



# Magnolia

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

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## “Long delightful Prospects...” Life in the Garden at Nomini Hall

*Mollie Ridout, Annapolis, Maryland*

Nothing delights a historian more than a primary source, and in the case of Nomini Hall, one of the great eighteenth-century houses of Virginia, we have an excellent one in the journal of Philip Vickers Fithian (1747-1776). Situated overlooking Nomini Creek, a tributary of the Potomac River, Nomini Hall was the home of Robert Carter III (1727/28-1804), grandson of Robert “King” Carter. Once the center from which Colonel Carter managed his far-flung complex of plantations and large population of enslaved people, hired workers, and artisans, the house burned to the ground in 1850. The nineteenth-century farmhouse that replaced it is now gone as well. But Colonel Carter’s house and gardens live on in Fithian’s journal, which was edited by Hunter Dickinson Farish (1897-1945) and first published in 1943.

In 1774 Philip Vickers Fithian was a twenty-seven-year-old graduate of the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University). He was on the cusp of being ordained as a Presbyterian minister and, in order to broaden his experience and avail himself of an income, he took a one-year position serving as the tutor for Colonel Carter’s children. That year he kept a detailed journal that has informed generations of readers. Luckily for us, his observation of the social scene and his enjoyment of the physical environment provide great insight into the uses of an eighteenth-century garden.

Six months into his stay at Nomini Hall, Fithian takes time to write a detailed description of the property. The large and elegant house is built of brick and covered with a lime mortar. It occupies the center of what appears to visitors to be a small village. The corners of the yard are demarked by four buildings, a substantial Coach House, Wash House, School House, and Stable, each about 45’ by 27’ and located about one-hundred yards from

the house. To the East a double avenue of poplar trees stretches three-hundred feet to the main road. Fithian tells us that these “tall, flourishing, beautiful Poplars,” in rows “something wider than the House ... form an extremely pleasant avenue, & at the Road, through them the House appears most romantic, at the same time that it does truly elegant.” (Farish, 81) Additional outbuildings, including the kitchen, a bake house and a dairy, form “a handsome street” to the West of the house. Although the buildings no longer survive, the avenue of Tulip Poplars

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*Many of the original Tulip Poplars still line the drive.*

Photo by Mollie Ridout.

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# CALENDAR

**April 26-28, 2019. 37th Southern Garden History Society Annual Meeting in Birmingham, Alabama.**

Lectures will be held at the Birmingham Botanical Gardens. Meeting headquarters hotel is the Embassy Suites by Hilton.

Visit [www.southerngardenhistory.org](http://www.southerngardenhistory.org)

**April 26-28, 2019. Colonial Williamsburg 73rd Annual Garden Symposium, “Garden Design: Trends & Traditions,”**

mixing tried-and-true traditions with new trends to great effect in a variety of gardens. Visit: [colonialwilliamsburg.com/learn/conference](http://colonialwilliamsburg.com/learn/conference) or call 1-800-603-0948.

**May 2, 2019. “White House Gardens Symposium,”**

hosted by the White House Historical Association and Oak Spring Garden Foundation, featuring the history and development of the White House gardens, specifically the West and East Gardens. Panel discussions led by leading scholars on the legacy of Beatrix Farrand and Bunny Mellon. Historic Decatur House, Washington, DC. Visit: [www.whitehousehistory.org/gardens/register](http://www.whitehousehistory.org/gardens/register)

**May 22-25, 2019. “Detroit as a Cultural Landscape Palimpsest,”** held in 41st Annual Meeting of the Alliance for Historic Landscape Preservation, Detroit, Michigan. Conference themes will address expressions of urbanized ethnicities; political and militarized landscapes; the lasting legacy of sites of industrial production; and issues of urban renewal, urban redesign, innovation, and resilience. Visit: [www.ahlp.org/](http://www.ahlp.org/)

**June 16-September 15, 2019. “Monet: the Late Years,”** an exhibition held at the Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas, focuses on the period when the artist—his life marked by personal loss, deteriorating eyesight, and the threat of surround war—remained close to home to paint the varied elements of his garden at Giverny. Through fifty-two of these gardens paintings, the exhibition traces the evolution of Claude Monet’s practice from 1913, when he embarked on a reinvention of his painting style that led to increasingly bold and abstract works, up to his death in 1926. Visit: <https://www.kimbellart.org/exhibition/monet>

**June 17-21, 2019. American Public Gardens Association Conference, “Thrive Together, Diversity Grows Gardens,”**

Washington, DC. Host gardens include U.S. National Arboretum, the Smithsonian, the pristine garden rooms at Hillwood Estate, and Dumbarton Oaks, and the United States Botanic Garden, one of the oldest botanic gardens in North America. Visit: <https://2019.publicgardens.org/>

**June 23-28, 2019. 23rd Annual Historic Landscape Institute: “Preserving Jefferson’s Gardens and Landscapes.”**

This one-week course uses Monticello’s gardens and landscapes and the University of Virginia as outdoor classrooms to study historic landscape preservation. Visit: [www.monticello.org/hli](http://www.monticello.org/hli)

**September 20-21, 2019. 13th Annual Heritage Harvest Festival at Monticello,**

Charlottesville, VA. Celebrate the agricultural and epicurean legacy of Thomas Jefferson with workshops, lectures, and tomato tastings and family friendly activities. Featuring the 2019 honorary chairs: chef, author, and food activist Alice Waters and Corby Kummer, senior editor and food columnist, *The Atlantic*. Speakers include Peter Hatch, Michael Twitty, Ira Wallace, and many more. Visit: [www.heritageharvestfestival.com](http://www.heritageharvestfestival.com)

**September 26-28, 2019. “Landscape, Race, and Culture: Shaping a World of Color in the American South,” the Restoring Southern Gardens and Landscapes Conference,**

Winston-Salem, NC. Nationally recognized scholars from across the US will convene to discuss the issues of race, culture, and landscape and how these factors formed a complex world of color on the American South. This biennial conference in co-sponsored by the Southern Garden History Society and Wake Forest University. Kofi Boone, ASLA, NC State University presents the Flora Ann Bynum keynote lecture. Speakers include Louis P. Nelson (UVA), Dana E. Byrd (Bowdoin College), Matthew Reeves (James Madison’s Montpelier), Tiffany Moman (TN State U.), Geoffrey Hughes (UNC-CH), Dreck Spurlock Wilson (NOMA), Shaun Spencer-Hester (Anne Spencer Fnd), and many more. Visit: [www.oldsalem.org/events](http://www.oldsalem.org/events)

## “Long delightful Prospects..... (continued from page 1)

(*Liriodendron tulipifera*) still stands.

The setting of the house drew Fithian’s attention and praise from his arrival. Garden manuals of the eighteenth century echo each other in offering advice for the siting of a garden. Essential conditions begin with a wholesome exposure, good earth, and good water. A.J. Dezallier d’Argenville, whose book, *The Theory and Practice of Gardening*, was translated into English in 1728, notes next the importance of “the view and Prospect of a fine Country.” He esteems “...nothing more diverting and agreeable in a Garden, than a fine view, and the Prospect of a noble Country. The pleasure of Seeing, from the end of a Walk or off a Terrass ... a vast Number of Villages, Woods, Rivers, Hills and Meadows, with a thousand other Varieties that make a beautiful Landskip, exceeds all that I can possibly say of it.” (D’Argenville, 13)

While it seems a great distance from the early-eighteenth century in d’Argenville’s native France, to the late-eighteenth century in the Northern Neck of Virginia, we have a splendid witness to these aesthetics. In August of 1774 Fithian describes in his journal:

“a ramble .... first thro’ the Garden ... then ... down the Pastures quite to the River, admiring the Pleasantness of the evening & the delightful Prospect of the River, Hills, Huts on the Summits, low Bottoms, Trees of various Kinds ... Cattle and Sheep feeding some near us & others at a great distance on the sides of the Hills, People, some fishing, others working, & others in the Pasture among the Horses; —the country emphatically in her goodly Variety! I love to walk on these high Hills ... where I can have a long View of many Miles ....” (Farish, 178)

Thus the European tradition of the long view—an appreciation of the natural beauty of long vistas—carries



Robert Carter III family cemetery on the grounds of Nomini Hall, with a successor to the original Catalpa tree.

Photo by Mollie Ridout.

over to the new continent.

The fifth desirable characteristic listed by d’Argenville is “Conveniency of place ... that the House be near some River, for the more easy bringing to it all Necessaries ....” (D’Argenville, 13) Fithian describes the situation of Nomini Hall, “... a high spot of ground in Westmoreland county at the Head of Navigation of the River Nomini...” (Farish, 80) The house stands about a quarter mile from the river, which branches so that it encloses the property on two sides. This location afforded a landing where boats could unload people and goods. It was typical that planters in the eighteenth-century Tidewater oriented their houses towards rivers that provided easier transportation than the highways of the time. But Fithian declares that this location also lends itself to the “... long delightful Prospects of our winding River which we have from the high Hills!” (Farish, 166) He often stands at his bedroom window, on the second floor of the school house, and admires the high craggy banks of the river and the huge hills, some bare, some covered with cedar and pine trees.

Thus situated, Nomini Hall was set off by terracing amidst this undulating estuarine landscape. D’Argenville notes of the construction of terraces that “‘Tis in this the greatest Expence of a Garden consists, and about which

(continued on page 4)



Benjamin Henry Latrobe’s watercolor, “View Down the James River from Mr. Nicholson’s,” 1796, could easily illustrate Philip Fithian’s view from the schoolhouse window.

Latrobe sketchbooks, Maryland Historical Society.

## “Long delightful Prospects. . . . . (continued from page 3)

you ought to take the greatest Care . . .” (D’Argenville, 116) Fithian perceives this subtly disguised effort, noting that the grounds of his employer “discover a delicate and Just Tast, and are the effect of great *Invention, Industry & Expençe.*” (Farish, 44)

Fithian describes the form of the land around the house, a single high terrace, or as he says, “a curious *Terrace*, covered finely with Green turf, & above five foot high with a slope of eight feet, which appears exceeding well to persons coming to the front of the House. . . before the Front Doors is a broad flight of steps of the same Height, & slope of the *Terrace.*” (Farish, 81) The area defined by the Terrace is perfectly level and “designed for a bowling green.”

While the built terrace only involved one “fall,” or change in level, it is clear from his description that the natural contours of the land have been employed to maximize the falling effect and to place the house prominently. Fithian speaks of seeing the house from a neighbor’s six miles away. Even with one fall, Fithian is conscious of the great effort that went into creating this landscape.

Moving from the long prospect to the “charming Landskips,” in Fithian’s words, let us consider the flats, as the surfaces of the terraces were known. Frequently but not always, terraces near the house were laid out in “parterres.” From the Latin word for “divide,” parterres were sharply demarcated level divisions of ground that, by the eighteenth century, featured lawn areas, flower beds and small hedges.

The level area around the house is “laid out in rectangular walks which are paved with Brick, & covered over with burnt Oyster-shells.” (Farish, 81) Fithian refers to “Platts,” the flat beds laid out on the terrace. He also uses the term “Area” to designate a part of the property near the house yet large and open enough for fruit trees. The four parts of the property he names are the Area, the Poplar Walk, the Garden, and the Pasture.

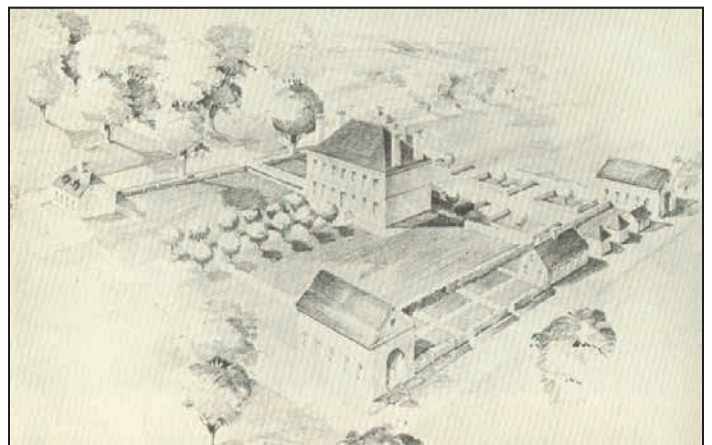
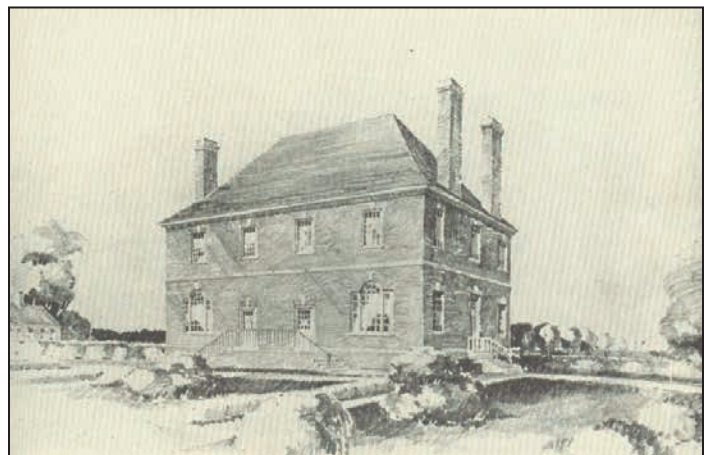
But best of all is Fithian’s record of life and activity in the garden. Although not a gardener himself, Fithian exhibits a bit of a schoolboy crush on his employer’s wife, Frances Tasker Carter (1738-1787). She is deeply involved in the management of the estate and takes great pleasure in all aspects of country life. Fithian quotes her as saying that “to live in the Country, and take no pleasure at all in Groves, fields, or Meadows; nor in Cattle, Horses, & domestic Poultry, would be a manner of life too tedious to endure.” (Farish, 32) Fithian takes every opportunity to walk about the grounds with her and question her on all he sees. Fortunately for us, he records such conversations in detail.

Mrs. Carter is mistress of the garden and the grounds.

She directs the gardeners. James Gregory, who is employed by the Colonel at half a Crown daily wages and referred to as the gardener, comes in seasonally to oversee and instruct the two “Negro slaves,” who are “gardeners by trade,” and devote their full time “when the weather will anyhow permit it” to work in the garden. By the third week of February “they are beginning to work in the Garden with vigor.” (Farish, 67) Mrs. Carter appears to be knowledgeable about grafting, growing plants from root division, and other aspects of gardening. “After school, I had the honour of taking a walk with Mrs. Carter through



A watercolor sketch of Nomini Hall shortly before it burned in 1850, by E. Maund. From Thomas Tileston Waterman’s *Mansions of Virginia: 1706-1776*, UNC Press, 1946.



Sketches reconstructing Nomini Hall and its grounds, based on Fithian’s description, from Waterman’s *Mansions of Virginia: 1706-1776*.

the Garden—it is beautiful, & I think uncommon to see at this Season peas all up two and three Inches—We gathered two or three cowslips in full-Bloom; & as many violets—the English Honey Suckle is all out in green & tender Leaves—Mr. Gregory is grafting some figs—Mrs. Carter shewed me her Apricot-Grafts; Asparagus Beds &c.” (Farish, 78)

Fithian comments that she has “polite and full answers” to his questions about plants in the garden. He notes lettuce, peas, and asparagus in the vegetable garden. He comments on the beauty of the region as the extensive orchards come into bloom, including apricots, peaches, plums, and cherries—“the country begins to put on her Flowery Garment, & appear in *gaiety*.” (Farish, 90) Exotic fruits include figs and pomegranates in more protected areas. Strawberries, gooseberries, barberries, and sloes are gathered in season. Persimmons grow wild. The Carter daughters gather cowslips and violets. One day they present him with a nosegay of Jessamine. They also gather flowers of the prickly pear, a native cactus, and he admits that he “was diverted, tho it was a little cruel.” (Farish, 123)

The garden’s role as a pleasure ground, a place to take exercise, and an opportunity to escape from the busy household is well documented by Fithian. He frequently notes his “turns,” his “grand and agreeable walks,” and his rambles through the garden. Sometimes this is an opportunity to read, study, or practice sermons by himself; sometimes an opportunity for a melancholy remembrance of the home and the girl he left behind in New Jersey. Often he seems to use a walk through the garden as a way to decompress after he dismisses school for the day. And he particularly enjoys an occasional opportunity to learn more about the garden from Mrs. Carter. At times the garden is the scene of an entertaining romp with the young daughters of the family. It is the custom of the family to walk for half an hour each evening through the Garden and that means in the company of “three brisk mischievous Girls.” As the summer weather grows more oppressive, walks are put off until the sun sets. One particularly hot day in July he writes: “The Afternoon extremely hot I could not leave my Room til the Sun had hid his flaming Place behind the Earth—then I walked through the Garden—the whole Family seem to be now out Black, White, Male, Female, all enjoying the cool evening.” (Farish, 145)

For Colonel Robert Carter, the garden affords a sentimental and solemn role. Several times the family discusses their distaste for churchyard cemeteries, which go unkempt and are often disturbed by wandering livestock. The great families of the Northern Neck instead maintain family graveyards on their own property. Colonel Carter in fact has interred his father, Robert Carter II, the builder of Nomini Hall, in the garden. There he has planted with his own hands and is nourishing a Catalpa tree in his father’s



Photo by Mollie Ridout.

*Figs were among the many fruits, vegetables, and flowers in the garden at a Nomini Hall.*

memory. He states his intention to build his own coffin, to use as a storage chest until it be put to its proper use, and asks to be laid under a shady tree without a stone, so that he might “sleep in peace and obscurity.” But Mrs. Carter begs that she might at least have a stone, if only marked with her name, for the sake of posterity. Indeed, the remaining feature of this landscape is the family cemetery.

Philip Vickers Fithian gives us one of the most complete contemporary portraits of a garden in the eighteenth-century Tidewater. Its aspect, dimensions, plantings, and management are faithfully recorded. But, in addition, he enlivens the garden with its familiar inhabitants. Besides its utilitarian role, the garden at Nomini Hall clearly afforded recreational use and social connectedness for the family and in fact, even brought together very disparate members of the plantation community on occasion. It provided a place for contemplation, study, and introspection. And it also figured in a family’s sense of identity and belonging, its recognition of roots and continuity as one generation honors those who have departed and contemplates its own passing.

*Mollie Ridout, former Director of Horticulture at Historic Annapolis, Inc., is secretary of the Southern Garden History Society. This paper is the third in a three-part series on falling gardens of the Chesapeake. See: Magnolia vol. XXIV, no. 4, fall 2011, “A Chesapeake Falling Garden: Landon Carter’s Sabine Hall,” and vol. XXIX, no. 1, winter 2016, “An Elegant Seat: Caring for the Gardens at Mount Airy.” The author wishes to thank Kenneth M. McFarland, former director of education at Stratford Hall and honorary board member of SGHS, who provided invaluable assistance throughout the development of these papers.*

## References

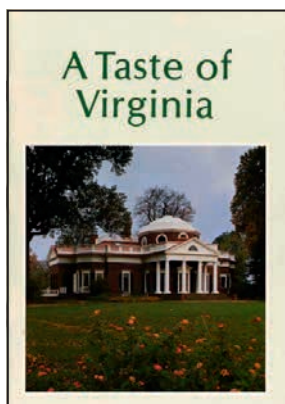
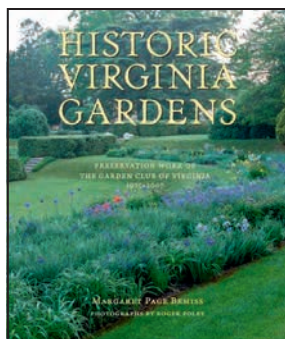
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# Margaret Page Bemiss

## An Appreciation by Davyd Foard Hood

Margaret Page Bemiss, author of *Historic Virginia Gardens: Preservation Work of the Garden Club of Virginia, 1975-2007*, and a recipient of the Southern Garden History Society's Certificate of Merit, died at her home in Richmond on Monday, 15 October 2018, at the age of 85. The Certificate of Merit was presented to her in Richmond on 24 September 2010, during the fall board meeting, in recognition of her scholarship, her writing on Virginia garden history, and contributions as a member of the Restoration Committee of the Garden Club of Virginia. She also was a co-editor of *A Taste of Virginia*, the cookbook of the James River Garden Club, which was originally published in 1980, and reissued in a revised edition in 2018 as *A Taste of Virginia: Through the Garden Gate*.

With the publication of *Historic Virginia Gardens* in 2009, Mrs. Bemiss joined the century-long roster of garden historians in Virginia, several of whom, like her, were members of the James River Garden Club, of which she also served as president. This small distinguished group had its origin in the publication of *Historic Gardens of Virginia* by the James River Garden Club in 1923 and the pioneering role of Edith Tunis Sale (1876-1932) as its editor. Her work was soon joined by that of two others, whose place in Virginia garden history is also storied. In 1929 Mrs. Andrew H. Christian and Mrs. William R. Massie compiled the *Descriptive Guide Book of Virginia's Old Gardens* as a handbook for the first annual garden tour sponsored in 1929, 29 April—10 May, by the Garden Club of Virginia. These tours, soon identified as Historic Garden Week, have continued to the present with the 2019 tour, 27 April—4 May, celebrating the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that now legendary event. Frances Archer Christian (1864-1938) and Susanne Williams Massie (1861-1952) quickly revised and expanded their guidebook, and in 1930 saw into publication a second important compendium, *Homes and Gardens in Old Virginia*, which immediately found an honored place beside Mrs. Sale's *Historic Gardens of Virginia*. Each enjoyed reprinting(s).

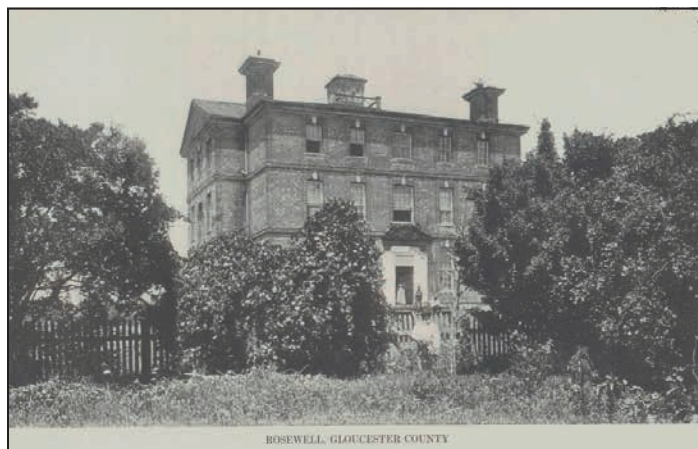


In 1949, when a new edition of *Homes and Gardens in Old Virginia* was considered, Virginia Christian Claiborne (1894-1960) and Ella Williams Buek Smith (1888-1974), daughters of Mesdames Christian and Massie, respectively, succeeded their mothers and were joined as co-editors by Caroline Pickrell Strudwick (1893-1976). The revised edition of *Homes and Gardens in Old Virginia* was published in 1950 and featured a number of important twentieth-century gardens, including those at Nordley, Milburne, and the Samuel Merrifield Bemiss House on Rothesay Road, in Richmond, at Lochiel in Orange, and gardens in Colonial Williamsburg, among others. In 1962, when another edition of *Homes and Gardens in Old Virginia* was issued, the role of the late Virginia Christian Claiborne was taken up by her daughter, Frances Claiborne Guy (1921-2016), who collaborated with Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Strudwick. Mrs. Guy had the singular distinction of being a third generation garden historian in Richmond's Christian family.



The fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Garden Club of Virginia in 1920 was celebrated in 1970 with the publication of *Follow the Green Arrow: The History of the Garden Club of Virginia, 1920-1970*. Written by Christine Hale Martin (1910-1983), a member of the Gloucester Garden Club, its pages included the text of the paperbound history of the club's first decade written by Maud Carter Clement (1879-1969) of Chatham.

Next in date, in 1975, came *Historic Virginia Gardens: Preservations by the Garden Club of Virginia*. Written by Dorothy Hunt Williams (1914-2005), a member



Rosewell Plantation in Gloucester County, Virginia, before it burned in 1916. Photo published in *Historic Virginia Homes and Churches*, 1915.

of the Dolley Madison Garden Club, of Orange, it is a compilation of the earliest restorations undertaken and supported by the Garden Club of Virginia. *Follow the Green Arrow, Volume II*, a history of the Garden Club of Virginia during its third quarter-century, from 1970 to 1995, was published in 1997. It represents the work of a committee of club officers and leaders, of whom Charlotte Taylor Massie (1917-2000), a member of the Tuckahoe Garden Club and the long-time editor (1965-1993) of the guidebook for Historic Garden Week in Virginia, was a critical contributor.

While Margaret Page Bemiss was born the year after Edith Tunis Sale's death on 21 August 1932, and she was but a girl in her fifth year, when Frances Archer Christian died on 24 October 1938, she would come to value their writings and those of the others mentioned here, and enjoy their collegiality.

Born in Richmond on 4 May 1933, the daughter of Rosewell Page Jr. (1902-1988) and Madge Wickham Page (1907-1993), Margaret Reid Page grew up at Oakland in Hanover County. Oakland, a plantation of the intermarried Nelson and Page families, and Oakland, the house, were imbued with history and traditions that found their expression in the "Plantation Tradition" writings of Thomas Nelson Page (1853-1922), particularly his *In Ole Virginia* of 1887. Thomas Nelson Page, the son of John and Elizabeth Burwell Nelson Page, was born at Oakland and grew up in the company of his brothers, Frank Page (1849-1918), later an Episcopal priest, and Rosewell Page (1858-1939). The dormered one-and-a-half story house in which he was born burned in 1898 and Thomas Nelson Page rebuilt it on the same foundations and along the same lines.

In time, with his service as ambassador to Italy, 1913-1919, and residence in Washington, DC, Oakland became the residence of Rosewell Page Sr. and his family, and was next the home of his son and namesake, Margaret's father. Father, son, and a grandson, Margaret's younger brother, all bore Rosewell as their given name, an honorific for the great Gloucester County mansion built, from about 1725, by their ancestor, Mann Page I (1691-1730), and completed by his son Mann Page II. (The brick walls of Rosewell, which burned in 1916, survive today as a splendid ruin. It has long been considered the largest house of colonial Virginia.)

Educated at St. Catherine's School and Bryn Mawr College, Margaret Reid Page was married 25 June 1953 to FitzGerald Bemiss (1922-2011), the son of Samuel Merrifield Bemiss (1894-1966) and Doreen FitzGerald Bemiss (1897-1982). He was educated at St. Christopher's School, Woodberry Forest, and the University of Virginia. A member of the Virginia House of Delegates from 1955 to 1959 and the Virginia State Senate from 1960 to 1967, Mr. Bemiss was highly regarded for a "life of distinguished service to his family, his community, his

state and his nation." These roles and his contributions are noted in the obituary published in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, following his death on 7 February 2011, and the tribute written by Jeff Schapiro. Among these his work as a conservationist, his chairmanship of the Virginia Outdoor Recreation Study Commission and the Virginia Commission on Outdoor Recreation, proved the most influential. He contributed an afterword, acknowledging the distance yet to go, to *Conserving the Commonwealth: The Early Years of the Environmental Movement in Virginia* written by Margaret T. Peters and published in 2008 by the University of Virginia Press.

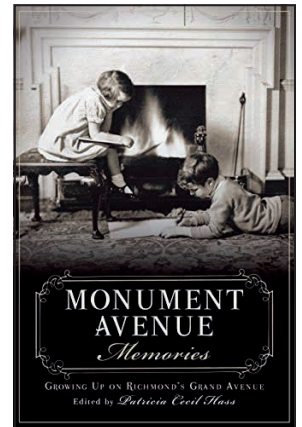
In the area of conservation, as in much of his life, FitzGerald Bemiss' commitments complemented those of his wife. These were treated in like fashion in her obituary in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* on 17 October 2018, which celebrated her work of many years on the restoration of Virginia's historic gardens and landscapes, fundraising for Sheltering Arms Hospital, and support of Virginia Commonwealth University at which she became a student in mid-life, a graduate in 1978, and a decade-long member of its Board of Visitors in Virginia. After his diagnosis with Parkinson's Disease, and the difficult years that followed, research and treatment options became another shared cause; they made an inaugural gift of one-million dollars to the Virginia Commonwealth University Parkinson's and Movement Disorders Center.

A final shared effort occurred with the publication of *Monument Avenue Memories:*

*Growing Up On Richmond's Grand Avenue* in 2013. Edited by Patricia Cecil Hass the paperbound book features the memoirs of childhood days among friends by a dozen Richmonders who grew up in townhouses lining the blocks of 1800-2300 Monument Avenue, between the statue of Robert E. Lee at Allen Avenue and that of Jefferson Davis at Davis Avenue. Margaret

Page Bemiss wrote the forward, recounting the history of the boulevard, its statues, and the families whose houses overlooked its tree-lined greenswards. Her husband's account of growing up at 1811 Monument Avenue with his sister Cynthia (1929-1974) appears first of the twelve reminiscences. A childhood photograph of "Gerry" and Cynthia Bemiss, at ease in front of the living room fireplace at 1811 appears on the front cover of *Monument Avenue Memories*.

[Editor's Note: Davyd Foard Hood wrote the letter of recommendation for the award of the Certificate of Merit to Mrs. Bemiss.]



# Our Woodland Oasis in Birmingham

By Louise Agee Wrinkle, Birmingham, Alabama

## **A Little Background on Birmingham**

Such a new city as Birmingham, having only been incorporated in 1871, cannot claim the history that belongs to such mature settlements as Mobile, Montgomery, or Huntsville, Alabama. This youngster missed the Civil War, but as soon as coal, iron, and limestone—the essentials of iron and steel production—were discovered in close proximity, a rapid industrial growth produced what became known as the Magic City.

Urban development started in the vicinity of the steel mills, beginning with Elyton, Pratt City, and Bessemer. The logical place for the new Birmingham, or “the Pittsburgh of the South,” was Jones Valley, nestled between Shades Mountain and a gigantic mass of iron ore aptly known as Red Mountain. Birmingham was fortunate to benefit from the expertise of Warren H. Manning, originally of the Olmsted Bros. Boston office, but soon a power in his own right. According to *Warren H. Manning: Landscape Architect and Environmental Planner*:

“Warren Manning (1860-1938) was one of the twentieth century’s most influential landscape architects and planners. Building on the social and environmental principles of his mentors at the Olmsted firm, he significantly enlarged the imaginative scope of twentieth-century landscape architecture and city planning. Manning was the first landscape practitioner to envision regional and national planning initiatives to control transportation, utility, and natural resource systems, and he was the first to establish a national practice based on principles of environmental design.”

Manning advised local visionary and developer Robert Jemison, Jr. to protect and maintain the wild beauty of the land. After laying out the city on relatively flat land, Manning designed Highland Avenue to wind around the foothills of Red Mountain, while leaving designated pockets of green parks on the North, or lower side. The first of the careful developments in the early 1900s was called Avondale, then Redmont, which was soon followed in the 1920s by Mountain Brook. Rather than leveling hills and filling valleys and imposing grids of uniform blocks and streets, Manning’s landscape plan respected the mountains, valleys, streams, and flood plains.

## **Our Woodland Oasis on Beechwood Drive**

In 1938 my father built a house for his family in Mountain Brook on Beechwood Road. We were in undeveloped territory, in Jefferson County, since the City of Mountain Brook was not incorporated until 1942. When we were children, we had few neighbors and my sister, Kitty, and I were free to roam on foot or by bicycle for miles around. We explored Shades Creek and the Old Mill, which was built as a tea-house attraction for potential residential clients to stop and enjoy the beauty of this new suburb.

My sister and I were fortunate to grow up in this special place. My parents enjoyed living at 2 Beechwood Road until their deaths in the mid-1980s. My husband, John, and I bought out Kitty’s interest in the property and proceed to make changes in the house and grounds to suit contemporary living.

We were extremely fortunate in the talented advisors critical to these changes who became known as “The Committee:” Dick Pigford, an architect who reinvigorated a fifty-year-old house with new life and modern conveniences; Beaty Hanna, the head of Landscape Services who provided landscaping expertise; Norman Johnson, whose genius made the mostly uncultivated landscape into one gladly shared with visitors; John McNabb, a talented stone mason who contributed much to the property. To make this place accessible, “the Committee” worked together to lay paths and to build stone walls, benches, and bridges to enable us to get from one place to another and to enjoy the entire property. These improvements all have a natural look, settling in to the landscape, so that they are not easily recognizable as man-made additions and look as if they have been here always.

Minimalism is alive and well at 2 Beechwood Drive. I prefer to leave things as they are and try to let the land speak to reveal its preferences as to treatment. My aim is for things to look as if they had been here originally without man’s interference. Many consider the familiar Four Seasons or Pan with his magic flute as necessary decorations for the well-appointed garden. However, I can appreciate the natural sculpture of an ancient, craggy hawthorn tree that has been here since before any of us arrived. The single statue I have here is St. Fiacre, who remains from my Mother’s day and I feel is appropriate.

Most of us want a maintenance-free landscape, and a little “benign neglect” is often the best advice to follow. The right plant in the right place usually works but determining that “rightness” sometimes takes some trial and error. Careful selection of plants that can



take care of themselves and are not subject to insects and disease make maintenance easier than coddling weaklings. Natives are often sturdier than exotics, but I was greedy enough to want some non-natives as well. And exotics, when transplanted to a new home without their natural enemies, can sometimes become thugs.

As 2018 approached, I realized that soon we would have been here for thirty years. Usually landscapers plan for families to live in a certain location for no more than fifteen years, but we have been here for twice that time. I thought I should create some record of my time here for my children and grandchildren and that some gardeners interested in natural gardens would find another's experiences enlightening. Thus, I came to write book, *Listen to the Land: Creating a Woodland Oasis*, and while organizing my thoughts about gardening, I became aware of how closely my design philosophy adhered to that of the planners of Mountain Brook. They recognized the natural beauty of the rough terrain here at the foot of the Appalachians and strove to preserve the mountains, bluff, and streams in this unspoiled territory. They wanted to manage it as little as possible, just as I have endeavored to maintain the wild, untamed topography of my land.

Photographs of my property from the time we arrived in 1938 reveal what appears to be first growth timber of usual Alabama species: pines, tulip poplars, sourwoods, dogwoods, hawthorns, sweet gums, and evergreen magnolias. Those individuals surviving storms and other disasters have developed over the years into magnificent giants. They cast shade on the majority of the property, so growing roses or tomatoes is out of the question. But finding shade-loving plants other than ferns and hostas can be a delightful puzzle. Add to these familiar stalwarts some native moisture-loving plants and you can populate the borders of your brook or pond.

After many years here, I decided that I needed a toolshed on the North side of the property, so the earlier "Committee" gathered again - alas minus Beaty Hanna - and we designed a potting shed to be a terminus to the cutting garden where I could overwinter tender plants and start new ones. A stone wall forms the side of the shed and stands as the end of the cutting garden. The potting shed fits gently into the side of the hill, needing no auxiliary heat in winter.

Another advantage of the potting shed is that it provides shelter for the Billygoat, a big machine like a rolling mower, which vacuums leaves and debris, chips them, and handily readies them for the compost pile.

Previously the Billygoat had lived in the basement and was only used rarely because it was a struggle to get it out and use it where it was needed.

As time has gone on, excess growth has sometimes dictated changing or replacing of plants. For years we stumped plant nuts with identification of *Daphniphyllum macropodum*, or False Daphne in a very prominent place in the entrance court. We began with a pair, but as usually happens, they did not grow uniformly, and one succumbed to some malaise. Finally, the remaining one outgrew its space and had

to be removed. By that time, I had been introduced to what has become certainly one of my favorite plants: evergreen dogwood, or *Cornus capitata*. So now I ignore my own advice about pairs and have a couple of youngsters waiting to show their stuff next spring. They have one of the few sunny spots where I hope they will be happy.

Again, when trees die, are removed, or fall, their demise results in providing a new source of sunlight. Profuse bloom from a large native azalea was the reward

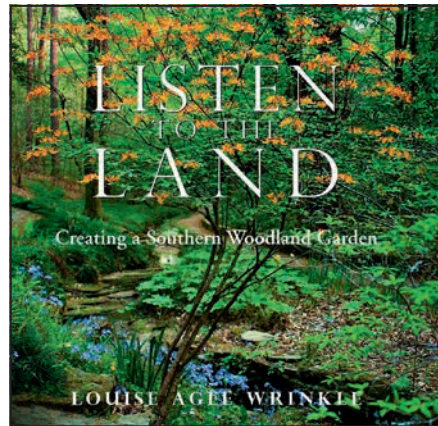
for losing a mature water oak nearby. Likewise, I hope the recent removal of a gigantic leaning pine in tornado alley will give the Davidia, or Dove Tree, in place for thirty years without bloom, the sun and incentive to show off its dramatic bracts, which give it the name Handkerchief Tree.

It is more fun to act while creating landscape features than to react and try to maintain what has been done. Initially we were creating order out of chaos by setting in paths, steps, walls, bridges, and that was fun. Now most of that work has been done, and we are mainly responsible for maintenance. Most of the interest here comes from permanent planting, some deciduous, like crabapples, quince and Japanese maples, and many evergreens, such as boxwood, American Holly, evergreen dogwood, and hemlock.

Spring explodes in the sunken garden with white tulips to accompany blooming crabapple trees while yellow and blue pansies dance in the cutting garden. Green-veined white caladiums replace the tulips for summer and provide some cooling thoughts with green veins snaking through their large white leaves. Later in the season zinnias and dahlias provide cut flowers for the house during summer and fall.

It is hard to realize but thirty years have gone by since moving back to Beechwood Road. I have slowed in energy and stamina, but I am still devoted to maintaining this place and wonder what will become

(continued on page 10)



## Our Woodland Oasis.....(continued from page 9)

of it in the future. Plans for preservation are discussed and considered but not finalized. As we welcome April, I look forward to the members of the Southern Garden History Society exploring this special woodland oasis in Mountain Brook.



Louise Agee Wrinkle was born and raised in Birmingham, Alabama, in an environment of unspoiled woods and streams. Other than her years at Wellesley College in Massachusetts, Converse College in South Carolina, and the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, she has lived her entire life just outside of Birmingham—most of it on the property that she has cultivated for the last thirty years.

For more than thirty-five years she has been an

## Book Review

*Shades of Green: My Life As The National Trust's Head of Gardens, Negotiating change – care, repair, renewal*, by John Sales | Unicorn Publishing Group | 336 pages, hardcover | ISBN-10: 191160418X; ISBN-13: 978-1911604181 | 2018, List price \$37.95

As Anna Pavord writes in the foreword to *Shades of Green*, “John Sales’s long reign as Head of Gardens at the National Trust gives his writing a particular and unusual resonance.” It also makes for fascinating reading. Born in 1934 in Hammersmith, Sales readily acknowledges “I have enjoyed a fortunate life, professionally and personally.” Readers of *Shades of Green* will also find it enviable.

Early on he saw a life in horticulture, and as a teenager he worked in a commercial nursery and college greenhouses at Swanley, Kent. After a short period in National Service and further horticultural study and work experience, John Sales was accepted into the two-year Certificate Course at Kew in 1956. He simultaneously sought a National Diploma in Horticulture and secured it in 1957, before completing the Kew program in 1958. That same year, following his marriage and a stint at the Ealing Parks Department, he began a twelve-year tenure in horticultural education at Writtle College near Chelmsford, eventually becoming a senior lecturer.

The die was cast in 1970 when he saw an advertisement for the position of “Horticulturist, assistant to the gardens adviser” at the National Trust. He applied for the

active and distinguished member of The Garden Club of America (GCA), serving as Chairman of its Horticulture Committee, on the Executive Committee, and as a recognized Horticulture Judge for GCA and other flower shows. She has received numerous honors and awards for her service, culminating in the GCA’s national Achievement Medal in 2001 in recognition of outstanding achievement, in both creative vision and ability, and in the interpretation and furtherance of GCA’s mission. She was a Founding Board Member of the Garden Conservancy, whose mission is to preserve exceptional American Gardens and landscapes for the education and inspiration of the public. She has dedicated numerous years of service as a board member to both The Birmingham Botanical Gardens and the Aldridge Gardens in Hoover, Alabama.

position, was accepted, and in January 1971 began his work at the Trust as assistant to Graham Stuart Thomas (1909-2003). Graham Stuart Thomas is better known to most of us as the prolific, highly readable, and respected author of gardening and horticultural books, beginning with *The Old Shrub Roses* of 1955. In 1973 John Sales succeeded Mr. Thomas as the Chief Gardens Adviser, a position renamed as Head of Gardens, and served in this role until retiring in 1998.

*Shades of Green*, as the book’s subtitle aptly states, is John Sales’s engaging firsthand account of his stewardship of the gardens held in the National Trust over a quarter-century. Opening this life-story with an introduction, he goes on to address his work at fifty estate and country-house gardens grouped under chapter titles that reflect his address of the particular demands and opportunities he faced at each. This number includes well-known gardens, including Ickworth, Stourhead, Prior Park, Plas Newydd, Mount Stewart, Nymans, Erddig, Biddulph Grange, Hidcote, Sissinghurst, and Studley Royal, and others whose names are not on the tip of everyone’s tongue, but of no less interest to the reader. As the third part of the book’s title indicates, these twenty-five years as Head of Gardens required a range of efforts and responses, “Negotiating change – care, repair, (and) renewal,” each tailored to the character of place. All occurring in a period of rising professionalism and steadily evolving, likewise rising, scholarship in garden and landscape history, of which, and to which, John Sales’s work contributed. His, indeed, were blessed days.

Davyd Foard Hood  
Isinglass  
Vale, North Carolina



# The Passing of David Austin and Liz Druitt

The rose world has lost two significant figures in recent months. Prolific British rose breeder and celebrated author David Austin, who over the course of fifty years developed the popular “English-style Roses,” died December 18, 2018, at the age of 92. His long career involved successfully hybridizing historic, nineteenth-century favorites with modern repeat-blooming cultivars, to create varieties prized for fragrance and flower form. The nursery and plant center he created in 1983 contains a renowned collection of more than two-hundred roses and by the beginning of the twenty-first century the David Austin Roses Limited brand was probably the most successful in the world. His notable and classic books include *The Heritage of the Rose* (1988), *David Austin the English Roses* (1993), and *Shrub Roses and Climbing Roses* (1999).

Many Southern Garden History Society members are especially touched by the untimely loss of acclaimed rosarian, author, designer, and long-time Texas Rose Rustler Liz Druitt, who died March 19, 2019. Liz was an extraordinary human being, beloved for her passion for roses and gardening and all things beautiful, her wickedly quirky humor and unique personality, her inspired way with words, her shock of wavy red hair, and her cherished Rhodesian Ridgeback dogs, who often traveled with her. With Antique Rose Emporium’s Michael Shoup, she co-authored *Landscaping with Antique Roses* (1992) and she later published *The Organic Rose Garden* (1996), still a much treasured reference in our libraries. She contributed numerous articles in *Southern Living*, *Fine Gardening*,

*Flower and Garden*, and *Horticulture* magazines and hosted “The New Garden,” an environmentally-oriented gardening series on PBS. Her lead article in the spring 1994 issue of *Magnolia*, “Cherchez

le ‘Musk,’” remains a favorite account of the rescue of the true Musk Rose, a parent of the Noisette class of roses. She ends the story as only Liz could:

“Breeders of modern roses are coming to recognize the vigor and beauty of older kind, but rose breeding is a long, slow business and every old rose that gets bulldozed is not only a loss to gardens now but a loss to the gene pool for the roses of the future. On a personal level, simply by growing a rose variety and keeping it from extinction makes a contribution to the conservation of existing beauty, and, unlike whale-saving, you get to enjoy your noble work in the intimacy of your own garden. It’s even possible that the foundling rose rescued from the teeth of the backhoe or collected from a cemetery on the verge of ‘perpetual care’ will turn out to be an identifiable and historically important variety, such as the ancient Musk Rose.”



Photo by Malcolm Manners.

Liz Druitt (wearing sunglasses) surrounded by Pam Smith, Stephen Scanniello, and Connie Hilker.

## Virginia Hart Retires

By John Sykes, Society President

SGHS Administrator Virginia Hart will retire on May 30, 2019. For fourteen years, Virginia has been the consummate professional guiding the Society’s Directors and assisting our members. Managing a part-time, volunteer board and a membership scattered across the South and points beyond has been no easy task. For those of us who have had the privilege to work closely with Virginia, we know how much the Society has benefitted from her guidance, practicality, patience, and wisdom.

Former SGHS President Jeff Lewis believes: “The contributions of Virginia Hart cannot be overstated. Like a blessing, Virginia came along at just the right time, and SGHS is a better and more professional society because of her.” When Flora Ann Bynum died unexpectedly in March 2006, the leadership of then President Mary Ann Pickens and others guided the Society to Virginia Hart, who made sense and order out

of our membership records.

Society secretary Mollie Ridout knows how well Virginia helped the SGHS: “She moved this organization into the twenty-first century despite

our bent for times gone by. Our future is brighter for all that’s she’s done.” SGHS Treasurer Gail Griffin adds that “Virginia has counseled us all to ensure that the Society remains strong and able to fulfill its mission.

Part of what made Virginia’s working relationship with the Society meaningful was her deep affection for Flora Ann Bynum. Virginia has honored the extraordinary legacy of one of our founders by her own significant contributions to SGHS. At the Annual Meeting in Birmingham, the Board of Directors passed a unanimous resolution honoring Virginia and presented her with a special gift in grateful appreciation for her service to the Society.



Virginia Hart.



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## Awards and Scholarships

The *Flora Ann Bynum Medal* is awarded to recipients who have rendered outstanding service to the Society. Nominations may be made at any time by any member.

The *William Lanier Hunt Award* recognizes members, non-members, and/or organizations that have made an exceptional contribution to the fields closely aligned with the goals of the Society. Nominations may be made by any member.

The title *Honorary Director* (Board of Directors) may be bestowed on individuals who have rendered exceptional service and made significant contributions to the Society.

The *Certificate of Merit* is presented to a member or non-member whose work has advanced the mission and goals of the Society.

Society *Scholarships* assist students in attending the Society's annual meeting and are awarded to bona fide students enrolled in college and university majors relevant to the mission and goals of the Society and to new professionals in the field.

*Details, requirements, and directions for submitting applications are posted on the SGHS website: [www.southerngardenhistory.org](http://www.southerngardenhistory.org). For those without internet access, a copy of this document can be mailed. Contact Virginia Hart, SGHS Administrator.*

## Annual Membership Dues

The society's membership year is from *August 1—July 31*.  
 Membership categories:

<i>Benefactor</i>	<i>\$500 and above*</i>
<i>Patron</i>	<i>\$250</i>
<i>Sustainer</i>	<i>\$125</i>
<i>Institution or Business</i>	<i>\$100</i>
<i>Joint</i>	<i>\$60</i>
<b><i>(two individuals living in the same household)</i></b>	
<i>Individual</i>	<i>\$40</i>
<i>Student</i>	<i>\$15</i>

*\*Contact the membership coordinator if you would like to pay more than \$500 via credit card.*

For more membership information, contact:  
 Virginia Hart, SGHS Administrator  
 Post Office Box 15752  
 Winston-Salem, North Carolina 27113  
 Phone (336) 770-6723

Email: [membership@southerngardenhistory.org](mailto:membership@southerngardenhistory.org)

*Memberships can now be made electronically on our website!*  
[www.southerngardenhistory.org](http://www.southerngardenhistory.org)

*Deadline for submitting articles for the next issue of Magnolia is June 30, 2019.*

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