

Leesburg Garden Club Historical Sketch Teckla Cox c. 2011

The Leesburg Garden Club was founded 9 December 1915 by four women, Mrs. Page (Bessie H.M.) Laughlin (1876-1950), Mrs. John (Frances P.) Gibson (1882- 1964), Mrs. J.R.H. (Cora L.) Alexander (1884-1972), and Mrs. William (Norita F.) Martin (1876-1952). Early in 1916 eight additional women were invited to join, and by the end of 1917 there were a total of 22 members. By 2018 membership was limited to 40 active members, 15 associate members (members who for reasons acceptable to the Executive Board can no longer be active but who are entitled to the privileges of the club including voting), 5 non-resident members and such honorary members as the club and the Executive Board vote to include. Honorary members are people who have benefitted the club to a considerable extent. For example, the husband of a member was made an honorary member because of his work growing and hybridizing lilies which the club entered in many shows and with which it won many ribbons.

The club began as a group that met to read aloud from the works of Charles Dickens (1812-1870). One member mentioned hearing of something called a “garden club” and so Dickens was abandoned in favor of plants. Although named the Leesburg Garden Club, members came from all sections of Loudoun County and in the beginning many of them lived on farms as well as in the Town of Leesburg. Almost all had vegetable gardens, so initially there was as much emphasis on vegetables as on flowers.

On 18 May, 1926 the Leesburg Garden Club became the 14th member of the Garden Club of Virginia (GCV) which had been founded in 1920 with the object of encouraging preservation, conservation, beautification, and restoration in the state. The GCV organized Garden Week in Virginia to earn money for this purpose and in 1929 the Leesburg Garden Club opened two historic houses and made “about \$16.” Proceeds have increased tremendously and by 2017 the club’s net receipts surpassed \$25,000 for Garden Week, which takes place at the end of April each year.

From the beginning the club had a number of civic projects as well as the members’ own interests in gardening. Starting in 1917 members supplied fresh vegetables to the local hospital from their own gardens and from a garden which they established on the hospital grounds. They canned produce to provide vegetables for the staff and patients in winter in the days before freezers. This program continued until the early 1940s when the club switched its attention to landscaping at the hospital. Members also planted flowers to cheer up patients. Another early project was to help elementary school children plant flowers and teach them about beautification. This project expanded to become the Highway Development Committee and eventually the Beautification Committee which promotes the aesthetic improvement of Loudoun County and its towns and highways.

The club’s concern with county beautification led it to work actively in opposition to the use of billboards. One member, Vinton Liddell Pickens (1900-1993), particularly urged the use of zoning to prevent the construction of billboards. She regularly attended meetings of the Board

of Supervisors until the board agreed to appoint a Planning Commission to write a zoning ordinance. Vinton Pickens was the commission's first and longest serving chairman. Through the work of the Leesburg Garden Club, in 1942 Loudoun County became the first rural county in the country to have a zoning ordinance.

In 1985 the club became embroiled in a conflict with Lyndon LaRouche (1922 - 2019), an extremist political figure. LaRouche moved his headquarters to Loudoun County, and one of his organizations, Campaign Publications, Inc., filed for a variance to change the use of its agriculturally zoned property. The Leesburg Garden Club joined other concerned groups and citizens to protest the request. The Board of Zoning Appeals denied the request in February of 1986, and LaRouche and his supporters targeted those who opposed the variance with media attacks. Leesburg Garden Club members were described by LaRouche in an interview as "these clacking busybodies in this Soviet jellyfish front sitting here in Leesburg oozing out their funny little propaganda making nuisances of themselves."

Leesburg Garden Club 1995-2020 Addendum Judy Gerow May 2020

Sources

Ancestry Library Edition, U.S. Census, Social Security Death Index, www.ancestrylibrary.com (Accessed 19 July 2011). Blue Ridge Herald, obituary, 21 July 1932. Blue Ridge Herald, obituary, 26 October 1950. "A Brief Biography of Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr.," <http://www.larouchepub.com/resume.html> (Accessed 21 July 2011). Find a Grave, www.findagrave.com (Accessed 19 July 2011). Leesburg Garden Club Collection, 1920 - (M 044), Thomas Balch Library, Leesburg, VA. Loudoun Times Mirror, obituary, 30 July 1964. The Washington Post, obituary, 13 August 2003. The Garden Club of Virginia, Follow the Green Arrow: The History of the Garden Club of Virginia, 1920-1970: Richmond: The Dietz Press, 1970.

Scope and Content Note

The collection contains records of the Leesburg Garden Club and includes directories, histories, minutes, committee reports, annual reports, scrapbooks, GCV information, information on the Leesburg Garden Club's participation in Garden Week in Virginia, photographs, information on the club's part in the adoption of zoning and a sign ordinance in Loudoun County, membership lists and information on the club's 501c3 status and other miscellaneous material.

Early records of the club were lost when the historian died. Consequently, most of the material begins with the 1940s although there are a few earlier items including histories and some meeting/yearbooks. Minutes from 1995 and 2007 are also missing.

This is an open collection and additional material will be added at least every two years. The collection includes seven scrapbooks dating from 1948 through part of 2008. The material which would have been placed in a scrapbook during and after 2008 is currently being put into folders for better preservation. Much of the material, especially in the early books, is in very fragile condition. Material (which had come loose from pages) has been placed in containers with interleaved notations of where those missing pages may be found. Some Garden Week material and yearbooks may also be found in the scrapbooks. Files on Historic Garden Week note many addresses and locations of houses which may be compared with the Lewis/Edwards Architectural Surveys of Loudoun County, 1971-1983 (M 022), Architectural Surveys of Leesburg, 1971- 2001(M 016), and Loudoun County Architectural Surveys, Supplement, 2003 (M 011) for more information on many of the buildings.