In 1787, Philip Van Rensselaer contracted with housewright Isaac Packard to build on the outskirts of Albany the gambrel-roofed Georgian style house known as Cherry Hill. The house and its surrounding 900 acres, complete with barn, brewhouse and tannery, became the seat of Van Rensselaer’s prosperous agricultural endeavors.

Over the course of three centuries of family ownership, the house and grounds changed as each family altered the structure and added their personal belongings. At the same time, the surrounding acreage was gradually reduced as the family and local economy shifted from an agrarian to an urban way of life. By the late 19th century, the property was reduced to five acres. A city neighborhood developed around Cherry Hill, turning the farmhouse into an urban mansion.

Cherry Hill’s present characteristics are the result of the care and preservation provided by the last two generations, the Rankin family. During the 20th century, the Rankins maintained the site and developed the present arrangement of lawns, trees, shrubs and beds.

In June, 1910, Emily Rankin wrote her mother:
“This is a very bad time just now for flowers, the peonies and roses gone and nothing in bloom but the spirea. In a week's time the bachelor's buttons and holly hocks promise to be in full bloom.”

The Rankins developed the upper garden area into rectangular beds along wide grassy paths. The ends and intersections of the paths were marked by garden ornaments: a wooden arbor seat (reproduced at its original location), a circular wooden temple with Dordic columns, a sundial and birdbath. Yews were planted to delineate and frame internal garden spaces and perimeter areas. The garden benches you see today were purchased in memory of museum volunteer Jane Briscoe and are similar to ones used by the Rankin family.

The garden south of the house was used as an area for the Rankins’ dogs. The modern garden now visible was developed by volunteers Hazel Van Aernam and Sharyn Brown in the spirit of Emily Rankin’s gardens.

Extensive research on the grounds has been conducted with funds from the New York State Council on the Arts and the Institute of Museum and Library Services.