

DOCUMENTING A DYNAMIC HISTORIC LANDSCAPE

Andrea Sprott, Garden Curator, Elizabeth Lawrence House & Garden

As some of you may already know, I am currently working with the National Park Service and a few leading experts in landscape preservation on an important documentation project of the Elizabeth Lawrence House & Garden for the Historic American Landscape Survey (HALS). HALS is a permanent federal cooperative program with the National Park Service (NPS), Library of Congress (LoC), and the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA). The mission of HALS is “to record historic landscapes in the United States and its territories through measured drawings and interpretive drawings, written histories, and large-format black and white photographs and color photographs.” (nps.gov/hdp/hals)

For HALS, documentation of the Elizabeth Lawrence House & Garden is essentially a current comprehensive snapshot of the property consisting of three components: complete and detailed measured drawings of the garden; a descriptive historical narrative, including context and national significance; and professional large-format photography. Once completed, the documentation project in its entirety will be accessioned into the Library of Congress, who will make the records available to the world through their website.

The Elizabeth Lawrence House & Garden was suggested and accepted for a HALS project due to Elizabeth Lawrence’s national significance as well as the property being a rare example of dynamic historic landscape preservation. Once completed, the HALS project will be the first one in North Carolina, and will serve as the model for future HALS projects in the state.

We began the project in 2016, with a day-long information gathering seminar. One of the first steps was to find out if anyone in the North Carolina chapter of the ASLA was available to help update a set of CAD (Computer-Aided Drafting) drawings, including major plant inventory, of the entire property from 2007. As no one was available to help, it became clear that I had to do it myself, insofar as I could. Updating the drawings has been slow and tedious process, but rewarding and enlightening; some details of Elizabeth’s design technique have come into focus that may have otherwise gone undetected. All of this knowledge will help me better interpret the feel of her garden and help inform future planning and planting decisions.

We are incredibly fortunate to have a few leading experts in historic landscape preservation and documentation serving on the Elizabeth Lawrence House & Garden Advisory Council. I’ve been working very closely with them, as well as the head of HALS in Washington, D.C., on all aspects of the project.

In early April, the National Park Service sent their large-format photographer to complete that portion of the documentation. Over almost three days, the property was photographed from all angles. Working with the photographer to set up shots, I have never seen the garden look more beautiful, or more like Elizabeth, than through that camera lens.

This project is a big undertaking. It is tedious, time-consuming and technical, but well worth the time and effort! It will position us to pursue more national recognition and provide a platform for raising awareness. Once completed and submitted, the Elizabeth Lawrence House & Garden HALS project will be part of an elite group including Dumbarton Oaks and the Congressional Cemetery in Washington, D.C., and the John Bartram House and Garden in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. I think Elizabeth Lawrence would be pleased!



National Park Service large-format photographer Jarob Ortiz uses very precise, specialized equipment for photographing historic sites.

The Elizabeth Lawrence House & Garden is only the second site to be documented using this unique camera set-up.



We have found our marbles! Well, we’ve found *someone’s* marbles. These small kaleidoscopic glass orbs have all been found in Elizabeth Lawrence’s garden over the past eight years. Garden curator Andrea Sprott keeps a special jar for just such tiny treasures. “I am sure some of these belonged to previous owner Lindie Wilson’s grandchildren, who have told me somewhat emphatically that I might find many more marbles in the garden,” says Andrea. These fun finds keep us—and our garden volunteers—eagle-eyed in the gardens at all times... we never know what we’ll be digging up next!