

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE LANDSCAPE AT A HISTORIC SITE



Historic buildings and their landscapes are a cohesive unit that reads like a book to tell the story of the life and times of its occupants. Pierce E. Lewis in *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes* describes the landscape as “a cultural record that reflects tastes, values, aspirations and even our fears in a tangible way.” Calder Loth, Senior Historian in the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, reminds us that “historic grounds serve as a compliment to the building, not to obscure or dominate it.” These ideas factor heavily in the restoration design plans today. Research found in letters, photos, books and archeology help to develop the restoration design with an understanding of the maintenance required. Realizing gardens are not static, reevaluation of plantings and design help to keep it maintained and in concurrence with the new information about the landscape.

With garden design gleaned from experiences in their home country of England and from the garden books of the day, these early colonials set about taming the wilderness surrounding their Great Houses. Typically, the curtilage was large and in appropriate proportion to the structure. This served as a pleasing setting as well as providing a view to approaching visitors as a protective measure. Brick walls fences and hedges were used as enclosures to keep out domestic animals and wildlife. The ha-ha was a more elaborate design sometimes used for this purpose also. This landscape element created a barrier while preserving the view with use of a turfed incline that slopes downward to a masonry retaining wall. Examples are at both Stratford Hall and Mount Vernon.

Terracing was another element brought from English gardens that lent a dramatic effect and was perfect for a hillside setting. The broad paths created in a formal patchwork pattern in the larger gardens accommodated the ladies very wide skirts which were in fashion at the time. Within these squares, vegetables were planted for household consumption. Flowers would often be intermingled with the vegetables and more prominently added to the outlying borders as seen at the 17th century garden at Bacon’s Castle. South facing forcing walls captured the warmth of the late winter/early spring sun for starting seedlings.

In a time with no modern air-conditioning, trees in the landscape provided relief from the sometimes-stifling heat within the houses. It was not uncommon for chairs from inside the house be brought outside for sitting in the shade to enjoy the summer breezes. Thomas Jefferson had special Windsor chairs made for this purpose. Besides shade trees, there was always a place for fruit trees in the landscape and many gardens included an orchard.

Landscapes were an integral part of the life of early Virginians and thus a significant part of the historic properties. Preserving these vestiges of the past completes the stories of the magnificent dwellings.

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