



# Magnolia

*Magnolia grandiflora*  
The Laurel Tree of Carolina  
Catesby's *Natural History*, 1743

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## Charleston Gardens: A Turn of the Century View

by Virginia Lopez Begg, Andover, MA



Portrait of Frances Duncan at  
age 18. Courtesy of Dolben  
Library, Northfield-Mount  
Hermon School, Northfield, MA.

Mrs. St. Julien Ravenel titled the last chapter of her 1906 history, *Charleston, The Place and The People*, "Confederate Charleston. The End." The finality of that title is underscored by her omission of any account of Charleston after 1865. By the end of the Civil War, she wrote, "Everything was overgrown with rank, untrimmed vegetation. Not grass merely, but bushes, grew in the streets. The gardens looked as if the Sleeping Beauty might be within."<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Ravenel was not alone in her feeling that the city's glory days were past.

In the very same year as the publication of Mrs. Ravenel's book, however, Frances Duncan, a young garden writer from New York, arrived in Charleston to gather material for several articles about area gardens. Duncan eventually wrote three important articles and a garden novel that present a different view of Charleston and its gardens at the turn of the century.<sup>2</sup> Her writing depicts a new generation of Charlestonians, proud of their garden heritage and eager to rebuild.

Frances Duncan's description of Charleston gardens and the two great Ashley River estates, Magnolia Gardens and Middleton Place, in a relatively undocumented era is of much interest to garden historians. The article about Middleton Place, in fact, appears to have been the first full length treatment of the estate to appear in a national publication and remained the only such article for some years. Most

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## Calendar

**October 21st-22nd, 1994.** "Oktober Gartenfest — Celebrating the German Influence on Texas Gardens," hosted by the University of Texas Winedale Historical Center, Texas A & M University, The Herb Society of America Pioneer Unit, and the International Festival Institute at Round Top. Speakers include SGHS members Nancy Volkman, Dr. William Welch on "Roses for the German Texas Garden," and D. Greg Grant on "German Cemeteries and Their Plants." Contact Gloria Jaster, U. T. Winedale Historical Center, P. O. Box 11, Round Top, TX 78954. (409) 278-3530, or FAX (409) 278-3531.

**October 25th, 1994.** "Historic Landscapes: Getting to Treatment" at Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts. This one-day symposium examines several case studies of historic landscape preservation works in progress. Speakers include Suzanne Turner on her work at Shadows-on-the-Teche in Louisiana. Contact: National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1785 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20036.

**November 3rd-6th, 1994.** "Georgia Legacies Etched on the Land: A Celebration of the 100th Anniversary of the Savannah Park and Tree Commission" at the Coastal Georgia Center in Savannah. This conference will take a broad look at rural, urban, and ethnic influences on the



coastal Georgia landscape and address preservation challenges in maintaining its historic legacy. Tours of Savannah, Ossabaw Island, Sapelo, old rice fields and the wildlife refuge. Speakers include SGHS

members Catherine Howett and Richard Westmacott, Charles Birnbaum of the National Park Service, and others. For more information contact: Coastal Georgia Landscape Conference, Public Service Center, Armstrong State College, 11935 Abercorn St., Savannah, 31419. (912) 921-2332; Fax (912) 921-5581.

**June 1st-3rd, 1995.** Annual conference of the Alliance for Historic Landscape Preservation, to be held in Santa Barbara, California. For membership information, contact Shary Page Berg, 469 Franklin St., Cambridge, MA 02139. (617) 491-3727.

**April 21st-23rd, 1995.** The thirteenth-annual meeting of the Southern Garden History Society. Plans for this meeting, coordinated by Dr. Edgar Givhan, include trips to two gardens over a century old that are still maintained in the Mobile, Alabama area. Look for more information about this meeting in the next issue of *Magnolia*.

**October 5th-7th, 1995.** The tenth-biennial conference on "Restoring Southern Gardens and Landscapes," held at Old Salem in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. The conference theme will be "The Influence of Women on the Southern Landscape." ♣

## Charleston Gardens continued from page one

significant of all, Duncan also drew a plan, the earliest found to date, of the overgrown gardens. She documented existing conditions almost a half century after the Civil War and about a decade before the extensive restoration undertaken by J.J. Pringle Smith and his wife, Heningham Ellet Smith. A study of Frances Duncan's South Carolina trilogy, her garden novel, her unpublished correspondence with her editor, and other sources, casts useful light on a fruitful period of Charleston garden history.

Frances Duncan came to Charleston in the early part of the American phenomenon that has been called "the garden fever." The garden fever

began in the 1890s, peaked in the 1920s and ended at the outbreak of World War II. It was a cultural phenomenon of surprising complexity, having its roots in many factors. A deeply felt reaction against industrialization, urban life and constant, rapid change lay behind both the Arts and Crafts movement and the Colonial Revival. Both of these helped to stimulate the garden fever. As Americans recoiled from a machine-dominated way of life, many developed a new interest in nature and expressed it in a variety of ways — the founding of national parks, the Audubon movement and, above all, gardening. Old gardens, their roots deep in American history, seemed to



weave together many of these cultural threads. Where better to find old gardens than Charleston?

The same age witnessed a garden revolution. The mechanical precision of Victorian bedding out, with its technology-based production of thousands of tropical exotics to create startling patterns, was falling into disrepute among the cultural elite. Eyes turned appreciatively to the old-fashioned flowers touted by William Robinson and Gertrude Jekyll in Britain. Again, old gardens held new appeal and Charleston, rich in garden history, drew fresh admirers.

Charleston was in vogue in 1906. So agreed *The New York Times'* book review section.<sup>3</sup> Owen Wister, the writer most famous for his Western saga, *The Virginian*, had just published a novel about the old city called *Lady Baltimore*, after the cake that plays a role in his story. A novel redolent of Colonial Revival themes, the book extols Charleston people and places, including,



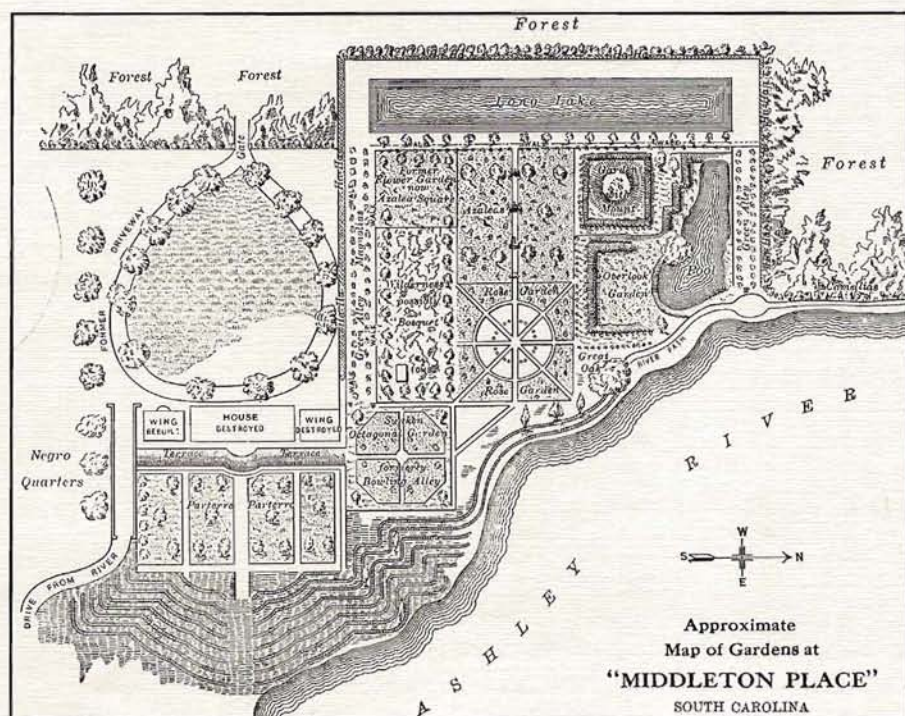
same time, the *Century* and *Country Life in America*, two important magazines with a national circulation, were preparing to send knowledgeable authors South to write about Charleston gardens.

To understand the full significance of Frances Duncan's South Carolina trilogy, one must first look at the magazine and the editor for whom she wrote because the impact of her articles was magnified by their forum. The *Century*, "which many contemporary critics considered the best general periodical in the world,"<sup>4</sup> exercised much influence among the nation's cultural elite. Although past its greatest years because of competition from newer mass market magazines, the *Century* held its place as publishing's staunchest advocate of high standards in art and literature. The magazine had just discovered the garden fever, publishing its first ever garden issue in May, 1906. Its editor, Richard Watson Gilder, was himself a leading cultural influence and the center of New York literary and artistic circles. The

recognition of Charleston's importance in the firmament of American gardens by Gilder and the *Century* forms part of the historical value of these articles.

The idea for the *Century* series came from Frances Duncan. She and the magazine had been trying to agree on the subjects for a number of garden articles and "old Southern gardens" was one of her suggestions. Duncan's background well fitted her for her task.<sup>5</sup> Born in New York in 1877, she was the daughter of a sea captain from Maine. She grew up in Northfield, Massachusetts and attended the rigorous girls' seminary there. Frances Duncan was independent and not afraid to be different throughout her long life and, at eighteen, she made a decision

uncommon for young women in her time. Wanting a career in horticulture, she obtained a work-study position at Long Island's nationally known Parsons Nursery, a concern responsible for propagating and introducing many Asian shrubs and trees to American gardens. There, she not only



Plan of Middleton Place, based on a drawing made by Frances Duncan, *Century*, October, 1910.

for instance, Magnolia Gardens. *Lady Baltimore*, although unfortunately marred by the Pennsylvania author's pervasive racism, created real interest in Charleston far from its borders. *The New York Times*, however, was not the only cultural icon to cast its eye upon the city. At this



studied woody plants and the nursery business, she also read widely in Samuel Parsons' library of landscape classics. Such books trained her eye to recognize good design so that when she arrived in South Carolina, she knew what she was seeing.



topics suggested by Gilder: Magnolia Gardens; the Augustine Smythe garden in Charleston; the "tea garden"; and the Noisette rose farm (undated notes by FD, probably late April, 1906). Staying at

"Shamrock Terrace" and enjoying a busy social life in Charleston, Duncan immediately made arrangements to visit various gardens to get "permissions and invitations" for illustrator Anna Whelan Betts who was soon to arrive. Betts would draw and paint illustrations – Gilder did not favor photography – for Duncan's articles at a level of artistry for which the *Century* was justly famous. Duncan now reported to Gilder that they would breakfast at Augustine Smythe's and, another day, visit Magnolia Gardens, whose owners, the Hasties, were about to depart. She also passed on the "sorrow" that *Country Life in America* had just spent two days at Magnolia, with Henry Troth taking photographs (FD to RWG, 4-18-1906). This was indeed a sorrow for Gilder and Duncan, but indicates the growing interest in Charleston gardens by national publications. *CLA* documented the upscale end of the country life movement, featuring articles about estates, country sports and of course, gardens. Both publisher Frank Nelson Doubleday and editor Wilhelm Miller became significant tastemakers as the garden fever rose in intensity. The magazine admired Magnolia enough to publish three laudatory and useful articles about it.<sup>7</sup>

Duncan also reported that she had heard intriguing references to another garden, Middleton Place, and intended to "inveigle" her friend, harbormaster Colonel Armstrong, to take her there in a launch. It was "un-Murrayed [undiscovered by tourists] and inaccessible," and Duncan decided to proceed on her own, without Gilder's prior approval. Subsequent letters reveal her increasing enthusiasm for Middleton Place, her attempts to persuade Gilder to authorize the article and, most fully, her attempts to win the confidence of owner Elizabeth Middleton Heyward who zealously guarded the old estate. At the same time, Duncan continued her work on the Charleston city gardens article, as well as the Magnolia piece. It will be best to treat these two separately and then return to Middleton Place.

Frances Duncan was eager to do her best work for the *Century*, submitting repeated revisions of her articles. "Charleston Gardens" finally appeared in the March, 1907 issue. Its descriptive details included vignettes of six



"A Charleston Garden Gate," a color painting by Anna Whelan Betts for "Charleston Gardens" article by Frances Duncan, *Century*, March, 1907.

Illness confined Duncan to bed in 1900 and she turned her hand to garden writing. By 1905, she was writing for a variety of prestigious magazines, working on her first book and negotiating with the *Century*. Gilder, who favored articles about the South in part to encourage rapprochement between North and South, must have assented because Frances Duncan was soon writing to him from Charleston. Many of Duncan's letters to Gilder and others regarding her South Carolina trilogy are held in the *Century* Company Records at the New York Public Library and this account owes much to them.<sup>6</sup> Dates in parentheses below refer to this correspondence, and all spelling and punctuation are Duncan's.

Duncan arrived in Charleston with several



specific gardens. She was of course writing about what she saw in 1906, an important part of the value of her writing to historians.

Duncan began by noting that Charleston was rare among American cities for its sense of place. There is a there there, Gertrude Stein might have said. She gave a thumbnail sketch of the city's history and architecture before moving to the gardens. Charleston gardens, she said, were created in the aura of the "golden age of English garden-craft," the seventeenth century, when ordered geometry prevailed. Such designs still prevailed in 1906 Charleston.

The Miles Brewton house boasted a garden that retained its historic integrity, according to Duncan. Then owned by Susan Pringle, a high brick wall overlooked an arbor covered with roses, brick-lined flower beds and a kitchen garden. Harmony of house and garden, a goal of all good design, was a hallmark here, as it was throughout Charleston, pointed out Duncan. She also commented on the - oleanders and the fragrant *Acacia farnesiana*, an unusual use of a botanical name in her writing. Here too she mentioned that "noteworthy" or unusual plantings were not characteristic of Charleston gardens. Owners did not or could not experiment, a trait that helped to preserve the fabric of the city.

Frances Duncan found a particularly elaborate old garden at the Simonton house, then owned by Mrs. Alston and formerly Mme. Tolman's Boarding School. Bricks outlined geometric flower beds, on axis with the piazza steps. English violets, irises, the Jacqueminot rose, sweet bays, and Chinese primroses were some of the plants lending their grace to these beds, while recently planted magnolias lined the path to the house.

The Nathaniel Russell house, owned by the Sisters of Mercy in Frances Duncan's time, appeared in one of Anna Whelan Betts' paintings



with its wrought iron balconies overlooking the garden. A hedge of altheas screened the kitchen garden from the square flower garden, which held spikenard, pomegranates, coral tamarisks, orange trees, and larkspurs.

Frances Duncan was much impressed by Charleston's garden walls, usually brick laid in English bond. In an attempt to imitate the English landscape, the nineteenth century had done away with fences and walls in many areas and Americans were beginning to realize their loss. Gates were another construction detail remarked on by Duncan and drawn by Betts. Of wood, wrought iron or a combination, they were a signature of Charleston gardens. The young writer also commented on the design unity between house, garden and outbuildings – servants' quarters, kitchens, and stables. "There are no 'back premises' to dodge furtively...." Plants were often used to tie structures and spaces together – yellow



"A Garden Wall," from "Charleston Gardens."

trumpet creeper at the Adger Smyth house, for example – and often roses.

Gilder had wanted Duncan to write about the Augustine Smyth garden on Legare Street. After describing the house and outbuildings, she presented the garden as primarily a rose garden, rich in the roses we now call antique: Paul Neyrons, Reine Marie Henriette, Duchesse de Brabant, and Madame Plantier, for example. Many other



flowers also grew in this garden. Poppies, cornflowers, and hollyhocks followed various kinds of daffodils. Garden features here included arbors shading paths, trellis work, a sundial, and a rose-covered summerhouse.

Frances Duncan was continually struck with Charleston's successful marriage between design and horticulture, so difficult to achieve in any garden. She admired Charlestonians' ability to resist the Victorian scourge of the specimen plant. "Charleston's gardens are quite as fortunate in what they have not as in what they have. The golden catalpa; the variegated weigela – that joy of traveling salesman; yellow-spotted aucubas..." and most of all, the dreaded bedding out. Her record of what was not there is as valuable to preservationists as what was.

In closing her article, Duncan briefly described the Burkmeyer garden, adjoining a house "built by Col. Ashe for his daughter Mrs. Gadsden." She admired the ivy-covered walls and listed the



flowers: "Chinese primroses, snapdragons, California poppies, marigolds, larkspurs, not the colossi of the exhibitions, but the old-fashioned sort...." Charleston had even, it seemed, resisted the "bigger is better"

philosophy of Victorian horticulture.

Only one aspect of Charleston's gardens met with Frances Duncan's dismay. "The city's public gardens are not so lovely." In a city where live oak and magnolia thrive, "why should folk now begin to plant as a street tree the ubiquitous and short-lived poplar?" The *Century* had urged Duncan to write practical articles so her concluding words gave specifics to those who wanted to learn from Charleston gardens. She recommended that readers study the gardens' eminently successful design rather than try to reproduce them, exactly, so linked were they with the city's ineffable sense of place.

Frances Duncan followed her Charleston gardens article with "Magnolia Gardens," published several months later in August, 1907. Here she faced a problem which may have contributed to her repeated revisions and delays. Magnolia was a well known tourist destination already. *Country Life in America* had published one article about it in 1905 and had two others in preparation. What could she say about it that was new? She decided upon an approach that was literary rather than descriptive to try to capture the psychological experience of Magnolia.

A straightforward opening gave some background about the Ashley River estates and the Drayton family which owned – and still owns – Magnolia. Duncan then described her steamer journey upriver, one of two such trips the boat made every day in the spring season. Magnolia Gardens was indeed popular, perhaps too much so for Duncan's taste. Visitors were shepherded in groups through the gardens, guarded fore and aft. "The *genius loci* is the shyest, most elusive of deities, and in these latter days, when folk are armed with 'How-to-Know' and 'What-to-Look-at' books, and tourists go about seeking what they may devour in the way of sights, determined to let not one of them escape, the shadow-loving spirit has grown as wary as a hermit thrush and as difficult of acquaintance."

Duncan recognized the need to accompany tourists who might snap off branches as souvenirs but was determined to experience the soul of Magnolia in solitude. She took her first



"In a Charleston Garden, The Home of Mr. Augustine T. Smythe" – from "Charleston Gardens."





opportunity to slip away from the group and wandered alone through the gardens. The balance of her article was a paean to Magnolia's compelling beauty.

Here, dim in their draperies of moss, a brotherhood of giant oaks upreared huge, age-contorted limbs, while at their feet, burning ever deeper and deeper into the depths of the forest, were azaleas like an enchanted fire – blaze upon blaze of color, a very sea of vivid, unearthly brilliance....And still the color struggles to escape, now stealing along the margin of silent water, only to flare back; lighting the dreaming surface, sunset-fashion, then flashing into scarlet; leaping up into the trees, and blazing out, a crimson torch, from the somber, dark-foliaged magnolias.

Duncan was wise to be literary rather than literal in her Magnolia Gardens article. She captured the spirit of the place and managed to communicate to the *Century's* audience the magic of Magnolia. She conveyed to historians too what it was about this famous garden that drew so many tourists at the turn of the century.

Frances Duncan's article about Middleton Place was the most significant of her South Carolina trilogy. By writing what appears to have been the first full article about the garden in a national publication and in drawing the first plan yet found, she also brought Middleton Place to the attention of the nation's cultural elite for both its inherent excellence in design and its value as an icon of the Colonial Revival. Having more to say about Middleton Place, Duncan then returned to the topic in her garden novel, *Roberta of Roseberry Gardens*. Duncan's correspondence with the *Century*, her article and her garden novel offer a unique and valuable view of this important American garden.

Frances Duncan arrived in Charleston in the spring of 1906, twenty-nine, energetic, and widely read in horticulture and landscape design. Almost immediately a part of Charleston social life, her acquaintances went out of their way to be helpful. By April 29, Duncan's first two articles were under way and she had gotten her initial look at Middleton Place. She began her dual campaign to sell the story idea to Richard Watson Gilder and to win the approval of Elizabeth (Lily) Middleton

Heyward, no easy task. She wrote to Gilder:

Now do read the little I have been able to tell you of Middleton Place in my Charleston outline. I think it a great find. I am most anxious to take a photographer there but could not yesterday – owing to Mrs. Hayward's prohibition....



"The Path by the Long Pond" – from "An Old-Time Carolina Garden."

I think I can get permission tomorrow (I am to be taken to call on Mrs. H. by her favorite cousin who has taken no end of trouble). Dowling takes excellent photographs and I think it important (in the reconstruction of the place I want to do) to have them. Then I can block out for Miss Betts the growth which probably was there and also that which wasn't there.

I daresay you will think I am daft over Middleton Place but I am already



scheming how I can possibly arrange to come down in November and go on horseback with my friend the elderly-lawyer-descendant of Pierre Bacot through the miles of Middleton woods and find out where originally the vistas were cut through, so we can make the place as it was before the glory had departed.



*"When Middleton Place Was in Its Prime" – from "An Old-Time Carolina Garden."*

So tell me what you think. This magnificent old estate lying forgotten among the wilds fascinates me.  
(FD to RWG, 4-29-1906)

Here as elsewhere, Duncan's letters refer to Charlestonians who helped her with invaluable information about Middleton Place. From 1865 to 1906, while Magnolia had been the major creative focus of the Reverend John Grimke Drayton and later his family, Middleton Place had been without such continuing care. The grounds were



overgrown, even neglected, and few could see what had once been. The value of Duncan's writing and her plan to historians is magnified by her consultation with such

advisors as the "favorite cousin" and the "elderly lawyer" who were long familiar with the gardens. The favorite cousin could well have been Henry Augustus Middleton Smith, who had grown up with Heyward and who was committed to saving Charleston area properties from development. Another candidate is his son, J.J. Pringle Smith, to whom Lily Heyward eventually left Middleton Place.<sup>8</sup>

A further excerpt from the correspondence, (undated but probably late April, 1906) goes on:

Middleton Place: – This is the best thing of all by far....laid out on a magnificent scale....The proportions are beautiful – I don't know a place in this country which touches it.

Of course it is now in a state of decay....much of the garden has gone back to the wild, some obliterated, but you would be as fascinated with the place as we were. Today Miss Betts and I went lunchless until five o'clock she sketching and I working out a plan of the original garden. What I want to do is this:—

Reconstruct the place, show it in the days when it was really a barony....There is nothing like it in this country – and *Country Life* will be green with envy ....The owner of Middleton Place will not allow visitors nor cameras – nor northerners!! (I have been industriously learning to say 'gyarden' [Charleston pronunciation] that I may not bring down her wrath – though since I've seen the place I don't wonder [at her dislike of northerners].

I have never seen such a reconstruction as I propose done. The article should be important from a gardening point of view, it could be very important historically (I have made friends with an old gentleman who knows everything about the landmarks and the genealogies – a descendant of the owner next the Middletons)....

I never in my life was so interested in a garden as in working out here what



was original and what had grown up. Then there was a 3 mile drive through the woodland here and there opening into vistas....

You can imagine there were wires to be pulled in order to see Middleton Place for its present owner Mrs. Heyward is very peculiar. Even her near relatives thought we might not be allowed to land....

Frances Duncan's concern about Lily Heyward's approval was not misplaced. *Country Life in America* had photographed the gardens but Heyward disliked the results and refused to allow them to be published, writing Wilhelm Miller a stiff note. She closed with a fillip, "As I am not a widow, pray do not write to me as Mrs. E.M. Heyward. My name is Mrs. Julius H. Heyward."<sup>9</sup> Duncan's 1910 article remained the only significant piece published about Middleton Place until "The Ashley River and Its Gardens" in the May, 1926 issue of the *National Geographic*, by which time Pringle and Henningham Smith's restoration efforts were under way.

The young writer continued to work on all three articles but, as she suspected, another visit South seemed necessary.

In addition: "I have just been offered a delightful 'job' down here – resuscitating an old garden up the river also other gardening jobs and may be able to arrange to come back in the autumn – I don't know.... Everyone has been marvelously kind – we have really been feted here" (FD to RWG, 5-2-1906). A letter owned by the South Carolina Historical Society indicates that she did indeed return in November.<sup>10</sup> Her relationship with Lily Heyward improved to the point that the older woman asked her to

collaborate on a number of historical articles about the Middleton family, in addition to writing the garden article (FD to RWG, 5-21-1906). The



collaboration does not seem to have occurred.

In the fall of 1906, Lily Heyward sent Frances Duncan pictures and historical notes in connection with the place. "The pictures (which I sent to the Art Department) aren't at all what we want to use, I'm sure. The article should have drawings, not photographs, anyway....I'll write to her about it – you needn't bother to do that. She is very peculiar – and if I make her cross there'll be no end of bother – she won't let me come to Middleton Place" (FD to RWG, 11-16-1906).

Gilder was eager to publish the final article of the trilogy, but Duncan was determined not to hurry a project that had become so important to her.

Will you return, Mrs. Heyward's Ms. to me? I am right sorry to have had to bother you with it, but the good lady has feelings of a hare-trigger order and the muzzles of her guns are trained on NORTHERNERS....

About Middleton Place – certainly I hope to do the article, but I am by no means sure I can manage it speedily. It



"Climbing – Roses Over the Porch of the (Simonton) Alston House" – from "Charleston Gardens."

ought to be rather elaborate, a careful presentment of the lordly old gardens as they were in their heyday of beauty....I



would like to do a restoration [she means plan] of it – the rice plantations at the river margin, the elaborate terraces from there to the formal garden, the negroes and the flat-boats – the old bowling-alley and rose-gardens. Six thousand acres there were in Middleton Place! If well done, it should make a notable article and I don't want to do it indifferently.

Also, about Miss Betts on the Middleton Place pictures – I rather wish Mr. Parrish could do them. There is so



Parrish's name for several reasons besides his standing in the art world. She knew him from the summer colony of artists and writers at Cornish, New Hampshire, where they both lived. She knew of his interest in

gardens and of his spectacular paintings for Edith Wharton's "Italian Villas and Their Gardens," a series that appeared in the *Century* in 1903-04. Gilder did not accede to this request but Duncan did achieve one coup that even Wharton had not managed, the publication of a plan with her article. In her autobiography, Wharton wrote, "According to the publishers, the public 'did not care for plans'."<sup>11</sup> Duncan's plan of the unrestored Middleton Place, based on her site work and her interviews, is the most valuable single element of her entire South Carolina trilogy.

Frances Duncan delayed several years before submitting her Middleton Place article in the spring of 1910. She had accepted a job she disliked – first garden editor of the *Ladies' Home Journal*, which kept her bored but well paid. In addition, Gilder was terminally ill, dying in 1909, and editor Robert U. Johnson seemed less interested. But as Duncan herself admitted, "The real reason ...is that I had been fussing with the article off and on for so long I simply couldn't stand it around a minute more..." (FD to RUJ, 4-6-1910). Johnson was not happy with the completed article, seemingly because it was too serious, a complaint Edith Wharton had also to deal with. Duncan responded with some emotion: "I am sincerely sorry that you were so thoroughly disappointed in the Middleton Place article....For that article – I couldn't have treated differently or otherwise – it's not indifferent work – I have no qualms of conscience on that point – never have I spent more time or pains over anything, but you can't let your pen frolic around a dignified old personality like that – it's impertinent" (FD to RUJ, 7-8-1910).

Despite the *Century's* reservations, Frances Duncan's "An Old-Time Carolina Garden" was the lead article of the October, 1910 issue. A full color painting by Anna Whelan Betts, "When Middleton Place was in Its Prime," faced the opening page. Duncan's article is certainly the most thorough and comprehensive of her trilogy and the value of her period documentation can hardly be overestimated. Middleton Place has relied on her plan in its restoration efforts for years, so present day visitors see in part what Frances Duncan was able to reconstruct at the



"Garden of the Nathaniel Russell House, Now Owned by the Sisters of Mercy" – from "Charleston Gardens."

much garden-design there – a person has to know what the garden architect in 1750 was 'driving at' irrespective of what has concealed the original design, and how much this is in her line, you know of course better than I. (FD to RWG, 12-28-1906)

Frances Duncan probably suggested Maxfield





turn of the century.

Duncan began her article with some history of Middleton Place and the estates and plantations along the Ashley and Cooper Rivers. She described the lifestyle of the planter class, noting that Drayton Hall was the only great house to survive the "destruction of 1865" and Middleton Place the only "elaborate gardens"; here, she must have been referring to design rather than horticulture. A short account of the Middleton family and their role in American history followed, at least in part a response to Lily Heyward's concerns. Such material, however, also reflected the deep interest in such subjects in the Colonial Revival era.

Middleton Place escaped the English landscape style that "Kent and Brown were industriously engaged in stamping on" the face of that nation. Duncan stated her belief that Middleton Place substantially reflected the gardens that were designed in 1750. The only exception was the azaleas, introduced, she said, within the previous hundred years, and now overgrown and obscuring the garden's "beautiful distances" and other features. The azaleas greatly complicated her task of determining the original layout of the garden.

Duncan's oral history interviews were probably the source of passages such as this: "For half a mile up the river the bank was terraced; it was half a mile from the house to the entrance-gates; the pleasance is a mile in circumference, and beyond it, in the old days, the forest on the west and north was open for hundreds of acres, with vistas as in the Forest of Fontainebleau."

The article described many of the now familiar features of Middleton Place in detail, for instance, the brilliant placement of the house on axis with the river and the horseshoe-shaped drive. Although her emphasis was on design, she included horticultural comments. "If you stoop and pluck a bit of grass to-day, you find it no mixture of a modern seed-house, but an English tufted sort of two centuries ago. Possibly sheep were allowed to crop the grass, for between this lawn and the gardens is a 'ha-ha'." She also described the use of red cedars along the terraced river bank to mark "important points, as cypresses are used in Italy."

An interesting omission is the lack of any mention of the now well known butterfly lakes at the river's edge. Photographs from around 1920 show that these had silted in so Duncan was not

aware of their presence. She did carefully describe three other "artificial lakes," the long pond, for instance, now called the Reflection Pool.

The 'long lake,' which separates the pleasance from the forest on the west, is a delightful transition from the formal garden to the wild. This is six hundred and fifty feet in length, narrow, rectangular, but of beautiful proportions. The banks are terraced, forest-trees shadow the water on one side, while on the other, the garden-side, oaks are set at regular intervals, shading an azalea-bordered walk. This lake may have been a fish-pond once, for it still harbors excellent trout.

Duncan also remarked on how the colonists' necessary use of native plants helped to preserve the gardens. She admired the magnolias and red cedars, but of course commented as well on exotics such as Middleton's ancient camellias. She



*"Azaleas in the Magnolia Gardens" – from "Magnolia Gardens."*



described too the layout of walks and paths, how they had been designed to offer both enjoyment of the garden and protection from the sun and how plant growth now obscured so many of them. She was certain that there must have been much in the way of garden ornaments such as statuary and benches, although most of this had disappeared by her time.

"An Old-Time Carolina Garden," with its invaluable plan illustrating the various features she described, was Frances Duncan's most significant contribution to the bibliography of South Carolina gardens. But she was not done with her subject.



"A Visit on the Lawn in Olden Time"—from "*Magnolia Gardens*."

The place continued to haunt her, perhaps for more than gardenly reasons. She completed her published works about South Carolina gardens with a garden novel, *Roberta of Roseberry Gardens*, published serially in *The Garden Magazine* from November 1914 to December 1915 and as a book, by Doubleday, Page in 1916.

The garden novel was a phenomenon of the



garden fever era. Popularized by the anonymous literary sensation of 1898, *Elizabeth and Her German Garden*, it stimulated many American women to become gardeners and a surprising number

to write about gardening. As a genre, it also allowed women to discuss matters of importance to them behind the dual screen of fiction and seemingly innocuous garden literature. Frances Duncan, who later stated that all her fiction was autobiographical, used *RRG* to express three important issues in her life: her feelings about the Parsons Nursery; her anxiety about marrying; and her deep interest in Middleton Place. Only the last will concern us here.

Briefly, the story is as follows. A young woman, Roberta, takes a work-study position at a renowned American nursery, Roseberry Gardens. There she meets Paul Fielding, the scion of an old Charleston family with a magnificent but overgrown estate, Paradise Park, on the Cooper River. He has come to the nursery in part because he hopes to establish a nursery at Paradise Park, sell plants to Roseberry Gardens, and raise money to restore the estate. He falls in love with Roberta, who is determined to have a career and not to marry.

Paul and his father invite Roberta and her aunt for an autumn visit to Paradise Park. There, Paul shows Roberta the glories of the old place and shares his dreams for ways in which to restore it. She resists but when he describes how they can run the nursery together she comes to believe she can have her horticultural career and marriage as well.

The value of *RRG* for garden historians is twofold. The novel allowed Duncan to express the depth of her aesthetic and romantic feelings for Middleton Place and to describe it in a more lyrical style than the *Century* article permitted. It also provided her with an opportunity to present the hopes and plans of the rising generation of Charlestonians, who valued their garden heritage and sought to restore it.

The identification of Paradise Park as Middleton Place is based on Duncan's descriptions of the fictional garden, which closely match her words about the real garden, in some cases using the identical phrases.

...Paul planned to take out the trees that, in accordance with the ancient clearing, were superfluous and to reopen the



'Fontainebleau vistas' made by his great-great-grandfather.

They spent many an afternoon in the spacious old gardens: the four-square rose garden, where huge ancient camellias guarded each corner; from that opened a sunken octagonal garden and the herb garden; the flower garden, where the old-fashioned posies had once held carnival....Far more formal was the Magnolia Walk that marked the boundary of the gardens and ended at the Long Pond. Here magnolias, once close clipped, grew straight and tall on either side, forming a walk of gleaming green like a yew walk in an English garden. The long pool was rectangular, shaded by tall oaks that stood back from it, ranged in a row at a decorous distance....(RRG, pp. 234-235)

Her obvious longtime interest in Middleton Place as shown in her *Century* correspondence is also supportive.

The identification of Paul Fielding is more problematical. Was he a real person, a composite of several people Duncan knew or an archetype of young Charleston in 1906? It is also difficult to resist speculating whether Duncan did fall in love in Charleston and whether she might have imagined herself as one day the mistress of Middleton Place and its restoration. A possible candidate for Fielding is J.J. Pringle Smith, Lily Heyward's eventual heir and nineteen years old in 1906, ten years younger than Duncan. It is worth noting that Smith married in 1913 and Duncan in 1914, a man seven years younger than she. In addition, a son and daughter at Magnolia Gardens were the right age and Duncan may have included their hopes for Magnolia in a composite. Until and unless further correspondence comes to light, the identification will not be possible.

Frances Duncan portrayed Paul Fielding – the new generation – as proud of his heritage and eager to explore all opportunities that might enable the land to support the gardens while doing no harm. Dire are the book's warnings about lumbering and phosphate mining which had marred the Charleston area landscape. Roberta begins to understand and share Paul's ideas:

He had gone over his heritage with a



new eye, as if he were a homesteader and it was just-opened government land. He had the soil tested, and studied to find what untried crops might possibly

thrive in that climate....He thought of raising Japanese plums, tea, or indigo like 'little Eliza Pinckney,' of planting mulberry trees and raising silkworms. He turned one acre into experimental plots, holding that the only way to assure oneself conclusively that a crop will or will not grow is to try it....'She sees what I'm driving at,' said Paul.

And she did. Although at first the charm of the gardens, their unlikeness to anything she had known, poignant beauty of the past, had allured her, and had spoken so insistently, to think of the task before the lovely old acres of meeting the exigencies of the present seemed a cruel dislocation. Later she had clearer vision, began to see how the place could meet the conditions and meet them nobly. She began to see what Paul meant to do – to keep the beautiful lines of the old gardens, and yet make them commercially profitable, to restore their beauty of the beloved acres, to keep even the effect of a stately pleasance, and to bring back the old air of well-being and prosperity. The undertaking fascinated her.

So together they measured the old parterre, ploughed it, leaving a grass strip where a path should be, and marked the beds which were to be filled with camellias, set in nursery rows. Together they potted hundreds of infant camellias and with the optimistic arithmetic of youth, and especially youth in agriculture, they reckoned up the proceeds of hypothetical sales which, according to their cheerful reckoning, would in a few years completely clear the plantation of its entanglements. They made thousands of box cuttings from the old hedges. (RRG, pp.231-233)

All of these hopeful plans are to bring back to life one of the country's most beautiful and significant gardens.

Frances Duncan's writing about South Carolina



gardens early in this century serves several purposes for garden historians. She documented conditions in an important period of transition for these gardens. Her work provides evidence of the attention the nation's cultural elite was beginning to give to Southern gardens and the emerging significance of these gardens as national as well as regional cultural resources. Duncan's writing also demonstrates how gardening became a component of the Colonial Revival movement and, finally, portrays a new generation of Charlestonians committed to the preservation and restoration of their garden heritage.

In the end, it would be best to let Frances Duncan tell what Charleston's old gardens meant to her:

Whatever of poetry or romance there is in a man an old garden brings it out and awakens it. Somewhat of the beauty and charm there was in the human life of which it was once a part remains in the garden. The house, long unused, may feel dead and sombre, but in the garden the spirit stays; the belief in loveliness, of which the garden was itself an expression, lingers in the neglected borders and overgrown shrubbery. The appeal of the tiny violets and the fragrant roses is as fresh and poignant as it was a half century before, when their first blossoming was awaited eagerly by lovers long in their graves. It is the imperishableness of this earthly loveliness, fragile as it seems, that brings suddenly into being a dormant belief in other forms of loveliness; the transitory, perishable, and fleeting become the eternal and immortal. That is what an



old garden does to one. (RRG, p. 236) ♣

#### End Notes

1. Mrs. St. Julien Ravenel, *Charleston, The Place and the People* (New York: Macmillan, 1925; first printing, 1906) 505.
2. Frances Duncan, "Charleston Gardens," *Century*, March, 1907, 705-719; "Magnolia Gardens," *Century*, August, 1907, 513-519; "Old-Time Carolina Garden," *Century*, October, 1910, 803-811.
3. *Roberta of Roseberry Gardens*, Doubleday, Page: New York, 1916.
4. *The New York Times Saturday Review of Books*, March 23, 1907, 176.
5. Arthur John, *The Best Years of the 'Century'* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1981), ix.
6. For an account of Frances Duncan's life and work, see: Virginia Lopez Begg, "Frances Duncan: The 'New Woman' in the Garden," *Journal of the New England Garden History Society*, Fall, 1992, 28-35.
7. I wish to express my thanks for permission to quote from the Century Company Records held in the Rare Books and Manuscripts Division at the New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.
8. O. B. Capen, "Great Azalea Garden in the South," *Country Life*, March 1905, 474-479; Wilhelm Miller, "Self-Perpetuating Estate," *Country Life*, January, 1908, 299-302; Wilhelm Miller, "Show Garden of the South," *Country Life*, March, 1908, 495-498.
9. I would like to express my gratitude to Barbara Doyle, historian and research consultant at Middleton Place, for information about the Middleton family and other research assistance.
10. Elizabeth Middleton Heyward, Greenville [SC] to Wilhelm Miller, New York, NY, May, 1906. Middleton Place Foundation.
11. Frances Duncan, Boston, MA to [John] Bennett [Charleston, SC], April 20, [probably 1907], John Bennett Papers, South Carolina Historical Society. Thanks to Barbara Doyle, Middleton Place Foundation, for bringing this letter to my attention.
12. Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1934), 139.

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## OF INTEREST

The proceedings from the 1993 Garden Conservancy conference, "Masters of American Garden Design III: The Modern Garden in Europe and the United States," are now available. The publication includes the following papers: "Maverick Impossible: James Rose and the American Garden" by Dean Cardasis, University of Massachusetts (Amherst); "Spheres, Cones, and Other Least Common Denominators — French

Cubist Gardens Through the Eyes of Fletcher Steele" by Robin Karson; "Modernist Gardens on the 'Edge of the World'" by David Streatfield, University of Washington; and "The Peculiar Garden — The Advent of Modernism in German Garden Design" by Joachim Wolschke-Bulmahn, Dumbarton Oaks. Proceedings may be ordered through the Garden Conservancy, P. O. Box 219, Cold Spring, NY 10516. The cost is \$16 for members and \$18 for non-members, plus a \$2 shipping charge per copy. Call (914) 265-2029 for more information ♣



## *Lawrence Henry is Named President of Brookgreen*



**B**rookgreen Gardens in Murrells Inlet, South Carolina has appointed Colonial Williamsburg's director of museums, Lawrence Henry, as its new president. Henry succeeds Gurdon L. Tarbox Jr., who is retiring after forty years as Brookgreen's chief executive. At Colonial Williamsburg, Henry was responsible for the development and operation of Carter's Grove, the DeWitt Wallace Decorative Arts Gallery, and the Williamsburg home of John D. Rockefeller, Jr. He also coordinated the Williamsburg Garden Symposium, the oldest annual horticulture program in the country. SGHS members who attended our society's most recent annual meeting in Colonial Williamsburg are well acquainted with Larry Henry who served as conference chair and was elected as a member of the board of directors of SGHS.

Brookgreen Gardens stands on the grounds of a former colonial rice plantation. It was established in 1931 as the first public sculpture garden in America by sculptor Anna Hyatt Huntington and husband Archer Huntington. Today, this 9,127-acre garden and wildlife park serves as one of the region's premier cultural and educational institutions ♣

## *Severe Storm Hits Barnsley Gardens*

**O**n June 29th, a violent thunderstorm, with potent bursts of sixty-mile-an-hour winds, leveled more than two dozen trees at historic Barnsley

Gardens in Adairsville, Georgia. Two original white oaks and an ancient red cedar were the most significant losses, according to gardens manager and SGHS

member Steven F. Wheaton. He and his grounds crew have spent a good part of the summer clearing out the once towering oaks that were twisted like corkscrews throughout the property.

Barnsley Gardens surrounds the ruins of the original estate — a never-completed, twenty-six-room Italianate villa begun in 1841 by British cotton magnate Godfrey Barnsley for his wife, Julia. During the mid-nineteenth century, Barnsley planted boxwood, roses, and exotic ornamentals shipped from England. He also built ponds, grottos, and even two large Victorian rockeries. Under its current ownership, the ruins of the mansion and the surrounding thirty-acre garden have undergone an intensive revitalization effort after seventy-five years of neglect ♣

## *A SEARCH FOR INFORMATION*

**J**udith Tankard is preparing a book on landscape architect Ellen Biddle Shipman for publication by Sagapress in association with the Library of American Landscape History. Shipman had many southern commissions in Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia. In order to present a complete project listing, Ms. Tankard would appreciate any information readers might have, especially regarding extant or restored gardens and those open to the public (such as Longue Vue in New Orleans). Contact: Judith B. Tankard, Library of American Landscape History, Inc., 1452 Beacon St., Newton, MA 02168. (617) 965-4167; FAX (617) 965-8067 ♣



## Members in the News



**L**ong-time SGHS member **Catherine Sims** is featured in the August 1994 issue of *Southern Living*, "Sharing Plants With Catherine." Her garden of "passalong" plants in Homewood, Alabama includes the fascinating Turk's Cap (*Malvaviscus arboreus drummondii*), the seeds of which can be obtained by sending a stamped, self-addressed, business-size envelope to: Turk's Cap, Southern Living, P. O. Box 830119, Birmingham, AL 35283.

In June, *Southern Living's* article, "Peace of the Country," featured two other loyal SGHS members, **Wyatt** and **Dorothy Williams** of Orange, Virginia. The woodland garden they have developed

and nurtured since 1937 reflects the handiwork of two prominent landscape architects from Richmond — Ralph Griswold and Charles Gillette. As a past president of the Garden Club of Virginia, Dorothy Wyatt has been an active force in Virginia's gardening scene for many years. Their 400-acre estate has been placed in the Virginia Outdoor Conservancy to be maintained in perpetuity.

SGHS member **J. Anthony Dove** has resigned his position as head of the gardens at Tryon Palace in New Bern, North Carolina. Dove is succeeded by horticulturist and environmental designer Carleton B. Wood, who joins Tryon Palace after working for Morris Arboretum in Philadelphia as well as holding a one-year fellowship at Kew Gardens in England. Dove will assume the directorship of Clark Botanical Garden in Long Island, New York ♣

*Deadline for submission of articles for the Winter Issue of Magnolia is November 1st, 1994.*

Ben G. Page, Jr., *President*

Dr. William C. Welch, *Vice-President*

Flora Ann Bynum, *Secretary-Treasurer*

William Lanier Hunt, *Honorary President*

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