

HISTORIC GARDEN PRESERVATION IN THE UNITED STATES  
ITS HISTORY AND PRESENT STATE

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In 1856 the State of Virginia granted a charter to an organization called the Mount Vernon Ladies Association of the Union and thereby established the first legislation for historic preservation in the United States. The charter enabled the association to purchase, preserve and maintain the estate of Mount Vernon on the banks of the Potomac, the home of George Washington, General of the Revolutionary Armies and first President of the United States. The establishment of the Ladies Association and their efforts at Mount Vernon should have augured well for the preservation of historic gardens and landscapes, for they were interested not only in the restoration of the house, a modest example of a plantation house, but also in the restoration of the gardens and agricultural land of Washington's estate. Today, the gardens rank as one of the most carefully studied and accurately restored historic gardens in America. Unfortunately, the example provided by Mount Vernon was not followed, and historic preservation since then has been more concerned with structures than gardens, while the techniques of archaeological investigation and accurate restoration now used almost routinely for historic buildings are rarely applied to gardens.

You may well ask what there is to preserve in the United States, so before I discuss the state of preservation today, I should like to show you a few examples of our garden history. Early settlers brought with them not only the seeds and roots necessary to establish an agriculture but also herbs and flowers. Even though their life was rigorous and their resources meager, the urge for decorative surroundings and flowers could not be denied, and little dooryard gardens flourished from the earliest settlements. Needless to say, none of these have survived, but a few have been restored accurately as to plants and layout. They show that the settlers brought with them not only the seeds but their memories of home; this garden, a restoration of a seventeenth century New England garden, is very similar in appearance to the cottage gardens of East Anglia in England.

As conditions became more settled, and the sale of agricultural and other natural products began to create more wealth, estates of some luxury and

ostentation were built. This was especially true in Virginia and other southern states, where the chief crop, tobacco, was in great demand in England. There, by the end of the eighteenth century, elaborate gardens were built by many estate owners; some of these survive in a restored form today. Such an estate was Gunston Hall, near Mount Vernon on the Potomac. The boxwood allée led to the edge of the hill overlooking the river ; the parterre is reminiscent of seventeenth century gardens of England. Gardens of this period were rarely large in extent; neither land nor labor could be spared for non-agricultural purposes. One is reminded of Thomas Jefferson's request to a friend in Bordeaux for a vigneron who could also play the violin. He stated that it was his desire to form a string quartet, but he added, each of the players would also have to have a skill useful either on the plantation or in the house.

Another eighteenth century garden, more ambitious in scale and closer to contemporary English practice is Middleton Place, near Charleston, South Carolina. Started in 1741 by Henry Middleton, it had lakes and grassy terraces comparable to the landscape garden style then dominating English design. This garden remained in the possession of the same family for many generations, and thus is comparable to some of the historic gardens of Europe, where successive generations have enlarged and replanted an original site. This garden still preserves three of the original camelias brought by André Michaux, the great French botanist in 1787, and is also notable for its large plantations of azaleas added in the last fifty years.

English landscape garden style was popularized in the United States by Andrew Jackson Downing, whose books on garden and cottage design had an important impact on design in the suburbs just beginning to expand around urban centers such as Boston, New York and Philadelphia. His work included designs for the great estates which were being built along the Hudson River and which unfortunately have not survived. Today, one single example of Downing's work is still in existence, similar to the layout we find at Lyndhurst, a Gothic revival mansion of the mid-nineteenth century.

Few gardens of the Victorian era have survived; the academic reaction at the end of the nineteenth century against the eclecticism and ostentation of the period caused most private gardens to be destroyed. However, the period between 1850 and the 1890's, that is, the period of the high Victorian garden, was notable for the development of the municipal park movement, and the emergence of landscape architecture as an element of city planning. The leader

of this movement, Frederick Law Olmstead, was the designer of Central Park in New York City. Possibly the only park in the United States to be designated as a National Historic Landmark, Central Park is protected now against encroachments and alterations, and is in the process of restoration under the guidance of a Curator, a unique position.

The end of the nineteenth century is notable in the United States for the appearance of large estates built in emulation of European ones. Centers such as Newport, Rhode Island, the Berkshires in Connecticut and Massachusetts, all summer resorts, or the Carolinas and Florida in the south, winter resorts, were sites for elaborate palaces or châteaux, and gardens designed to emulate the great periods of the European past. Here, for example, is Villa Vizcaya in Miami, Florida, designed as an Italian Renaissance garden, Biltmore, a Vanderbilt estate in North Carolina, has a château, a French style terrace and an English park designed by Frederick Law Olmstead.

Finally, a word should be said of the arboreta and botanical gardens. One of the earliest arboreta in the United States, created by the Massachusetts Horticultural Society in the 1830's was a cemetery park. Many others were built in the nineteenth century, including the Missouri Botanical gardens in St. Louis, dating from the 1850's, the New York Botanical Gardens and Longwood in Pennsylvania, formerly a private estate. The Huntington Botanical Garden in Pasadena, California, is an example of the great range of climate and plant material in the United States.

The few examples I have shown give only the most cursory glimpse of the variety and richness of the gardens of America. Unfortunately, this heritage is poorly protected and constantly endangered by destruction, neglect and ignorant restoration. This, in some ways, is a recent phenomenon. As I have already pointed out, the first historical preservation in the United States, at Mount Vernon, was concerned with gardens and grounds. Efforts to preserve our natural landscape began as early as 1832. In 1872, Congress authorized the Secretary of the Interior to acquire what is now Yellowstone Park, a wilderness area of great beauty with extraordinary geysers and hot springs. To Yellowstone Park have been added many other of our natural wonders, which today are governed by the National Park Service, established in 1916. In this century, its powers of regulation and control have been extended to military parks, historical monuments, and since 1966 the Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, a division of the National Park Service, has extended recording and some protection to state and local monuments.

Massachusetts, the site of the third permanent colony in North America, has been in the forefront of historic preservation. In 1891, a group of private citizens obtained a charter from the legislature as a corporation by the name of the Trustees of Public Reservations. The organizers, a group of wealthy and public minded citizens, had become disturbed by the rapid expansion of cities and towns and the consequent destruction of the natural countryside and landscape. They were empowered to acquire, maintain, and open to the public, "beautiful and historic places and tracts of land within the Commonwealth (Massachusetts)." The legal organization, with a private body empowered to accept gifts of land or property, which from the beginning the Trustees required to be endowed, and which were thereafter tax exempt, established an important precedent for the preservation of gardens as well as natural landscapes. Indeed, the Trustees of the Public Reservations served as a model for the establishment of Great Britain's National Trust.

The foresighted actions of the government and private organizations in the nineteenth century established a legal framework from which our historic preservation has developed today. The expansion of the powers of the Park Service is an example. Through its control of national parks, and the historic monuments in it, two important preservation activities have developed. The first of these is the Historic American Building Survey, established in 1934. Gardens as well as buildings have been included in this survey, which for the last forty years has been compiling accurate measured drawings and other documentation of historic buildings and their surroundings. As might be expected, emphasis was placed on eighteenth century monuments during the first years of the survey, but the survey is now extended to all periods of American history.

Examples of the survey show meticulous recording of the plant material as well as the layout and the architectural features.

The second example of the preservation activities of the Park Service is their maintenance and preservation of the gardens at the national historic sites they maintain.

Because of these activities, when the first federal legislation for preservation was drawn up in 1966, the new Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation was made a division of the Park Service. This act, was, in part, made possible by a Supreme Court decision which rules on the constitutionality of federal, state and even municipal legislation. The Parker-Berman decision as it

is known, significantly expanded the concept of zoning laws, in the statement, and I quote, "The concept of the public welfare is broad and inclusive. The values it represents are spiritual as well as physical, aesthetic as well as monetary. It is within the power of the legislature to determine that the community should be beautiful as well as healthy, spacious as well as clean...

The 1966 act in establishing the Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation empowered it to enlarge the National Register of Historic Places to include monuments of state and local as well as of national importance. States were required to conduct surveys and to draw up preservation programs which would qualify for federal aid. If any district, site, building or structure, included in the National Register is within or near a proposed Federal or federally assisted undertaking, the effect of the project must be reviewed to demonstrate that no adverse effect on the monument will occur. The criteria for judging an adverse effect include destruction or alteration of all or part of a property, isolation from or alteration of its surrounding environment, or introduction of visual or audible atmospheric elements that are out of character with the property or its setting.

It is encouraging that American preservation legislation is concerned with site and setting as well as the buildings. Nevertheless, this legislation has not been utilized frequently enough for the protection of our historic gardens and landscapes. For example, although the National Register and the List of National Historic Landmarks can include gardens, parks, etc., very few have been listed. In a recent book on the great gardens of America, eighteen were old enough to be listed but only six of them have been placed on the Register.

Another difficulty lies in the wording of much of our state and municipal law. In almost every case protection is provided only for that part of the site visible by the public from a public street. This has led to preservation districts where meticulous restoration of buildings has taken place, and where the plantings on the street are at least harmonious with the period, but where the part of the garden invisible to the public is either abandoned or entirely inappropriately designed and planted. All too often both money and interest in a preservation project runs out at the front door.

Thus, most successful preservation and restoration has remained in the private sector, all too frequently in the hands of amateurs who do not have the scientific methods necessary for accurate restoration. Nevertheless some projects should be described as exemplifying the best in preservation and

restoration that is happening in this country.

The most ambitious restoration project is in Williamsburg in Virginia. This was an important centre for the origins of the American Revolution and in the eighteenth century the capital of one of the wealthiest colonies. In 1927, John D. Rockefeller became interested in the town and provided funds to begin a restoration to the period of the 1770's . Nineteenth century houses were torn down, eighteenth century houses moved in, the remaining eighteenth century houses restored, and two major edifices, the Governor's Palace and the State House were rebuilt. Every effort has been expended to make the settings as well as the buildings appear appropriate. Williamsburg started as a private foundation with an endowment but now is paying for itself by charges to the public.

Another example of restoration and preservation that is not entirely governmental is provided by the American National Trust for Historic Preservation. Although chartered by the government it is a private institution ; it acquires historic properties such as Woodlawn, which is maintained as a monument open to the public. In an interesting example of cooperation, the Garden Clubs of Virginia, an association of amateur gardeners and horticulturists , was responsible for the restoration of the gardens to their eighteenth century style.

Finally, the most usual form of garden preservation today is that in which a property, formerly a private estate, is given to an organization or municipality with an endowment to provide for maintenance; the estate becomes a public park. Among the numerous examples I cannot resist naming Dumbarton Oaks in Washington D.C., the institution for which I work. Started in the 1920's, the estate had forty acres of elaborate terraced gardens and woodlands. It was donated to Harvard University as a research institution in Byzantine studies, pre-Columbian art and most recently the history of landscape architecture. One part of the grounds was given outright to the city of Washington as a municipal park. The gardens, maintained by a separate endowment, are open to the public and visited annually by more than 20,000 visitors.

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