

THE MR. AND MRS. WILLIAM W. WESSINGER GARDEN  
321 NW Hilltop Road  
Portland  
Multnomah County  
Oregon

HALS OR-6  
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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

## HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

### THE MR. AND MRS. WILLIAM W. WESSINGER GARDEN

HALS NO. OR-6

Location: 321 NW Hilltop Road, Portland, Multnomah County, Oregon

Latitude: 45.523381°, Longitude: -122.726197° (Entryway of House, Google Earth, Simple Cylindrical Projection, WGS84)

Significance: This site is significant for its design and connection significant people in the area. William W. Wessinger and his wife Patricia Lue Wessinger commissioned the design of the house in 1948, and it was built the following year. William Wessinger was part owner with his brother Frederick Wessinger of the Blitz-Weinhard Brewing Company. Mr. Wessinger was a long-time prominent businessman in Portland, Oregon, and, especially following the sale of the brewery in 1979, he and Patricia devoted a significant amount of time to philanthropy. The architect who designed the house was the respected Northwest Modern architect Walter Gordon, a contemporary and previous associate of the better-known architect Pietro Belluschi, and the home is constructed in the Northwest Modern style. Later additions to the original layout were also by Walter Gordon, and were sympathetic to the original design. The original landscape design was never completed, so it was only in 1976 that a formal landscape plan was carried out by the landscape architect Barbara Fealy, a fellow of the American Society of Landscape Architects, in collaboration with Mrs. Wessinger. Along with establishing a close friendship with the Wessingers, Barbara Fealy, with Mrs. Wessinger, would also go on to design the restored landscape at Timberline Lodge.

Description: The house is reached by driving up NW Hilltop Road, and is located at the crest of the hill, 980 feet above sea level. The road continues along the top of the ridgeline, with most homes located on the east side of the road and oriented east towards downtown Portland. The Wessinger House is placed on the west side of the street, along a small ridgeline that projects out to the west and offers a view north over a canyon at the southeast end of Forest Park towards Vancouver, Washington.

The home was constructed in the regional Northwest Modern style, and was constructed to integrate with its surroundings rather than to compete with them. A vehicle turn-around with planted island is located immediately off the street on the eastern side of the house. The main bedroom wing is off the north end of the house, and extends east, north of the turn-around. The north end of the home includes the master bedroom and bath, and projects out to the north slightly. The main living and dining-room wing is housed in a large hall entered off the turn-around and projecting west out into the lawn. The kitchen is just south of this,

with two more bedrooms over the garage are located in the south end of the home. A later addition includes a larger pantry and octagonal family room, known as “the gazebo.”

The original landscaping included a large lawn and plantings at the perimeter of the house and in the turn-around island. When Barbara Fealy was asked to design a new landscape, new features were included to create a much more elegant space meant to evoke the natural beauty of the Pacific Northwest.

Today, the landscape remains well maintained, if slightly overgrown in areas and slightly neglected in others. The lawn itself is quite well maintained, with a graveled path along its south side and salal on the slope south of it. Rhododendron, ferns, tall grasses, and kinnikinnick are used to the west and north to define the curving edge of the lawn, with an opening to the north to preserve the view towards Washington. An island of planting off the northwest corner of the patio off the living room includes low kinnikinnick, ferns, and several arranged rocks. An interior corner north of the living room and next to the bedroom wing uses similar plantings, with a small gravel path curving through it and salal and rhododendron to provide a sense of privacy to the bedroom wing. Another gravel path leads around the north side of the house, with dense salal, Oregon Grape, and kinnikinnick creating a barrier between it and the bedrooms. Several small concrete pools were often filled with water to help attract birds. Salal and a number of smaller trees were used around the front of the house to provide some privacy by shielding the house from the street. From the south end of the house at the lower level garage, one gravel path leads up to the lawn while a secondary one leads along the lower edge of the salal and back up to the path beyond the end of the lawn and around several trees. A bench at the lowest point on this path provided a resting place overlooking a variety of flowering plants, many of them chosen to attract butterflies and hummingbirds.

History: Barbara Fealy (1903-2000) was born in Salt Lake City, Utah. Her parents had moved there several years before, and established the Utah Nursery Company. The family spent periods of time in Colorado and southern California while Fealy’s father managed the expanding nursery business, eventually moving back to Salt Lake City before she graduated from high school. Highly unusual for this period of time, Fealy’s father took a keen interest in making sure his daughter had the opportunity to pursue a career. Fealy had shown both a notable interest in the nursery business and skilled artistic ability from an early age. She spent her first year of college at the University of California at Berkeley. With the help of her father, she then transferred into the University of Illinois Department of Landscape Architecture. Katherine Supplee notes in her biographical thesis on Fealy that this was “the height of the Country Place Era in landscape architecture, and education accordingly emphasized the design of large residential properties.”(Supplee, p14) While the general style of the period emphasized the picturesque English style of landscape, she was also exposed to

the work of local architect Frank Lloyd Wright, with his emphasis on enhancing the natural landscape. Visiting instructor Jens Jensen would prove influential in developing her interest in natural landscapes and native plants. Another early influence was professor Stanley White, who taught that landscape architecture could involve a whole variety of influences.

Shortly after finishing her education, Fealy returned home to Salt Lake City to help run the family's nursery business. Several drafting jobs led to her establishing her own practice in the mid-30s, along with writing a gardening column for the local newspaper. Within the column she emphasized simplicity and natural qualities of design. (Supplee, p18) After a series of moves, she and her husband eventually moved to Portland in 1947 when he took a job there. While the move to the Pacific Northwest and its wet climate was initially a difficult one, she soon recognized the great natural beauty of the region, and would live in the Portland area throughout the rest of her life.

Fealy established her practice in the Portland area shortly after moving there, and her reputation quickly grew. Working with the influential Portland architect John Storrs led to one of her early standout projects, the Salishan Lodge and resort on the Oregon Coast. Working with Storrs from the beginning of the project, the far-sighted developer John Gray saw the value in the resort being designed to emphasize the great beauty of the area. Her work on the project would receive an honorary award in 1981, the first year they were awarded by the ASLA. Among many other projects, later work with John Storrs would include well-received projects at the Oregon School of Arts and Crafts (now the Oregon College of Arts and Crafts) and work at the private Catlin Gabel School. Simultaneously, Fealy was also expanding her career with numerous private commissions, including work for many of Portland's most influential families.

William Wessinger was born at the end of 1917 to an established Portland, Oregon family. Patricia Wessinger (1923-2011) was born in Spokane, Washington, and would move to the Portland area by her late teens. By the time Mr. Wessinger was in his late teens or early 20s, he had already climbed the technically challenging Mt Jefferson, in the Oregon Cascades, and seems to have been drawn to the outdoors from early in his life. While "Patti," as she was known to friends, does not appear to have grown up with a keen interest in the outdoors, that seems to have changed quickly after the two met at the end of World War II, marrying in May of 1946.

The young couple would have five children over the next eight years, but that in no way kept them from the mountains they loved. Weekends during the winter were often spent skiing on Mt Hood, at times staying overnight at Timberline Lodge. Summers through the 1960s included extended stays at the cabin at "Lazy Meadow" in Camp Sherman, on the eastern side of the Cascades not far from Sisters, Oregon. Hiking was a common activity for the family, and Mrs.

Wessinger quickly grew to love the alpine wildflowers in particular. While not generally as adventurously outdoorsy as Mr. Wessinger, she was particularly proud of having climbed Mt Rainier in Washington State, along with a number of other mountains in the Northwest.

Mrs. Wessinger would also devote significant amounts of time to community service efforts; especially those centered on environmental conservation and the protection of animals. In 1955 she would become the first Chair of the Portland Zoo Commission, which would be responsible for moving the institution from its minimal existing facilities to its present much larger site, where it could grow into the respected institution that it is today. She would remain in touch with the institution throughout the rest of her life. She devoted significant amounts of time to the Nature Conservancy of Oregon, on whose board she would serve from 1976 through 1986, and again from 1995 to 2004, working tirelessly to save the wild landscapes that she loved. Other causes she worked on included Polar Bears International, an organization devoted to saving Polar Bears, on which she was a founding member in 1992. She would serve on their board until 2006, and was named a Director Emeritus. Patricia was also a founding member of the Friends of Timberline. Formed in 1975, the organization continues its dedication to restoring and maintaining Timberline Lodge. The WPA funded lodge on the south side of Mt Hood continues to be one of Oregon's great treasures, and in the late 1980s when the landscape around the lodge required restoration, it was Mrs. Wessinger who would ask Mrs. Fealy to be the architect for the project. While not taking as active a role in all those activities, Mr. Wessinger always played a supporting role, and would accompany her on many trips to see landscapes. Mr. and Mrs. Wessinger would become avid birders later in life, and while they would travel all over the world – especially loving their trips to into the wilderness – they would always maintain a particular love for the landscapes of the Pacific Northwest.

While it's unclear exactly how the Wessingers first came to commission Barbara Fealy for their home's landscape design, they undoubtedly had been exposed to her work. Several of the Wessinger children had attended Catlin Gabel School, and they were certainly aware of Salishan Lodge on the Oregon coast, both of which included her landscape work in connection to buildings by John Storrs. Mrs. Wessinger's active involvement in several local gardening clubs may have led to an acquaintance with Mrs. Fealy as well, or perhaps they were referred by one of Fealy's previous clients. Regardless of how they met, an immediate chemistry seemed to form between them through their common love of the Pacific Northwest and its native landscapes.

The home Mr. and Mrs. Wessinger had constructed shortly after World War II was very much in line with the Northwest Modernist ethic of building in sympathy with the land. Their close friend Aubrey Watzek had constructed a house in Portland's West Hills designed by the architect John Yeon in 1937. The

home would become one of the defining homes in the region, and Yeon and Mr. Watzek attempted to establish an alpine landscape around it to create a new style of garden evocative of alpine environments. While that experiment in introducing alpine plants to the sub-alpine environment would not succeed, Yeon would continue to design his own landscapes using native plants, informing future Oregon landscapes. Walter Gordon's 1948 design for the Wessingers established an elegant home that would also make extensive use of local timber, and closely followed the topography of the land without ever overwhelming it. While neither house takes direct cues from Japanese architecture, the relationship the houses have to their sites is distinctly influenced by it.

A landscape design was drawn up by a respected landscape architect of the area shortly after the construction of the home, but was never carried out, apparently owing to it being too formal for the Wessingers' tastes. While socially connected within the city, the couple was never interested in formality or any shows of status, and always favored a more relaxed lifestyle. According to Katherine Supplee's thesis on Barbara Fealy, she was first involved with the Wessinger garden in the 1960s. Dated materials from Fealy's archives at the University of Oregon begin in 1976, at the time when Fealy first began working with the landscape contractor Ronald Vandehey. During an interview with Supplee, Mrs. Wessinger noted, "I very quickly realized we were on the same wave length." While involved in local gardening clubs, Mrs. Wessinger also acknowledged the fact that she and her husband "aren't really gardeners, but I know a fair amount about native and alpine plants, and Barbara was perfect for our garden."(Supplee, p72)

Prior to Fealy's involvement, plantings around the perimeter of the house and a large lawn leading out to the woods had served the Wessingers' needs. They eventually realized that they wanted a garden inspired by the places they loved and that would create more intimate surroundings for their home. Barbara Fealy would design a garden that reflected the natural environment, could be maintained using minimal maintenance, and would attract local wildlife and birds.

Fealy's first step was to establish a series of paths around the garden. One path leading out into the woods would define the lawn's southern edge, while other edges were established by the use of salal and other native plantings. Curving edges help create a feeling of informality and peace, while the plantings also create an intermediate scale between the lawn and the tall woods beyond. While clearly cultivated, the garden evokes the more natural space of a clearing or meadow. The influence of earlier English style gardens can be seen, but the garden represents a more complex level of thinking than simply applying a certain style or pastoral ideal. The influence of Japanese gardens and the informality of early post-war garden design are clear. Barbara Fealy specifically pointed out to Supplee the significant influence Californian landscape architect

Thomas Church had on her work.(Supplee, p6) Church had been a primary influence in the movement towards gardens which acted as outdoor-living-rooms, and the casual nature of the Wessinger garden reflects the fact that it is intended as a space to be used and occupied.

Magazine clippings in the Wessinger garden archive file appear to have been from an early stage of design. A page from the April 1958 issue of House Beautiful highlights the use of low-maintenance groundcover and more casual arrangements of plantings. Several pages from an unknown magazine highlight the way in which naturalistic designed elements can bleed out into more natural surroundings. And finally, two Sunset Magazine articles were saved; the first from April, 1971 shows the use of artificial pools, an element that would become a defining feature at the far edge of the Wessinger garden lawn. The second Sunset magazine article dates to February 1975, and reviews a variety of design elements present in Japanese gardens. While the Wessinger garden is never overtly Japanese in style, Fealy uses arrangements of rocks, stone water basins, a pair of low stone sculptures, and a small water feature to create focal points in the garden that are reminiscent of the Japanese.

The Wessinger garden is significant in the way that it synthesizes a number of different influences into a distinctly “Northwest” style. The use of native vegetation was consistent with Fealy’s design work, but was also distinctly in line with the interest of the clients, especially Mrs. Wessinger, with whom the garden was always a collaborative effort. The friendship that grew between the two of them is one that both would treasure.

Fealy’s archive includes invoices indicating significant changes and an evolution of the garden taking place almost every year from 1976 through 1993. Each year, she would visit the garden with Mrs. Wessinger, and discuss new ideas for how to change and improve the space. Drawings from the archive are rarely complete, and instead indicate loose ideas that would evolve on the site itself during construction, which Fealy was often present for. The construction of fences, a curving walkway down to the garage, a concrete patio between the living room and gazebo, and eventually a small utility room were completed at various stages of the process.

As Fealy herself noted, “I don’t know myself what I’m going to do until [I’m] there. It’s like painting a picture. You drop some paint on it over there, and then you see you need something over here. I’ve got to be there. I like to stand back and see how it looks, and if I want to move it I’m going to move it.”(Supplee, p43) As Marlene Salon found out while working with Fealy, whereas her designs are so understated that they seem inevitable, a significant amount of creativity went into them. Salon found that Fealy’s gardens seemed “appropriate” for their place, but was particularly impressed by their “great deal of originality” and “real freshness.”(Supplee, p43)

By the late 1980s the Wessingers and Mrs. Fealy had become close friends, so that when the Friends of Timberline – with Mrs. Wessinger as an active board member – decided it was time to address the long neglected and badly damaged landscape around Timberline Lodge, Mrs. Wessinger was able to personally go to Fealy to ask for her help on the project. The 6,000 foot elevation of Timberline means that the landscape has a growing season of only two to three months, and years of overuse meant the fragile vegetation around the lodge had long since vanished. Mrs. Fealy's renown for her use of native plants in subtle way made her a natural choice for the project. Her work at the Salishan Lodge earned her an award in 1981, the first year the ASLA gave awards, and the landscape was awarded a Medallion by the organization during the celebration of the ASLA's 100th anniversary. She was also named a Fellow of the ASLA in 1985, the first woman in Oregon to receive the title. By the time she was asked to redesign the landscape at Timberline, Mrs. Fealy was nearing the age of 90, and while still actively working, was also beginning to wind down her practice.

Timberline Lodge had become a National Historic Landmark in 1976, and was constructed during the Great Depression under the WPA. Due to a lack of funds, the landscape plan drawn up by Emmett Blanchfield was never completed. His plan would serve as the rough inspiration for the new landscape, however, which also had to respond to a variety of modern needs. The challenge was to make the landscape appear as if the lodge had simply been dropped into an existing environment. With Patricia Wessinger as the Chair of the Friends of Timberline Landscape Committee, and Barbara Fealy employed as the landscape architect, an ideal combination of talents and passion had been brought together. Plant specialist Russ Hanby helped to draw up a list of native plants for the site.

In order to begin construction on the new landscape, one of the hurdles that had to be passed was the historic design review. This required a much more detailed set of drawings than Barbara Fealy usually drew up, along with several slight changes to her initial scheme in regards to some historic fabric that was discovered. When the scheme was finalized and sent to the Oregon State Historic Preservation Office, a letter accompanying the plans written by Emmet Blanchfield himself supported the “wonderful project similar to and in the spirit of the original.”

During construction, one of the primary materials used within the landscape were the large boulders present on the mountain. Mrs. Wessinger noted that “her ability to place rock is very unusual. It was wonderful to watch her use rock at Timberline Lodge.”(Supplee, p91) Again, despite there being detailed plans for the project, significant on-site coordination was key to Fealy's success. In a video interview shortly before her death in 2011, Mrs. Wessinger remembered Fealy quite fondly, and remarked that her “taste was always impeccable.” In the interview, she also mentions the efforts of the workers on the project, and

especially their dedication to the project, distinct respect for Fealy, and clear interest in following her instructions. Mr. Wessinger today remembers the two driving up on almost a daily basis during periods of construction.

The Wessinger garden today remains as one of Barbara Fealy's masterworks, but the landscape was also the foundation for her close friendship with William and Patricia Wessinger, and paved the way to one of her most famous projects, her landscape at Timberline Lodge. The garden at 321 Hilltop Road was a long-term collaboration with Mrs. Wessinger, whose interest in native plants pushed Fealy to do her best work, and the long collaboration allowed a distinct level of refinement to be met. The two women contributed to the Oregon landscape in very different ways, and through common interests were able to share in two remarkable projects.

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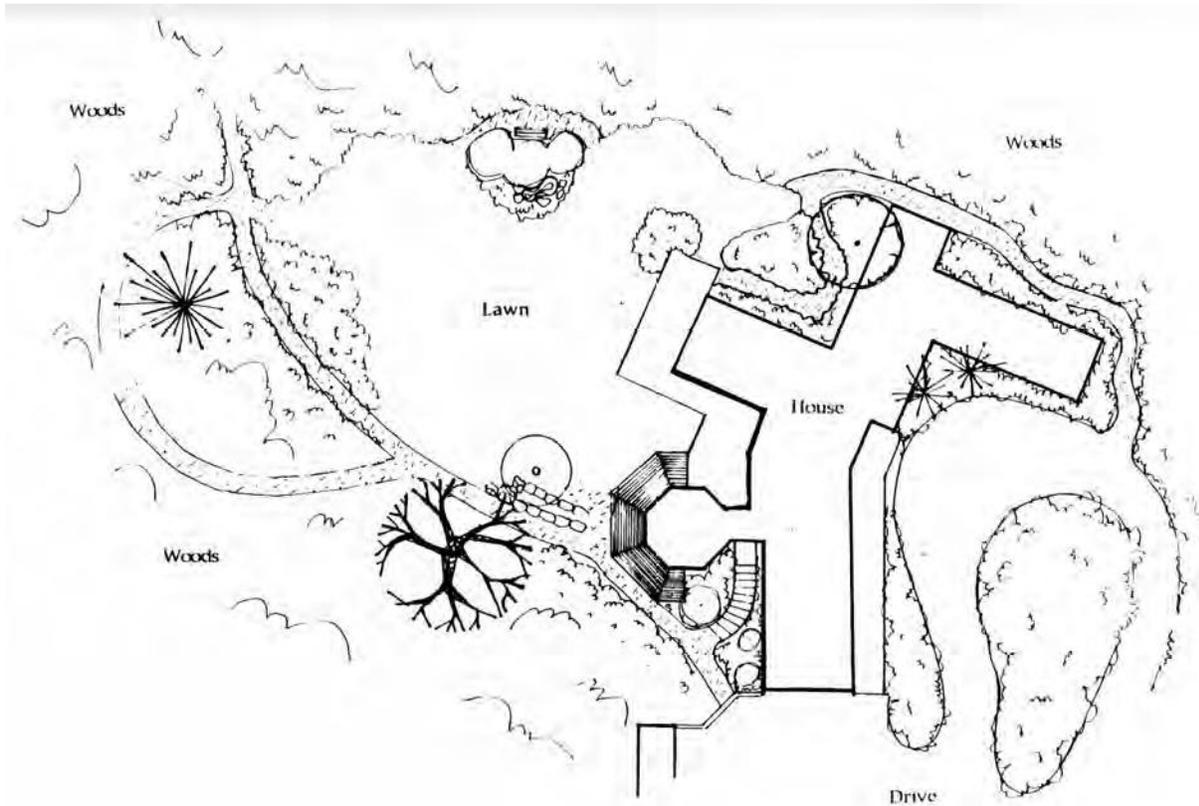
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2013 HALS Challenge Entry: *Documenting the Cultural Landscapes of Women*



Rough plan of home and garden. The southern path below the lawn was built much lower than drawn here, and begins near the garage and meets up with the one adjacent to the lawn in the woods. The east side of the vehicle turn-around is Hilltop Road itself, and extends northeast of this drawing. (From Katherine Supplee's thesis, 1993).

**THE MR. AND MRS. WILLIAM W. WESSINGER GARDEN  
HALS NO. OR-6  
PAGE 10**



View of the house with garage on the left, as approached on Hilltop Road. (Joseph Wessinger, July 13, 2013).



View of front of house, from Hilltop Road. (Joseph Wessinger, July 13, 2013).



The path north of the house, looking towards Hilltop Road with the bedroom wing on the right. (Joseph Wessinger, July 13, 2013).



Looking in the opposite direction along the north path. The master bedroom projects out, and the main lawn is beyond. (Joseph Wessinger, July 13, 2013).



View of the main lawn from the north end of the house. (Joseph Wessinger, July 13, 2013).



View of the lawn from the living room. (Joseph Wessinger, July 13, 2013).



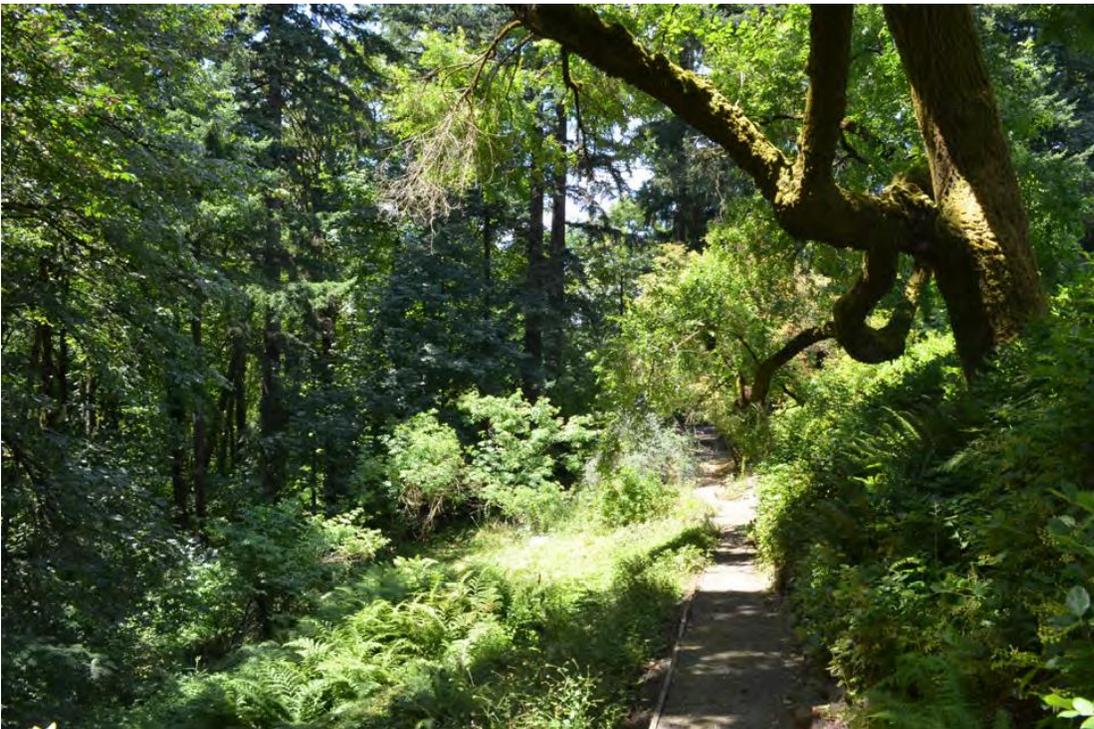
The view north from the living room. (Joseph Wessinger, July 13, 2013).



Looking across the lawn, with the small pond on the right, between stones. (Joseph Wessinger, July 13, 2013).



View of back of house, from where the main gravel path enters the woods. (Joseph Wessinger, July 13, 2013).



View west along southern path, from near the garage. (Joseph Wessinger, July 13, 2013).



View east along the southern path, with bench in the foreground. (Joseph Wessinger, July 13, 2013).