the way to the fishing place, Weir was “all artist, pointing out to me the manifold beauties of the landscape. When I called his attention to some stately trees, he said with that smile of his, “those are my trees.”



J. Alden Weir, Lengthening Shadows, 1887, oil on canvas, 20 1/4 x 25". Private Collection.

Weir’s paintings of Branchville strongly reflect this attitude. As art historian Hildegard Cummings wrote of Weir, “his paintings at [the farm] aimed...at capturing color, light, and pattern in ways that communicate his personal response to a scene.” Weir’s friend, Duncan Phillips, marveled at the “rare intimacy of the pictures...their true delight in little things and familiar surroundings.”

These paintings focused on the fundamentals of nature – what artist John Van Dyke, a contemporary of Weir, described as essentially “light, skies, clouds, waters, lands, foliage – the great elements that reveal form and color in the landscape.” In the late 19th century, American artists trained in the academies of Europe sought a new, expressive style to capture these elements of nature. By painting them with a brighter palette and pure, unmixed colors, Weir and his fellow artists defined the movement of American Impressionism.



In the late nineteenth century, American artists trained in the academies of Europe were searching for a new expressive style to capture nature. Impressionism, defined by its brighter palette and pure unmixed colors, proved to be the technique they needed to transform how they painted the American landscape.



Mahonri Young, The Apple Tree, 1934, pastel, 11 1/16" x 14 3/4", Museum of Art, Brigham Young University. All rights reserved.



Sperry Andrews, Untitled (detail), not dated, watercolor, Private Collection.



J. Alden Weir, Upland Pasture, ca. 1905, oil on canvas, 39 7/8" x 50 1/4", National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of William T. Evans.

Walking the Cultural Landscape...

Art, Inspiration, and Preservation at Weir Farm National Historic Site

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1. Burlingham House Visitor Center:

Introduction to Weir Farm National Historic Site



◀ You are standing on the broad gravel path in front of the Burlingham House Visitor Center.

J. Alden Weir's Branchville farm was composed of parcels of land from two neighboring colonial farms. Weir first acquired the 153-acre Beers farm in 1882, consisting of property north of Pelham Lane and down to present-day Weir Pond. In 1907, he acquired 50

acres from the neighboring Webb farm – the area where you now stand. In total, Weir's land eventually encompassed 238 acres.

The Burlingham House, part of the original Webb Farm, bears the name of the painter's youngest daughter, Cora Weir Burlingham, who lived in this house from 1931 to 1986. Educated in both interior design and horticulture, Cora created the broad garden terraces nearby, the Sunken Garden, and the adjacent stone potting shed. Much of the stone work was done by local stone mason and neighbor, Joe Knoche.

Walk down the broad gravel path to the woodshed, another structure built from local stone. To the south are fields that border the Weir Preserve. In 1969, Cora donated 37 acres of her land to the Connecticut Chapter of The Nature Conservancy, marking the start of the Weir Preserve. Today, the Weir Preserve includes 110 acres of diverse woodland and wetland habitat owned by the Weir Farm Art Center, a park partner.

Turn back and walk toward the Visitor Center. Follow the path in front of the Burlingham House on your left, in the direction of the Weir House. Note the House's original entrance which faced Nod Hill Road. When you pass through the gap in the stone wall (called a barway), you will be entering a meadow that once served as Cora's productive World War II-era Victory Garden (pictured below). Note how the stone walls bordered by lilacs, flowering dogwoods, and rhododendrons create a more comfortable private space.

2. The Crossroads:

Structures and Stone



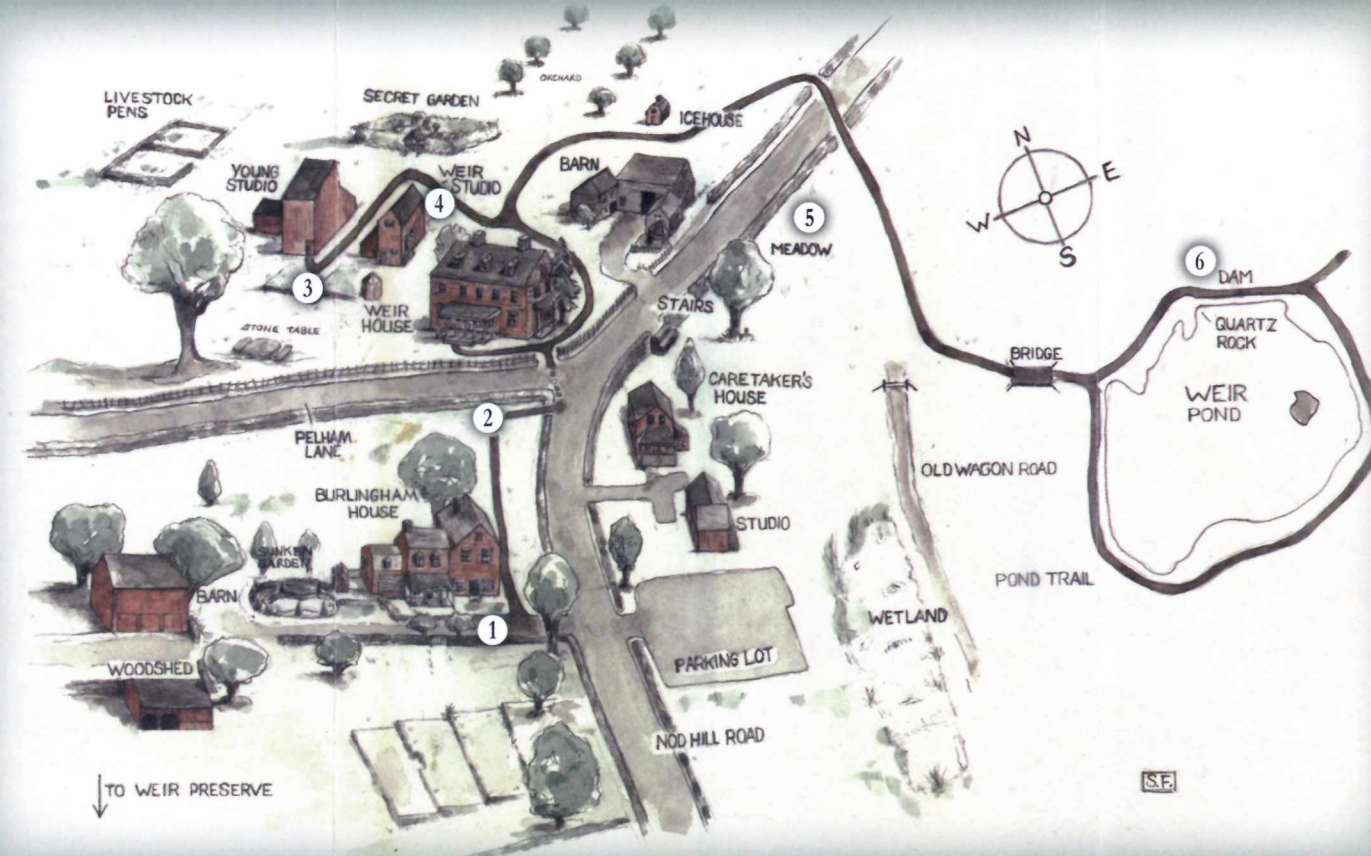
▲ You are standing next to the stone wall where Pelham Lane meets Nod Hill Road.

Stone defines this landscape. "The Great Wall of Cora," commissioned in 1931 by Cora Weir Burlingham – and humorously named for its length by her brother-in-law, Mahonri Young – dominates this crossroads. From here, you can see the narrow, winding country roads, the hand split fences, and stone walls of old New England. The houses sit close to the road – a common practice which made neighbors, animal-drawn carts, and postal carriers all the more accessible.

Unlike the American artists before them who often focused on majestic landscapes, the American Impressionists, like J. Alden Weir, painted intimate domestic scenes and everyday life. Weir designed features of this landscape and its structures to match his artistic vision of a rural retreat. He altered the land to suit his personal aesthetic tastes, adding rustic fences, stone walls, formal gardens, and a fishing pond.

In truth, J. Alden Weir never intended to own a Connecticut farm. The New York City-based artist was actively constructing a hunting lodge in the Adirondacks when he acquired this farm from art collector Erwin Davis.

Across Nod Hill Road is the smaller Caretaker's House, built in the 1830s to house the farmer and his family. The Caretaker's House now serves as home to the Artist-in-Residence Program, managed by the Weir Farm Art Center. The adjacent building, the Artist-in-Residence Studio, was built in 2010. The design of the studio was based on the historic barn that once stood in the same spot. The program hosts 12 different artists throughout the year who live on-site and produce artwork.



Note: Distance from bridge on Pond Trail to Weir Pond has been abbreviated on this map. Actual round-trip distance of Pond Trail starting and ending at the Parking Lot is 1.5 miles.

3. The Weir House and Studios:

Landscape as Artistic Inspiration



◀ As you make your way to Stop #3, you will be walking past the Weir House. This house began as a small, colonial dwelling, built in 1780, as part of the Beers Farm. Stop at the green door facing Nod Hill Road. This served as the original front door to the house. Its Greek Revival portico was added in 1830. Now move to your left, and face the larger porch facing Pelham Lane. After Weir acquired the house in 1882, he enlarged and altered it in 1900-1901, and again in 1911. He added a new front door, doubled the size of the living room, added a kitchen, formal dining room, and expanded this porch. Referred to as the "piazzza," it is where Weir and his friends spent many hot summer days. The stone picnic table to your left was also added by Weir. The stone table was a favorite spot for Weir's three daughters to host tea parties for visiting family and friends.

Retrace your steps to the right, and follow the path around the house to Stop #3. You are now standing on the former garden terraces to the west of the Weir House, facing the two red historic studios. On the right, you see Weir's 1885 painting studio. The larger building to the left is Mahonri Young's 1932 sculpture studio. The main windows of both structures – not visible from this spot – face north to utilize the consistent northern light that is ideal for creating art. Note the stone-trimmed garden terraces, Dorothy's hexagonal tool shed, and the stone wall enclosures that served as pig pens to the west of the Young Studio.

4. The Garden, Barn, and Outbuildings:

Farm and Function



with tree seedlings, the forest expanded, and structures fell into disrepair. Since 1990, the National Park Service has been restoring both the gardens and landscape to its circa 1940 appearance, a date that includes improvements made by Dorothy and Mahonri Young. J. Alden Weir had a whimsical sense of his farm, leading a friend to give it the nickname "The Land of Nod." The word "Nod" likely refers to the realm of sleep and dreams, referenced in books, musical theater, poems, and songs of his era.

Move toward the barn. Note the small basin in the rock to your left – Weir drilled into the rock to create a natural-looking birdbath. Turn left, and continue on the path along the west side of the barn. Pass the fenced livestock and chicken pens and head toward the far barway in the stone wall on Nod Hill Road. Cross the road, bear right at the fork in the path, and walk until you are by a wooden post opposite the Weir Barn.

5. Truant's Meadow:

Landscape for Art and Recreation



◀ You are now standing in a low meadow facing Nod Hill Road and a high, long stone wall, called the Platt Wall, built around 1900.

As seen in Weir's painting *The Old Rock*, now known as *The Truants*, this meadow exemplifies the dynamic nature of a cultural landscape. Once a large open field leading to the pond, the meadow is slowly reverting back to the encroaching forest behind it. As a result, the meadow is now actively maintained through woodland edge management and annual mowing.

Weir would occasionally paint his farm from his "Palace Car," a studio built with assistance of his resident farmer, Paul Remy. Set on runners and pulled by oxen, the car had windows on four sides and an oil stove, making it a portable, all-season studio. Immortalized in Weir's painting, *Landscape: Branchville, The Palace Car* (pictured above), it eventually became a playhouse for his children.

Like other American Impressionists, Weir experimented with pure, unmixed pigments, leaving his studio to paint outside, *en plein air*, directly from nature. He used quick, colorful brushstrokes to evoke a mood, or to capture a moment in time.

To reach Stop #6, walk to the pond by following the trail behind you that leads into the forest.

6. The Pond:

Alteration and Preservation



◀ You are standing on the earthen dam overlooking the pond.

J. Alden Weir was an avid outdoorsman who loved to fish, hunt, and hike. So when he entered his painting, *The Truants*, in a competition sponsored by the Boston Art Club and won \$2,500, he used his prize money to purchase ten acres of land and construct the "Boston Art Club Pond," known today as Weir Pond. He cleared a 3.6 acre area and constructed an earthen dam that captured water from intermittent streams and springs. Weir dug a

stone-lined channel to help regulate the pond water level. It allowed him to divert water toward the pond during dry periods, and away from the pond to avoid flooding. He also built a boathouse, dock, and stone steps to a viewing area. On the small island, he fashioned a gazebo surrounded by white birches. Most of the structures are gone today, but the pond, the dam, and the small island still exist, as does a distinct white quartz boulder Weir transported from the Adirondacks to adorn the dam. This setting was a backdrop for many outings, including fishing, painting, boating, swimming, and picnics. In winter, the ice was harvested and stored in the ice house.

By the late 1960s, the surrounding landscape had been left untended for decades, and a second-growth forest took hold. When land near and around the pond was threatened by development, the move for preservation began, eventually protecting the entire cultural landscape known today as Weir Farm National Historic Site.

Stop 1: Andrew Ricci, Untitled, 2008, watercolor, Weir Farm National Historic Site Collection.
Stop 2: Mahonri Young, *Connecticut Planters*, 1945, watercolor, Brigham Young University Museum of Art, Purchase/Gift Mahonri M. Young Estate.
Stop 3: Sperry Andrews, Untitled, not dated, watercolor, Private Collection.
Stop 4: Mahonri Young, *Branchville Shed*, 1938, watercolor, Brigham Young University Museum of Art, Purchase/Gift Mahonri M. Young Estate.
Stop 5: J. Alden Weir, *Landscape: Branchville, The Palace Car*, early 1890s, oil on canvas, Brigham Young University Museum of Art, Purchase/Gift Mahonri M. Young Estate.
Stop 6: J. Alden Weir, *On the Shore*, 1910-12, oil on canvas, Private Collection.