Horticultural Restorations

The United States has a rich and varied heritage. Beginning with the early settlements of Jamestown, Va., Plymouth, Mass., and St. Augustine, Fla., we have been influenced by a great diversity of climates, natural resources, ethnic populations, and foreign inputs. These influences and their products are well-documented in the traditional artifacts collected in museums: art, furniture, craftwork, and implements. In communities across this nation many old buildings have been restored and furnished with the help of existing historical records. The desire for accuracy in such undertakings extends to a need for historically accurate landscaping as well as architecture and furnishings. Horticultural restoration is of increasing interest and concern.

Garden restoration is an important part of our historical awareness and education, and has many applications. In the Eastern United States, locations of historical importance such as Colonial Williamsburg and the homes of many of our early Presidents have been restored by foundations or the U.S. Park Service and are open to the public. These sites preserve particular landscapes and environments important to our forefathers, but often are not primarily instructional. A different type of restoration is important at sites like Mabry Mill (Fig. 1) on the Blue Ridge Parkway in Virginia, Cades Cove in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, or the Agrimira in Georgia. These sites are restored to demonstrate the agricultural and farm manufacturing processes vital to the early settlers.

Horticultural restoration, like other restoration efforts, depends on the quality of records left for that period. Certain sites may be relatively easy to restore. For example, at Mount Vernon, the home of George Washington, only 54 years passed between the President’s death and the formation of the Mount Vernon Ladies Association of the Union, dedicated to it’s restoration and preservation (6). This restoration was aided by the relatively short period following Washington’s death, the accurate survey maps drawn in 1787, the extensive plantation records, and the lack of any radical change in use prior to the initiation of the restoration. In contrast, Thomas Jefferson’s home and gardens at Monticello have been much more difficult to restore, due to the 92-year interim period between his death and the initiation of restorative efforts, and the conversion of the grounds around the mansion from horticultural and landscape gardens to more agronomic uses (7). Jefferson was an avid naturalist, agriculturist and plantsman, and experimented with many fruit, vegetable and ornamental plant varieties obtained from friends around the world. He left extensive notes (Jefferson’s Garden Book) (1), which have both aided and hindered the restorative efforts. His notes on planting layout are accurate enough to use as a guide for archeological methods. For example, the orchard restoration presently underway located tree positions by organic matter residues in the soil indicating sites of past root systems. On the other hand, Jefferson constantly added to the estate buildings and plantings, projecting a cascade and garden structures which, for financial reasons, were apparently never built. Much effort may be needed to establish the physical nature of the site as opposed to the designer’s intention.

An important question in any horticultural restoration is to what year should the garden be restored? The restoration of Colonial Williamsburg was made difficult by the growth and evolution of the city on its 18th century foundations. Buildings and garden walls were restored based on building foundations, the “Frenchman’s Map” of 1782 and a copper engraving of several important buildings discovered in the Bodleian Library at Oxford. Some indication of landscaping was taken from these sources and from correspondence of various landowners and travellers, but the landscaping of Colonial Williamsburg is largely based on the styles prevalent in England at the time (2). A more recent landscape, Dumbarton Oaks in Georgetown, can be maintained accurately in the future due to the extensive instructions written by the designer, Beatrix Farrand, when the estate was conveyed to Harvard Univ., in 1941 (5). Whether the restoration follows historical

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Monticello. Thomas Jefferson's home and gardens. The home is the precursor of "classical revival" architecture in this country. The landscape gardens surrounding the house are restored; restoration of the vegetable garden and orchard is nearly complete. Located 2 miles southeast of Charlottesville, Va., on Route 53, Monticello is open daily from 8 AM to 5 PM in summer. Admission fee.

Colonial Williamsburg. A restored city with a wide variety of 17th century homes, gardens, taverns, and crafts. Costumed guides provide excellent interpretations of colonial life. Located near Interstate 64 in the city of Williamsburg, Colonial Williamsburg is open daily. Building hours and craft exhibits vary with season and day of the week. Admission fees for most buildings and gardens.

Mount Vernon. George Washington's home and plantation overlooking the Potomac River. The plantation is a particularly good example of a 17th century working plantation, and is well interpreted. Located 16 miles south of Washington D.C., the estate is open daily from 9 AM to 5 PM during the summer. Admission fee.

Westover Plantation. Home of the Byrd family, the house is considered to be the best Georgian architecture in America. The gardens are mostly original, including a row of ancient tulip poplars. The estate is on Route 5 between Richmond and Williamsburg, and the grounds are open daily (self-guided with little interpretation). Admission fee.

Woodlawn Plantation. The home of George Washington's nephew, the gardens at Woodlawn were restored by the Garden Club of Virginia. Formal gardens surround the early 19th century mansion. Located near Mount Vernon, the estate is open 9:30 AM to 4:30 PM daily. Admission fee.

Gunston Hall. The home of George Mason, author of the Bill of Rights, the restored gardens include a boxwood allée planted by Mason in the late 1700s (Fig. 2). Located 20 miles south of Washington D.C. near Lorton, the estate is open daily from 9:30 AM to 5 PM. Admission fee.

Stratford Hall. The birthplace of Richard Henry Lee and Robert E. Lee. Stratford Hall was the 2nd restoration project of the Garden Club of Virginia. The plantation is still an active farm and features a restored water-powered mill. Located on State Route 3, about 30 miles east of Fredericksburg, on the Potomac. Open daily from 8 AM to 4:30 PM. Admission fee.

Mabry Mill. This is an excellent display of pioneer agriculture and crafts, including syrup and soap making, blacksmithery, spinning, and a water-powered mill. Located at mile post 176 on the Blue Ridge Parkway near Floyd, craft demonstrations vary by day and time, between 8 AM and 7 PM during the summer. Admission is free.

Fig. 2. Gunston Hall, near Lorton, Va. The plantation house and garden structures display some of the earliest Chinese design details in this country.

Literature Cited

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