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

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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. At a time when Southern girls were educated in local schools, she entered Smith College, in Northampton, Massachusetts, eventually deciding to major in landscape architecture. After completing her undergraduate degree, she attended the Smith College Graduate School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture (formerly the Cambridge School) near Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, obtaining a master’s of landscape architecture degree in 1939. Although Harvard was, at the time, the center for forward-thinking modernist “Bauhaus” architecture, Lee always preferred designing traditional, more

Clermont Lee, circa 1955.
Courtesy of Juliette Gordon Low Birthplace.
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 teemed up with banker Mills B. Lane, Jr. and frequently battled with city officials to provide the oasis of green that motorists 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 interpretive 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 area 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.