

# Clermont Lee Garden at Savannah's Girl Scout Birthplace Under Threat of Demolition

By Ced Dolder,  
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Clermont Lee (1914-2006) was a pioneer in landscape design, especially in the world of recreating gardens in the antebellum style based in history. In spite of the popularity of the "Williamsburg" Colonial Revival style in garden design during the 1950s through the 1970s, Lee would create intricate gardens based on research in historic records. Among others, she designed gardens for the Owens-Thomas House, constructed in 1819, on Oglethorpe Square, and the antebellum Green-Meldrim House. She provided oversight and maintenance for the Owens-Thomas gardens for 15 years.

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Clermont Lee, circa 1955.  
*Courtesy of Juliette Gordon Low Birthplace.*



southern, less severe, landscape styles. After graduation, Lee returned to Savannah, working with federal projects during World War II near Sea Island.

By the early 1950s, Clermont was becoming known for providing period landscapes for Savannah's historic homes. A stroll through almost any section of Savannah would reveal the other-worldly atmosphere of the huge trees and grassy plazas framing historic buildings, or secret gardens peeking out behind brick fences. Experiencing this today is part of enjoying historic Savannah: walking the narrow sidewalks, crossing the famous squares, feeling the awe of the beautiful architecture. Savannah didn't always look this orderly, this well-kept. Clermont Lee was instrumental in providing her professional acumen to rapidly fading landscapes surrounding the historic homes that are now celebrated in Savannah.

While Lee was busy providing era-appropriate gardens for beautiful historic houses, Savannah's squares were often seen as a remnant of old Savannah, but not really *historic*. They certainly were not worthy of city funding and even were considered dangerous for locals and visitors after dark. Squares that had existed for over two hundred years

were suffering from neglect; they had become jumbles of pathways, playgrounds, deserted wells, utility poles, and chain-link fencing. Weeds grew along the curbing and overgrown plantings provided an opportunity for petty crime.

From 1951 to 1972, Clermont Lee developed and oversaw the renovation of five of Savannah's squares: Warren, Washington, Greene, Troup, and Madison. She teamed up with banker Mills B. Lane, Jr. and frequently battled with city officials to provide the oasis of green that visitors stroll through today. For example, one of the problems cited was bus lines and emergency crews petitioning to cut through the squares with straight lanes, which Lee solved by rounding off the squares' corners making it easier for vehicles to make the turns. Today, Lee's 50-year-old designs are still evident and should be guarded by city planners and preservationists as assets to the historic context of Savannah.

In 1953, Clermont Lee provided designs and planting plans for the Juliette Gordon Low birthplace garden, including maintenance consultation until her death in 2006. The Girl Scouts of the USA acquired the Wayne-Gordon property in 1953 as an interpretative center and house museum, honoring the founder of the



Girl Scouts organization, Juliette Gordon Low. The parterre garden at the rear, a simple, urban example of a wealthy Victorian floral retreat, was deemed appropriate for the era of the Gordon/Low house. *This intact 65-year-old, beautiful garden is under siege today, with the Girl Scouts of the USA organization planning demolition of this garden space.* The GSUSA wants to provide a paved zone for ceremonies for Girl Scouts and visitor access, and no longer sees the need to maintain a formal garden. Despite a rising howl of despair from the Girl Scouts community, and landscape professionals as well as historians, the New York-based organization is proceeding with these plans. The overwhelming irony is a garden designed by a strong, independent woman should serve as a positive example for the Girl Scouts of the USA.

Clermont Lee achieved remarkable success given the obstacles she faced. Again and again, she proved her professional and personal determination and pioneering spirit in her sixty-five year long career. She not only made history for women in the landscape profession but also had a lasting impact on the quality of Savannah's historic landscapes. Her design for the Girl Scouts garden doesn't deserve demolition, it deserves respect.

#### ABOUT CED DOLDER

Ced Dolder, retired from the Georgia Historic Preservation Division, has researched Clermont Lee for over 19 years, beginning with a historic context report on the accomplishments of women in the built environment, completed for the Georgia National Register in 2008.

PICTURED ABOVE LEFT Clermont Lee Garden at the Juliette Gordon Low Birthplace, circa 1960. *Courtesy of Juliette Gordon Low Birthplace.*

PICTURED ABOVE RIGHT Clermont Lee Garden at the Juliette Gordon Low Birthplace, 2016. *Courtesy of Ced Dolder.*