

Historic Virginia Gardens: Preservation Work of the Garden Club of Virginia 1975 - 2007
by Margaret Bemiss

Note: The following text accompanied a PowerPoint presentation by Margaret Bemiss at the 2009 Annual Meeting of the Garden Club of Virginia.

After the longest gestation period in history, the baby has finally arrived, and it is a beautiful baby. The one or two blemishes will be surgically corrected in the next printing. Several people have asked how I came to write it, and the answer is perfectly simple: Bessie told me to.

The original plan was to reprint Dottie Williams' *Historic Virginia Gardens*, which is out of print. I was serving on the Restoration Committee at the time and was charged with looking into that. The first move was to find the original films from which that volume had been printed. They were moldering in the pre-restoration basement of the Kent-Valentine house. I hauled them to Charlottesville, where they were judged by the UVA Press to be completely useless. I then sent a copy of that book to the Wyrick Press in Charleston to see if Pete Wyrick thought he could reprint it photographically, and the answer came back: "Don't bother, because books have changed so much since then. Do a new one to bring the record up to date." I reported back to the Restoration Committee, and Bessie said, "Fine, you and Nancy Talley do it." As Nancy's complicated life was getting progressively more complicated, co-authorship was not practical, but she helped enormously in the early stages and later with articles about the Valley properties.

There are interesting requirements for publishing a book about these gardens. I had to get permission from all the directors of all the properties to include their gardens, and they also vetted each and every article. All the historical images required tracking down their owners. No matter how long these images have been very familiar to the public, they are not considered to be in the public domain. The ones we needed belonged to sometimes obscure museums or hard-to-find libraries. For instance, the little drawing of the first Bruton Parish church, built in 1680, belongs to the Burgerbibliothek in Bern, Switzerland. The watercolor of Lee Hall belongs to the Gilder-Lehrman Institute of American History in New York, and the one of Montpelier, done by the wife of the then French ambassador, to the Musée de la coopération franco-américaine, Blerancourt, France. Will and I also made major discoveries in the Gillette Archive at the Library of Virginia. This is a drawing of a plan commissioned by Washington & Lee for the hillside below the Lee Chapel. The GCV refused to pay for this, substituting instead Gillette's plan pictured below. The Frances Benjamin Johnston photo of Belmont is in the Archive of American Gardens at the Smithsonian Institution, from the Garden Club of Virginia's collection of glass slides presented to the AAA by Dottie Williams when she was president of the GCV.

The question of how to present the plans of the various properties was an interesting one, as so many of them over the years have been revisited, refurbished, and added to, as conditions and needs changed. So, we decided to show the gardens as they are today, not as they were originally drawn. The landscape of Point of Honor in Lynchburg is a good example of the progression of a GCV garden which has undergone several improvements at the hands of three landscape architects. First, Meade Palmer's original drawing for the property. Then additional plantings and a terrace were added by Rudy J. Favretti, and finally, Will Rieley's office revised the walks and added new plantings. Lastly, Will's office

combined all of the designs and reconciled them with the existing conditions, then produced these clear drawings showing the shared authorship of these wonderful designs.

We found some aerial perspective drawings in Olda FitzGerald's wonderful book on Irish Gardens which we thought was a wonderful technique. I asked permission to crib the idea, which was readily given, so Jennifer from Will's office began this process using aerial photographs on which she delineated the edges of the main features, which produced line drawings to which detail was added and refined with field-checking and the final color washes added. To these views were added Roger Foley's wonderful photographs to complete the story.

The photograph of Belmont's view of the roses was Will's favorite of all of the photos, and he wanted to use it on the front cover. So did Roger, but Roxanne and I fought for Montpelier as newly restored presidential property and a more iconic picture of a historic Virginia garden

The thing to remember is that this book was, from start to finish, a team effort. Nancy Talley wrote most of the articles on Belle Grove and Blandy; Mary Ann Johnson wrote all of Danville Museum, Hollins, and Smithfield, and Madeline Hutcheson Mayhood, a member of the James River Garden Club, and a published garden writer, did yeoman work on Mount Vernon, UVA, and Washington & Lee.

Roger Foley's elegant photographs made the book. He takes pictures only from 5 to 9, a.m. or p.m., so that the light, as this picture of the Grace Arents' garden shows, is never harsh, or the contrasts too strong. And he read every piece before going to the property, so that the photographs really do illustrate the text.

Will Rieley's office oversaw everything - pictures, plans, perspective drawings, plant lists, text, relations with the Press, and Will took this picture of the Governor's Mansion garden.

The University of Virginia Press gave us a superlative book. Our acquisitions editor was the Director herself, Penny Kaiserlian. She and her two assistants, first Mary MacNeill and later Angie Hogan, were endlessly encouraging and helpful in any crisis. Martha Farlow was the layout editor responsible for the beauty of the book. None of it was farmed out, and their pride in their product equals our own.

In conclusion, the purpose of the book is twofold. First, as the subtitle says, it is a record of the preservation work of the Garden Club of Virginia from 1975 to 2007. And second, we wanted it to be a useful tool for landscape professionals, professors and students of landscape architecture and the history of landscape architecture, horticulturists and amateur gardeners, as well as future directors of grounds and gardens at the various properties. We hope we have succeeded.