

A Place for Memories

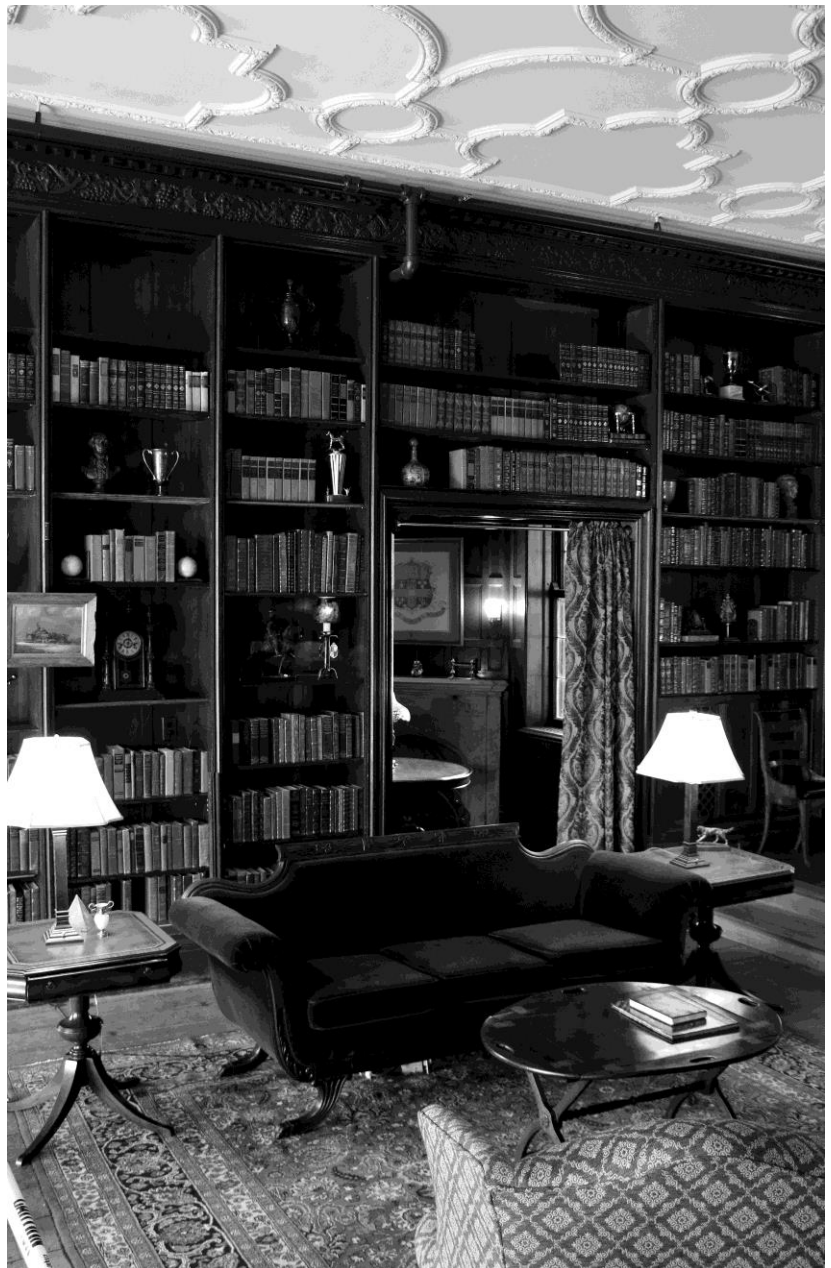
by Sherry Brookes, Events Coordinator

“May-Lake Farm – A reminder of the glorious past, and an inspiration for the future.”
— Entry from the Mayslake Farms guestbook, April 9, 1921

Built on the 848-acre Mayslake Farms and completed in 1921, Mayslake Hall was the retirement retreat of Francis Stuyvesant Peabody and his second wife, Mary. The desire for country homes was common among the well-to-do of the 1920s, and the Peabodys likely intended the hall to serve not only as a private residence but also as a way to meet the social obligations of a successful businessman like F.S., who ran in the same circles as other movers and shakers of the day.

Although lacking a ballroom, Mayslake Hall was built to impress and to entertain. It had reception and billiards rooms, a large living room and a series of well-appointed second-floor guest rooms to accommodate visitors on extended stays. The property’s 60 outbuildings included stables and a riding arena, allowing the Peabodys to host horse shows and fox hunts. (Sadly, the couple’s plans for Mayslake ended in 1922, when F.S. died of a heart attack at the close of the first hunt of the season on the estate.)

One can only imagine the parties held within Mayslake Hall, but guests seemed to delight in the estate’s beauty and the hospitality of their hosts. A guest book from 1919 – 1922, graciously loaned to the Forest Preserve District by the Peabody family, has almost 40 entries with comments such as “a wonderful ride on a real horse,” “hospitality in home and in field,” “a most enjoyable birthday breakfast,” “charming delightful morning,” “grand lovely day” and “a fine evening.” One entry from Oct. 22, 1921, extended thanks to the “Best Man” and the “Best Lady” for the best stories and the best Champagne. (Despite Prohibition, the Peabodys likely continued to enjoy this aspect of entertaining.) The entries tease the imagination with images of Mary and her friends enjoying afternoon tea with finger sandwiches and delicate, decadent pastries or of a group of hungry hunters sitting down to pheasant consommé and roasted saddle of venison, toasting the day’s success with a fine bottle of claret.



Although their time at Mayslake Hall was short, Mary and Francis Peabody would be pleased to know that the mansion and the lovely grounds once known as Mayslake Farms continue to inspire happy memories. Built after Francis Peabody's death, the nondenominational Portiuncula Chapel has provided the perfect setting for numerous ceremonies, and personalized bricks along the path to the chapel commemorate special people and occasions. (One family now has three generations of bricks!) Couples who wed at the chapel often return with their children to introduce them to Mayslake Peabody Estate and reminisce about their special day.



The estate is a popular public venue for plays, concerts, lectures, classes and exhibits and has provided wonderful backdrops for film and photo shoots. It's a welcoming year-round setting for indoor and outdoor private events, too. Corporations and charitable organizations choose it for casual business meetings, some adding ranger-led archery clinics as team-building exercises, and many have relied on Mayslake to help them host successful formal fundraisers.

Of course Mayslake Hall itself has been the site of countless engagements, vow renewals, anniversary celebrations, receptions and themed events, from Roaring '20s cocktail parties and steampunk-style weddings to Harry Potter-inspired affairs. Groups and individuals can reserve the exclusive use of the hall (provided they don't mind seeing people fishing or walking their dogs when the forest preserve is open) and can even add open-house-style tours to introduce guests to the fascinating history of the estate.

To accommodate functions like these, the Forest Preserve District has thoughtfully mixed the installation of modern restrooms, power doors and handicap-accessible ramps with its long-term plans to bring back the original glory of Mayslake Hall. But to ensure the building's use as a public space doesn't compromise this architectural gem, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the District has also put in place several rental procedures, including pre-approved floor plans and designated capacities based on the room and the time of year. (In most cases, 50 to 120 is comfortable.) Combined, these efforts help to fill the Mayslake calendar with the names of those who have chosen to make the estate part of their special events.

The Peabodys built Mayslake Hall as a place to create memories, and each year visitors continue to fulfill the couple's vision by using the historic property to create memories of their own.