



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

Magnolia

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Cereusly Mysterious: Eudora Welty's Night-Blooming Cereus Club

By: Jessica Russell, *Eudora Welty House & Garden, Jackson, Mississippi*

What would incite you to march up, long after nightfall, to the pitch-black porch of a stranger or even a friend, carrying (of all things), a handful of matches? For a twenty-something Eudora Welty and her talented band of merrymakers, it simply took the promise of a flower. Long before becoming a Pulitzer Prize-winning literary icon, Welty and her creative companions of Jackson, Mississippi, entertained themselves as the “Night-Blooming Cereus Club.” (Their motto: Don’t take it cereus, life’s too mysterious.)¹

Throughout the Great Depression and the trials of the years to come, their late-night jaunts to see the elusive inflorescence of *Epiphyllum oxypetalum* enlivened many a small-town night, and those adventures would go on to inspire significant scenes in Welty’s literature—all the while preserving a peculiar Southern tradition that took root at least a century before.

This tradition, of course, is the part-social, part-horticultural phenomenon in which proud cereus growers would announce an imminent bloom in the newspaper, often in the form of an open invitation for friend and stranger alike to converge on their porch to witness the spectacle late at night. (It is not uncommon for cereus flowers to start blooming around 10 p.m. or later.)

Beyond pure horticultural interest, such occasions made a fine excuse for onlookers to socialize while the flowers slowly opened in the background. In Mississippi newspapers alone, cereus references date back to the 1820s²—more than a century before Welty and her young companions, bemused by the tradition and craving a little diversion, made a point of frequently attending these events. By 1934, they would start calling themselves the Night-Blooming Cereus Club.³

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Photo by Brent Labatut.

Night-blooming cereus at the home of Brent Labatut. New Roads, LA.

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Bartram's Travels 250th Anniversary

By Randy Harelson, *New Roads, Louisiana*

Are you old enough to remember “the Bicentennial?” In 1976, our country put on a huge red, white, and blue celebration of the 200th anniversary of America. Fireworks and concerts were staged, speeches were given, but more importantly thousands of local buildings were added to the National Register of Historic Places, small history societies and museums were opened, and local history began to show up on the radar of ordinary citizens. Now America is approaching its semiquincentennial in 2026, the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence signed in Philadelphia on the Fourth of July 1776.

But another semiquincentennial is already underway. This is the anniversary of William Bartram's famous travels through the American South from 1773-1777, chronicled in his best-selling book *Bartram's Travels*, published in 1791. Bartram ventured through the Carolinas, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Tennessee before any of those places were thought of being “states.” (Georgia and South Carolina, two of the original thirteen colonies, became states in 1788.) On his way he noted and described the plants, animals, and people of this region land, sections of which were still unexplored by Europeans.

William Bartram was born in Philadelphia in 1739 to Quakers Ann and John Bartram. His father John was a close friend of Benjamin Franklin and was considered one of the most knowledgeable botanists of his time. He and his son William are seen as important contributors to the American Enlightenment through their scientific discoveries and work moving early American thought toward rational approaches and away from superstition.

William Bartram left his home in Philadelphia in 1773 to begin a “collecting trip” to gather seeds and starts of plants on commission from his London

patrons Peter Collinson and John Fothergill. Having demonstrated artistic ability as a child, William took his paints and paper, drawing along the way, as well as documenting his experiences in a journal. Later, he used these drawings and notes to write his book.

Today a series of historic markers from North Carolina to Louisiana mark Bartram's Trail, and the Bartram Trail Conference promotes scholarship and the placement of new markers along the route that

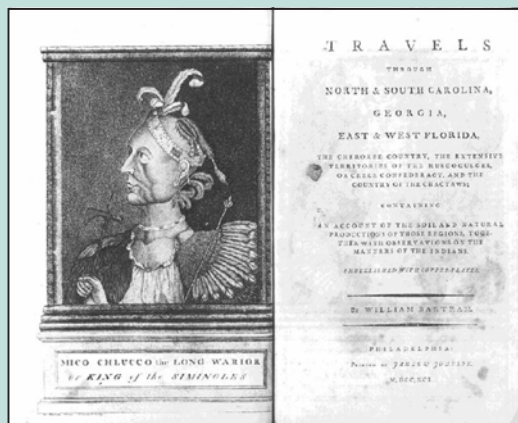
Bartram took through his four-year trip. (See <https://bartramtrailconference.wildapricot.org/>)

A fine one-hour documentary called *Cultivating the Wild: The enduring legacy of William Bartram, America's first environmentalist* is available for screening through the Bartram Trail Conference. It can be previewed on YouTube. <https://www.scetv.org/cultivating-wild>

William Bartram left his home in the English colony of Pennsylvania in 1773 and returned there in 1777, now in a new country, having declared its independence in 1776. Bartram's Garden is today a fifty-acre park on the Schuylkill River in Philadelphia, free and open to visitors every day. It is considered the oldest botanical garden still existing in North America.

Over the next four years *Magnolia* will present several articles about Bartram's travels and the plants the Bartram's discovered, propagated, and promoted. Some of these are *Franklinia alataamaha*, named for John Bartram's friend Ben Franklin, *Fothergilla*, named for John Fothergill, *Iris versicolor*, the blue flag iris, *Podophyllum peltatum*, Mayapple, and *Ilex vomitoria*, the yaupon holly, among others.

In the next issue of *Magnolia* look for an article on Bartram's by Brad Sanders, the author of *Guide to William Bartram's Travels* (Fevertree Press, 2002). This issue of *Magnolia* includes an “in-print” discussion of *The Attention of a Traveller: Essays on William Bartram's Travels and Legacy*, edited by Kathryn H. Braund.



Cereusly Mysterious: Eudora Welty's... (continued from page 1)

Yet this was a club that almost wasn't. Shortly before its formation, Welty's life, like the lives of all its members, seemed to be moving away from Jackson. Welty began the 1930s earning a graduate degree in business from Columbia University. Life in New York City energized her, and she attempted to make her home there. But as the Depression took hold, she, like so many others, could not find lasting work. All roads led home to Jackson.

Ever bright,



This hand-colored glass slide depicts a night-blooming cereus in flower. Courtesy of Eudora Welty, LLC and Eudora Welty Collection – Mississippi Department of Archives and History.



Photo by Brent Labatut.

Night-blooming cereus at the home of Brent Labatut. New Roads, LA.

creative, and curious, Welty attracted similar company growing up in her hometown. Southern Garden History Society members Susan Haltom and Jane Roy Brown note in *One Writer's Garden: Eudora Welty's Home Place*, "Budding writers Frank Lyell Hubert Creekmore,



Eudora Welty, 1909-2001. Courtesy of Eudora Welty, LLC and Eudora Welty Collection – Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

[future *New York Times* book review editor] Nash Burger, and the conductor and composer Lehman Engel—all of whom would go on to lead distinguished careers—were among the worldly, artistic friends who gathered on the Welty's porch for barbecue dinners and theatrical antics." Amid the scarcity of financial resources and cultural amenities, Welty explains, "we made our own entertainments." Including,

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The Cereus, De-Mystified

- ◆ It is a widely circulated myth that the cereus blooms only once a year. While individual blossoms last only one night, the plant can flower many times a year.
- ◆ Cuttings root readily from the flat stems (which resemble leaves), but patience is required to see the first blossom, which may take several years.
- ◆ Bright, indirect light (as on a covered porch) can encourage bloom, but overwinter indoors in zones cooler than 10 and 11.
- ◆ Well-drained soil is crucial for this member of the cactus family. Avoid overwatering.
- ◆ "Night-blooming cereus" is a common name applied to several similar species of cactus primarily native to Mexico and Central and South America.
- ◆ The primarily pollinator is the sphinx moth, but *E. oxypetalum* also attracts other nocturnal insects, bats, and even bees who come at first light, before the flower fades.⁹

Cereusly Mysterious: Eudora Welty's... (continued from page 3)

of course, scanning the newspaper for cereus-watching invitations.⁴

Through their letters, we can sneak along: “A night-blooming cereus opened down the street and had three flowers—we went to see it and looked at it with matches,” writes Welty in 1943, adding, “Do you remember all the intricate little things inside? The colors too, to be a night flower. It smelled good. The little stamen like a minute replica of the flower, and opens, too, just like it. The lady gave me a cutting started in a pot.”⁵ During these gatherings, Creekmore explains, “We’d sit, mesmerized, as the bud trembled and shuddered while it unwound its long slender white petals and spread them before our incredulous eyes as a delicately incised saucer full of froth.”⁶

Poetic as those words may be, they fail to mention that the glory quickly fades. As one hostess rather colorfully informed Welty’s club, by morning the flowers will look like “wrung chickens’ necks”—a phrase Welty would later use for well-timed comic relief in each of her two fictional scenes that feature a night-blooming cereus.⁷

Welty’s biographer Suzanne Marrs notes that a night-blooming cereus appears in “crucial episodes” in Welty’s short story “The Wanderers” and her novel *Losing Battles*. In “The Wanderers,” the “naked, luminous, complicated” flower known for its fleeting life evokes a deep sense of loss in the character Virgie Rainey. Similarly, in *Losing Battles*, the cereus blooms during a family reunion—a mere novelty for most onlookers, but a troubling omen to Granny, who sees her own mortality in the short-lived bloom. Oblivious to Granny’s concerns, Lexie blurts out, “Yes, and those’ll look like wrung chickens’ necks in the morning. . . . No thank you.”⁸

By planting the cereus in her fiction, Welty preserves it for her readers through the ages, a feat of increasing significance as the night-blooming cereus falls out of fashion, along with community-wide invitations to watch it bloom. Although a faithful few clubs and

enthusiasts still maintain the bloom-watching tradition, today it is more a curiosity than the social craze of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Further, as a public historical figure, Welty’s participation in flower-watching events is well-documented in her letters, biographies, and other sources, including *The New York Times*—thereby enhancing documentation of the tradition itself. In this way, Welty has ensured the old-fashioned cereus is “passed along” to new admirers, and not just on the page.

At Welty’s home in Jackson, now a National Historic Landmark maintained by the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, her surrounding Arts-and-Crafts-era garden has also been restored. The plant collection



Thornton, Robert John. Temple of Flora, or, Garden of the Botanist, Painter, and Philosopher. London: Published by Dr. Thornton, 1812.

includes two species of night-blooming cereus: *Epiphyllum oxipetalum*, also known locally as “Queen of the Night,” and *Epiphyllum hookeri*, or Hooker’s orchid. The Eudora Welty House & Garden routinely takes cuttings and passes them on to the community each spring at the annual Heirloom Plant Sale, a Welty garden fundraiser.

Then, as now, the night-blooming cereus is not commonly sold at nurseries, more often shared between friends as a passalong plant rather than purchased from a store. Indeed, virtually without exception, all Jacksonians believe their cereus traces back to Eudora Welty and her Night-Blooming Cereus Club. Though documentation be scant, they’re likely as not to be right; if nothing else, spiritually so.

As long as we continue to pass along this plant, and the stories it inspires, we can be sure the same “naked, luminous, complicated” flower that captivated Welty and her friends in the 1930s, and dazzled admirers across the South for at least a century before, will continue to enchant us for generations to come. Each cutting shared connects us to each other, planting us ever deeper into the Southern social tradition that inspired the Night-

Blooming Cereus Club.

So, if you’re fortunate enough to have one, share many a cutting with friends, and perfect strangers, too. Just “Don’t take it cereus, life’s too mysterious.”

Endnotes

- 1 Suzanne Marrs, *Eudora Welty: A Biography* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), 45: They went on to name themselves the Night-Blooming Cereus Club and took as their motto a slightly altered line from the Rudy Vallee song “Life is Just a Bowl of Cherries:” “Don’t take it cereus, Life’s too mysterious.”
- 2 Newspapers.com, *Statesman and Gazette*, Thursday, May 22, 1828, Natchez, MS.
- 3 Susan Haltom and Jane Roy Brown, *One Writer’s Garden: Eudora Welty’s Home Place* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 104. In 1934, the friends began calling themselves the Night-Blooming

(continued on page 6)



Trew, Christoph Jacob, Georg Dionysius Ehret, Benedict Christian Vogel, Johann Jacob Haid, Johann Elias Haid, Augustin Heckel, Anton Graff, and Thordarson Collection. 1750.



Sims, John. Curtis’s Botanical Magazine, Or, Flower-Garden Displayed: in which the most ornamental foreign plants, cultivated in the open ground, the green-house, and the stove, are accurately represented in their natural colours ... V. 53., Plate 2692. London: Printed by Edward Couchman, 1826.

Cereusly Mysterious: Eudora Welty's... (continued from page 5)

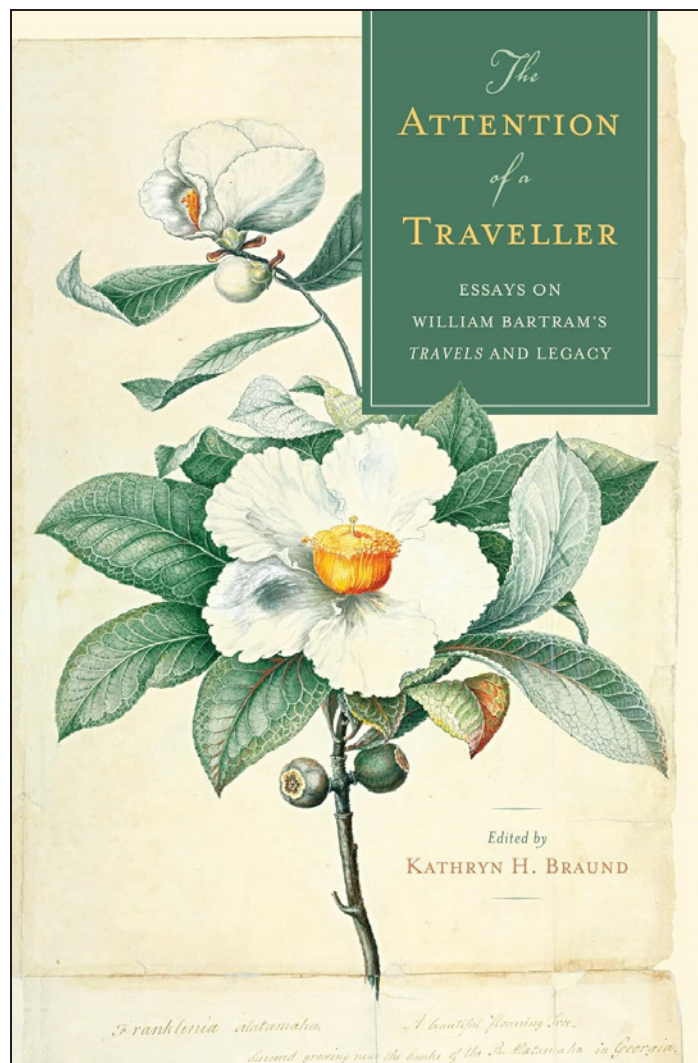
- Cereus Club, after the custom of visiting people who announced in the newspaper that their night-blooming cereus was expected to bloom that evening.
- 4 Haltom and Brown, *One Writer's Garden: Eudora Welty's Home Place*, 104.
 - 5 Julia Eichelberger, editor *Tell About Night Flowers: Eudora Welty's Gardening Letters 1939-1949* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi), 92.
 - 6 Haltom and Brown, *One Writer's Garden: Eudora Welty's Home Place*, 104.
 - 7 Suzanne Marrs, *One Writer's Imagination* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 9: "A lady informed [the Night-Blooming Cereus Club] that in the morning the flowers would look like "wrung chickens' necks." Years later, in "The Wanderers," (GA 235) Welty would use the "naked, luminous, complicated cereus as an emblem of life's beauty and brevity, and she would have an old country woman tell Virgie Rainey that "tomorrow it'll look like a wrung chicken's neck."
 - 8 Suzanne Marrs, *One Writer's Imagination* 199: "Crucial episodes in both story and novel concern a night-blooming cereus. In "The Wanderers," Virgie Rainey associates the beautiful flower with all she has lost. . . . In *Losing Battles*, the flower often proves to be similarly troubling. . . . When Granny asks Lexie to stay with her, Lexie "Seemed not to hear, staring at the old cactus where another bloom drifted white upon the dark. 'Yes, and those'll look like wrung chickens' necks in the morning,' she said. 'No thank you.'" (LB, 356).
 - 9 Elisabeth Gordon-Colón, *Notes on the Pollination of Epiphyllum oxypetalum (CACTACEAE) by the Moth Agrius cingulata (SPHINGIDAE)* (Medwin Publishers, 2023).

In Print

The Attention of a Traveller: Essays on William Bartram's Travels and Legacy, edited by Kathryn H. Braund | The University of Alabama Press | Hardcover (2022) and Paper (March 2024), 400 pages | ISBN. 9780817321291- 9780817361594 | List price, hardcover \$54.95, paper \$29.95.

With his introduction to the 250th anniversary of William Bartram Southern travels, Randy Harelson has provided the lead-in for this fall 2023 *Magnolia* issue. This brief look at *The Attention of a Traveller*, then signals what our Society president has promised will be a continuing series of Bartram-related discussions, essays, and reviews in *Magnolia*.

Coachwhip snakes, alligators, and (of course) the Franklin tree, *Franklinia alatanamaha*, are just a few of the ingredients making up the joyful mix of topics covered in this book. For Bartram aficionados, steeped in the history of the family's movements and endeavors, this five-part anthology supplements and enhances previous readings, including the foundational 1791 *Travels* book. For the less knowledgeable, *The Attention of a Traveller*, is nonetheless an easy way to join the ranks of Bartram devotees thanks to excellent essays describing the people, locales, plants, animals, and geological phenomena studied by William Bartram. Taking the reader into more recent times are overviews on how Bartram has been celebrated and commemorated, especially via the Bartram Trail Conference. As well, we get a detailed look at the



talent and training that underpinned William Bartram's exemplary skill at capturing and transferring widely varied elements of the natural world onto paper. The book's final section will delight bibliophiles with two essays under the heading "The Bartram Library." This Vermont-based writer, for example, learned from Chapter 13 that a drive to Albany, New York is required to see the real thing.

Of course, this book deserves the reader's attention chiefly owing to the knowledge and talents of contributors. The editor, University of Alabama professor Kathryn Braund, is an acknowledged Bartram authority, as is Brad Sanders, mentioned in Randy Harelson's opening comments. Also, the contributions of Joel T. Fry, long-time curator of Bartram's Garden, lend special gravitas. Sadly, the beloved Fry died in March 2023. While not foreseen at the time of publication, *The Attention of a Traveller* might now be taken as a lasting tribute to a remarkable Bartram scholar.

Ken McFarland, Brandon, Vermont



Wild, Tamed, Lost, Revived: The Surprising Story of Apples in the South, by Diane Flynt | hardcover, 304 pages | UNC Press, 2023 | ISBN: 978-1-4696-7694-4 | list price \$35

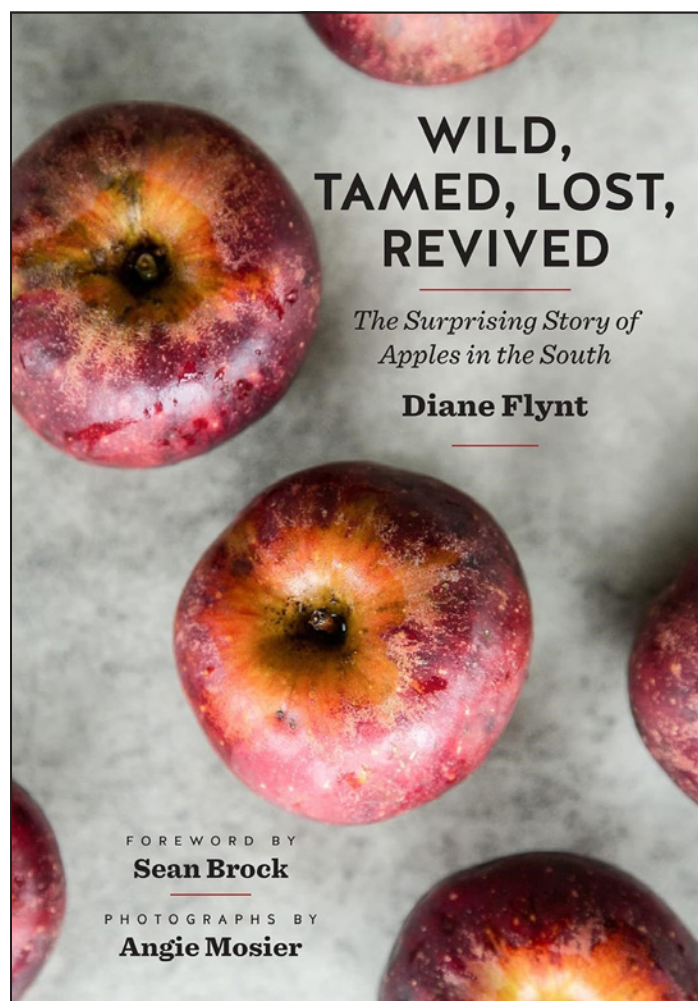
The apple is surely an underdog in the history of Southern gardens and landscapes. Diane Flynt's history unveils this "Surprising Story" in a heavily documented and richly composed story about the origins and evolution of what I've always referred to as our "democratic fruit." We associate the identity of Southern gardens with ornamentals like roses and camellias or vegetables like field peas or okra; however, one could argue that few horticultural species defined the Southern landscape of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries like the regional varieties of apple that emerged: from the low country of the Carolinas and the Gulf Coast to the Blue Ridge and the orchards of the Cherokees in the Great Smoky Mountains. It's truly "surprising," and downright shocking, that apple growing today is mostly confined to the higher elevations of the Upper South. Diane Flynt eloquently tells us why and how this happened.

Every apple seedling is a unique variety; the only way of duplicating the parent apple is by asexual means, budding or grafting. These chance seedlings, or "Wild" apples, were "Tamed" and named when the fruit offered

either flavor, excellence as a cider apple, or exceptional vigor in the humid low country of the South. Moving into the twentieth century, hundreds of varieties were "Lost" for a variety of reasons, but "Revived" today with the resurgence of interest in cider making.

Flynt's life story is a fascinating parallel to her scholarly but beautifully written and thorough tale of the history of the Southern apple. Born and raised in rural Georgia, Diane left a stressful but successful career in the corporate New South in 1995, and with her husband, Chuck, purchased a farm in the mountains of Southwest Virginia. A novice farmer and apple grower, she developed the land of this former corn field into Foggy Ridge Cidery: the "first twentieth-century cider orchard in the region [and] the first modern cidery south of Massachusetts." The engaging tale of her struggles and adventures in apple growing and cider making is a sweet companion to her scholarly but well-written and entertaining history.

Peter Hatch, Crozet, Virginia





CALENDAR

April 12-14, 2024. The 40th annual meeting of the Southern Garden History Society, “Wilmington and the Lower Cape Fear,” will be held in Wilmington, NC and headquartered at the Embassy Suites Hotel on the Cape Fear River. The meeting will offer lectures on the region’s history and tours of the private gardens and sites in Historic Wilmington, including the Burgwin-Wright House and Garden, and a final dinner aboard the battleship USS North Carolina with views of the city. Visit: southerngardenhistory.org for meeting details and registration information



April 20-29, 2024. Historic Garden Week in Virginia. Unique tours organized and hosted by forty-eight member clubs located from the foothills of the Shenandoah Valley to the beaches of Tidewater. Visit: vagardenweek.org



April 25-27, 2024. Colonial Williamsburg’s 77th Annual Garden Symposium, “Roots of the American Garden.” Speakers include acclaimed landscape architect Thomas Woltz; Amyrose Foll, contributor to Virginia Home Grown and director of Virginia Free Farm; and William Woys Weaver, author and food historian, and founder of The Roughwood Heritage Seed Collection. For more information visit: colonialwilliamsburg.org



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The Formal Gardens of the Bellamy Mansion Museum

By Gareth Evans and Leslie Randle-Morton, Wilmington, NC

When Preservation North Carolina began restoration of the Bellamy site in 1992, virtually all traces of the original gardens had disappeared. After years of research and continued work, the Victorian-era elegance of the Bellamy gardens has been faithfully recreated to interpret how the young landscaping plan may have appeared in the mid-1870s. Today the gardens are maintained by staff and a dedicated group of volunteers.

As early as 1855 family matriarch Eliza McIlhenny Harriss Bellamy (1821-1907) started an herbarium of botanical specimens which she updated annually. The structures on site, built principally by enslaved and free Black artisans, were completed from 1859-61. The formal landscaping began in 1865 after the family moved back into the house following a more than two-year absence due to the Civil War.

In 1866, the city of Wilmington widened both Market Street and Fifth Avenue. This modified the Bellamy property lines and created the border marked by the present brick wall and ornate iron fence. Research

suggests formal landscaping of the front and sides of the house occurred between 1866 and 1873, shortly after the fence was completed. Five southern magnolias, *Magnolia grandiflora*, were planted in this period and remain today.

The garden was certainly eye-catching, a little non-traditional, and a source of pride to the Bellamy family. Family tradition says that it was Eliza Bellamy's interest

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This photograph, taken in 1995, shows how the grounds looked prior to the garden restoration. Most of what is known about the garden's original design is a result of two years of historical research and archaeological investigation. The archaeological dig, coordinated by the University of North Carolina Wilmington, revealed the configuration of the beds and the materials of the paths.



Eliza Bellamy planned her garden in the French parterre style. A parterre garden is composed of symmetrical elliptical or circular garden beds that are usually connected by gravel pathways. In the case of the Bellamy Garden, the pathway was made from crushed oyster shells. The oyster shells helped to replenish minerals in the earth over time as well as aided in drainage. Diverse plantings were selected to ensure year-round blooms. The most successful plantings were hardy native species that could withstand the extended hot summers of this area.



Historical photographs and personal recollections revealed the specific plant choices and locations. Recreation of the Bellamy Garden took place in the fall of 1996. This photograph was taken in 2003.

The Formal Gardens... (continued from page 9)

in plants that inspired the design of this garden and prompted her to keep a botanical notebook on her plants. Unfortunately, the location of this notebook remains a mystery. Both native and some imported plants are here today, reflecting the wide horticultural interests of a wealthy Wilmington family.

After Eliza's death in 1907, the garden began a slow decline. By the time the last surviving daughter, Ellen Douglas Bellamy (1852-1946), died, the gardens were completely overgrown. The site fell into disrepair until 1989, when it was donated to Preservation North Carolina.

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All five of the site's Magnolia grandiflora trees are original and were planted in 1870.



The site boasts year-round blooms, but springtime at the Bellamy Mansion Museum is the most vibrant with several varieties of azaleas, gardenias, lilies, roses, and more.



Dedicated volunteers, like Karen Stronczynski pictured here, maintain the gardens under the guidance of Bellamy Site Manager and Master Gardener Bob Lock. Staff and lead volunteer Lynn Pendleton worked on the research in the 1990s.



Today's herb garden is designed to reflect some of the culinary plantings the Bellamy family would have enjoyed in the past. Much like today, Victorian-Era Americans used herbs for a variety of purposes including as insect repellants, medicines, cosmetics, dyes, teas and beers, cleaning products, potpourris for personal and household odors, and, of course, in cooking for both flavor and as preservatives.



Southern Garden History Society

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The *William Lanier Hunt Award* recognizes members, non-members, and/or organizations that have made an exceptional contribution to fields closely aligned with the mission and goals of SGHS. Any SGHS member may submit nominations.

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SGHS provides *Undergraduate Scholarships*, *Graduate Fellowships*, and *Young Professional Grants* for the express purpose of attending the annual meeting. Bona fide junior and senior students enrolled in college and university majors relevant to the mission and goals of SGHS are eligible to apply for scholarships. Graduate students studying in germane fields may apply for fellowships. Young professionals within five years of having graduated and working in related disciplines may apply for grants, as well as older individuals who have made career changes within the last five years. SGHS members are urged to promote awareness of these opportunities.

SGHS posts details, eligibility, and directions for submitting applications on the organization's website: www.southerngardenhistory.org. Those without internet access can receive a copy of this information by mail; contact Aimee Moreau, SGHS Administrator.

Annual Membership Dues

The Society's membership year is from *August 1—July 31*.
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*Contact the membership administrator if you would like to pay more than \$500 via credit card. For more membership information, contact:

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Deadline for submitting articles for the next issue of Magnolia is March 31, 2024.

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