

An Accidental Preservationist

By Judith B. Tankard

As a young art historian, I was well aware of preservation issues with paintings, sculpture, objects, buildings, and monuments, but gardens—no! It wasn't until the 1980s, when I was in hot pursuit of Arts & Crafts architects such as Edwin Lutyens, that I stumbled on some sorry examples of Gertrude Jekyll gardens that happened to be part of the grounds. Overgrown trees and shrubs, pitiful flower borders, missing ornaments, and modern-day water features were the name of the game. It wasn't until the publication of books on "historic gardens" and monographs on Sissinghurst, Hidcote, and Great Dixter that I realized there was another layer called historic gardens. After that initial fire was lit, I've never looked back. Over the years I've had an opportunity to observe good and bad preservation attempts based on varying levels of expertise, willingness of the owners, and—most crucial—approaches to maintenance. The Garden Conservancy's advisory role on preservation methodology for significant gardens as well as alerts by the Cultural Landscape Foundation for public spaces at risk have been invaluable in saving and managing important properties. Detailed cultural landscape reports have aided enormously in broadening our understanding of significant places that otherwise would be ignored.

While gaining expertise in the careers of landscape architects such as Ellen Shipman and Beatrix Farrand, I discovered that many of their gardens had disappeared, victims of readaptation or lethargy. Fortunately, the tables have turned in recent years and more sites are being rediscovered and resurrected. What has been consistently excellent is the quality and depth of research, in part thanks to the designers' archives. The landmark restorations of the Beatrix Farrand Garden at Bellefield, as well as Eolia, the Harkness Estate,

were greatly facilitated by landscape architects trained in research procedures. Detailed planting plans, archival photographs, and correspondence brought a surfeit of information that had to be evaluated in terms of modern-day usage as public properties. In most cases, the installation and maintenance steps were done by trained volunteers, but only after crucial funding was raised. These are the good stories. There are also the cases where research and installation were impeccably completed, but the project failed due to lack of understanding the intricacies of maintenance. In their day, Shipman's gardens, for example, were unusually maintenance-intensive, necessitating a plant replacement schedule that most budgets would not allow. One thinks of the tragic story of Beatrix Farrand at the end of her life having to close down Reef Point due to the lack of a fully trained gardener who could carry on her meticulous work.

When the National Park Service undertook the restoration of the small parterre garden at the Longfellow House in Cambridge, MA, designed by Martha Brookes Hutchinson in the early 1900s and revitalized by Ellen Shipman twenty years later, there were many challenges to face: a detailed history of the site necessitated archaeological digs, replacement of built features, and the search for substitutions for Shipman's plant palette, most of which had long gone out of cultivation. Consideration for modern-day pests, irrigation issues, and foot traffic all figured in to the highly praised rehabilitation privately funded by a friends' group who collaborated with the park service. Following along similar lines, a friends' group has recently initiated a partial replanting of Shipman's once-magnificent gardens at Chatham Manor (now Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park) in Fredericksburg, VA. The granddaddy of them all are the gardens and grounds at the Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site in Cornish, NH. All three properties, plus others, reflect solid research and rigorous maintenance.

In the case of institutions, such as Harvard University's Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, DC, it goes without saying that research, routine maintenance, and plant replacements reflect the high level of a professionally trained staff. However, the case is rarely so with private gardens that have seen significant changes over time, as wings are added to the original house, swimming pools dropped in, and plantings simplified. When property transfers to new owners, the gardens generally suffer or are irretrievably lost. The outcome is generally doomed due to unavoidable changes to the landscape, uneducated owners, lack of rigorous research, questionable maintenance, and limited budgets. Exceptions, of course, include knowledgeable owner-gardeners who revitalize rather than obliterate.

There are a several stories for outstanding public gardens that have been rediscovered through research or recovered from disasters. The most famous is Longue Vue House and Gardens in New Orleans, LA, the former home of philanthropists Edith and Edgar Stern. Designed by Ellen Shipman in the 1930s, the gardens were open to the



Above: The Beatrix Farrand garden at Bellefield, Hyde Park, NY, photo by Richard Cheek. **On opposite page:** Longue Vue House & Gardens, New Orleans, LA, photo courtesy of Longue Vue



public in 1968 during Edith's lifetime, but it took several major hurricanes to put the aging gardens in perspective. After the destruction by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, several groups, led by the Garden Conservancy, stepped in to assess the damage and commission a history of the grounds in order to implement an informed recovery and maintenance plan. Today, the gardens are once again one of Shipman's finest achievements.

It took a book, rather than a storm, to resurrect a slumbering Shipman garden in Jacksonville, FL, designed in the early 1930s, but long forgotten in the tangle of overgrown shrubs. Shortly after the publication of my book *Ellen Shipman and the American Garden* in 1996, a garden advisory committee member spotted the name "Cummer" in the client list and promptly found plans in Shipman's archive at Cornell. Fortunately, the bones of the garden lay undisturbed for decades, so the committee set to work to bring it back to life. A full-scale restoration was quickly spearheaded, but not before running into problems with some of the plants indicated on the plans. The committee learned that it's one thing to plant-by-plan, but another to find substitutes that are better performing. It was a miraculous discovery, but just after completing the restoration, Hurricane Irma severely damaged the waterfront garden. The museum acted quickly to repair the damage and replant.

In recent years, a number of Farrand gardens have undergone restoration, but a little-known one in Maine deserves mention. While much is known about the demise of Farrand's long-time home and garden at Reef Point, few people know about Garland Farm, where she spent the last three years of her life. Now the headquarters of the Beatrix Farrand Society, Garland Farm was once the home of her long-time caretakers at Reef Point. It was here that she designed her last garden—for herself—consisting of a sunny flower terrace at the back of the house and a small entrance garden shaded by her favorite trees and shrubs

that she brought with her from Reef Point. Although no plans have been found for the terrace garden, vintage color photos were useful for the Maine Master Gardeners volunteer team. A cultural landscape report unearthed information for a multi-year restoration strategy that included plant propagation and locating missing garden ornaments. Attention has now turned to the entrance garden, for which a few sketches have been located. Thanks to the volunteers who maintain this important garden, visitors from around the world can now glimpse one of Farrand's most personal gardens.

On a more personal level, in 2002 I had the pleasure of collaborating with landscape architect Norma E. Williams on documenting Greenwood Gardens, a preservation project of the Garden Conservancy in Short Hills, NJ. The slumbering garden had Arts & Crafts teahouses, pergolas, trellises, and grottos filled with Rookwood tiles, as well as water features, including an Italianate cascade that turned out to be the work of a little-known architect, William Whetten Renwick. Eighty years later, the original 1920s gardens were slumbering, the Art Deco-style house had been replaced, and a newer layer of plantings had been installed in the 1960s. The ambitious, multi-year restoration of built features and plantings has now come to fruition.



An art historian specializing in landscape history, **Judith B. Tankard** is the author of books on Beatrix Farrand, Ellen Shipman, and Gertrude Jekyll, among others. She is a longtime Fellow of the Garden Conservancy and organizes the Martha's Vineyard Open Day.

Photo by Jennifer Packard