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The Lost Gardens of Charleston

Rediscovering the Forgotten Horticulture of the Lowcountry

by Dr. Margaret Elliston

[Editor's note: Dr. Elliston presented a preliminary version of this research at the Society's 2025 Annual Symposium in Savannah. This article expands upon that lecture with new archival findings from the Charleston County Public Library's Middleton Collection.]

In the spring of 1742, Eliza Lucas Pinckney wrote to a friend in London that the gardens of Charleston were "the most beautiful in all of English America." She was not exaggerating. The Lowcountry's unique combination of subtropical climate, rich alluvial soil, and the influence of English, French, and West African horticultural traditions produced some of the most extraordinary designed landscapes on the continent — gardens that rivaled Versailles in ambition, if not in scale.

Yet today, the vast majority of these gardens have vanished. Of the estimated 200 significant designed landscapes that existed in the Charleston region before 1865, fewer than a dozen survive in any recognizable form. The rest have been lost to development, neglect, and the peculiar amnesia that sometimes afflicts our relationship with the living past.

This essay represents the first comprehensive attempt to document what has been lost. Drawing upon plantation journals, correspondence, nursery records, and the remarkable watercolors of the itinerant artist Jacques Le Moyne, we can begin to reconstruct the gardens that once defined the cultural identity of the Carolina Lowcountry.

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The earliest Charleston gardens were practical affairs — kitchen gardens and medicinal plots that reflected the immediate needs of a frontier colony. But by the 1720s, as the rice economy transformed the region's fortunes, a new generation of planters began to create landscapes of deliberate beauty and philosophical meaning.

Henry Middleton's creation of the terraced gardens at Middleton Place, beginning in 1741, marked the arrival of the formal English landscape tradition in the American South. The butterfly lakes, the symmetrical allées of live oak, and the carefully graded terraces descending to the Ashley River represented a vision of order imposed upon the wilderness — a statement of cultural aspiration as much as aesthetic preference.

But the most fascinating gardens were not the grand plantation landscapes. They were the intimate city gardens of Charleston's merchant class — small plots of extraordinary density and invention, enclosed by the high brick walls that still define the city's streetscape. In these confined spaces, gardeners created remarkable compositions of layered plantings, incorporating species from three continents.

The Huguenot gardeners who settled in Charleston after 1685 brought with them not only the horticultural knowledge of southern France but also a distinctive aesthetic sensibility — a preference for irregularity over symmetry, for texture over color, for the suggestion of wildness within a cultivated frame. Their influence on Charleston's garden tradition has been largely overlooked, but surviving records suggest it was profound.

Perhaps the most significant — and most neglected — contribution to Charleston's garden heritage came from the enslaved Africans whose labor actually created and maintained these landscapes. Recent scholarship has begun to reveal the extent to which West African botanical knowledge shaped the plant palettes, spatial organization, and even the symbolic vocabulary of Southern gardens.

The task before us is both scholarly and practical. We must continue to excavate the documentary and archaeological record before it is lost entirely. But we must also find ways to communicate the importance of these vanished landscapes to a public that may struggle to mourn what it never knew existed.

The Southern Historic Preservation Society is committed to this work. Our Garden Heritage Initiative, launched in partnership with the Garden Conservancy and the College of Charleston's Department of Historic Preservation, will fund three new research fellowships dedicated to documenting the horticultural history of the Atlantic South. We invite applications from scholars at all career stages.

President's Column

by Dr. William Hargrave

Dear Members and Friends,

As I write this column, the first camellias are blooming in our Savannah office garden — a fitting reminder that preservation, like horticulture, is fundamentally an act of faith in the future.

This has been a year of remarkable growth for the Society. Our membership now exceeds 1,200 individuals across fourteen Southern states, and our publication program continues to expand. The monograph you hold in your hands — or read on your screen — represents the twentieth issue of The Preservation Post, a milestone I could not have imagined when we published our first modest issue in the spring of 2021.

I am particularly pleased to announce the formal launch of our Digital Archive Initiative. This ambitious project, funded by a generous grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and matching contributions from our Patron-level members, will digitize over 5,000 photographs, maps, surveys, and documents currently housed in our physical archive.

Looking ahead, I want to draw your attention to our 2026 Annual Symposium, which will be held in Charleston, South Carolina, on October 15–17. The theme — 'Gardens, Landscapes, and the Living Past' — grows directly from the groundbreaking research presented by Dr. Elliston in the lead article of this issue.

Finally, I ask for your continued support. Every membership, every donation, every volunteer hour strengthens our ability to protect the places and stories that define Southern heritage. The work is urgent, and it belongs to all of us.

With warm regards,

Notes from the Archive

New Acquisitions & Research Opportunities

by Dr. Catherine Montrose, Digital Archives Manager

The Society's archive has received several significant donations this quarter. Among the most notable is a collection of forty-two glass plate negatives documenting the construction and early years of the Biltmore Estate in Asheville, North Carolina, circa 1889–1905.

These images, donated by a descendant of the estate's original landscape superintendent, include previously unknown views of Frederick Law Olmsted's approach road and the original nursery grounds. They have been professionally conserved and are now available for research by appointment.

We have also acquired a remarkable set of Sanborn Fire Insurance maps covering the historic districts of Natchez, Mississippi, from 1886 to 1951. These maps provide invaluable documentation of building footprints, construction materials, and land use changes over a sixty-five year period.

Researchers interested in accessing these or any other materials in our collection should contact the Archives Department at archives@shps-society.org.

A Letter to the Editor

On the Demolition of the Carpenter Gothic Cottage at 14 St. Philip Street

by Anne-Marie Lafitte, Board Member

To the Editor,

I write with a heavy heart regarding the recent demolition of the Carpenter Gothic cottage at 14 St. Philip Street in Charleston. Built in 1858 by the freedman carpenter Samuel Middleton, this modest but exquisite structure was one of the last surviving examples of African-American craftsmanship from the antebellum period in the city's Harleston Village neighborhood.

The cottage's destruction — approved by the city's Board of Architectural Review over the objections of preservationists, neighbors, and the Society itself — represents a failure of imagination and political will. The developers who purchased the lot have proposed a five-story mixed-use building that bears no relationship to the scale, character, or history of the surrounding streetscape.

This loss is a reminder that our preservation laws, however well-intentioned, remain inadequate to protect the full range of our built heritage. We need stronger protections for vernacular architecture, broader definitions of historical significance, and greater public awareness of what is at stake when we allow irreplaceable structures to be destroyed.

The Society's advocacy committee will continue to press for reforms at the state and local level. I urge all members to make their voices heard.

Notes & Queries

Research Query: Prof. James Oakes (University of Georgia) is seeking photographs or descriptions of the now-demolished Barksdale House in Macon, Georgia, for a forthcoming book on Greek Revival domestic architecture. Responses may be directed to joakes@uga.edu.

Correction: In our Fall 2025 issue (No. 19), the caption accompanying the photograph of the Roper House incorrectly identified it as being located on East Bay Street. The Roper House is located at 9 East Battery. We regret the error.

New Publication: Board member Dr. Benjamin Kincaid has published *Archaeology of the Plantation South: Material Culture and Memory* with the University of Alabama Press. The book is available through our shop at shps-society.org/shop.

Call for Papers: The Society invites submissions for the Fall 2026 issue of The Preservation Post. We welcome articles on any aspect of Southern preservation, heritage, and cultural landscapes. Submissions should be 2,000–5,000 words and follow the Chicago Manual of Style. Send inquiries to publications@shps-society.org.

CONTENTS