

A Tale of Two Gardens

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It's easy to drive along Lindbergh Boulevard in Kingsessing and not realize you're anywhere near a river, let alone that making one simple turn could land you in the peaceful oasis of Bartram's Garden, one of the most notable early gardens in America, with its terraced, riverfront landscape of blooms, trees and sparkling schist buildings. It's the kind of first-time experience that guarantees a joyful surprise. "Even to this day, native Philadelphians often don't know this place," said late Bartram's Garden curator and historian Joel Fry, "but when they come here, everyone—even people who deliver packages here or people who get lost and come here by accident—go[es], 'Wow, what is this place? I didn't know this was here.'"

Layered Landscape



Petroleum refining and other heavy industry dominated the Lower Schuylkill River when this photo was taken in 1926. The Woodlands can be seen highlighted in green at top and Bartram's Garden at bottom. | Photo: Dallian Aerial Survey Company, courtesy of Hagley Digital Archives

To the casual observer, the area along the Lower Schuylkill—the stretch of the river beginning around the University Avenue Bridge until it merges with the Delaware—looks like an industrial mashup of rusty old infrastructure: remnants of garbage treatment facilities, warehouses, junkyards, and refineries. But because preservation efforts back in the 19th century spared both Bartram's Garden and The Woodlands—two significant 18th century gardens and estates—from industrial development, a more comprehensive story of the Lower Schuylkill's history can be told, if one knows where, and how, to look. Beyond their geographical proximity and river views, these distinct sites share an interconnected history

within a much larger web of characters and movements across time. And, thanks to early preservationists' foresight, these cultural landscapes remain not only active historic sites and vital community assets, but also, and more significantly, offer a unique and illuminating lens on the development of early botany and horticulture in North America.

Ingrained in the political mindset of the intellectual elite of the 18th century was a profound interest in nature, botany and horticultural practice, which overlapped with other emerging branches of knowledge like medicine. Philadelphia was at the cutting edge of developing political ideals and scientific advancement, and the major players weren't just exchanging ideas or books. Plants flowed freely to and from Philadelphia, throughout the colonies and across the Atlantic, directly through Bartram's Garden and The Woodlands.

At the center of this web, a Quaker farmer, John Bartram, collected native North American plant species and shipped them to Peter Collinson, a Quaker merchant in England. Later, Bartam's son, William, a gifted naturalist and botanical artist who continued to care for the garden, exchanged seeds, letters and plant specimens with The Woodlands' William Hamilton. Benjamin Smith Barton, a physician and botanist at the University of Pennsylvania's School of Medicine, relied on William Bartram's skills in botanical illustration and made use of both Hamilton's estate and Bartram's Garden as a "living laboratory" for students in Materia Medica at the young nation's premier medical school.



Rowhouses built in the late 19th and early 20th centuries surround another 18th century survivor in Southwest Philadelphia, a 1764 farmhouse on Vogdes Street just off Woodland Avenue. | Photo: Peter Woodall

These two 18th-century survivors attest to the interplay between urban and rural development in colonial Philadelphia. As the city's urban center was taking shape in the 18th century, with townhouses, churches and civic buildings like Independence Hall under construction down by the Delaware River, the fertile Kingsessing region west of the Schuylkill River was being apportioned into plantations and productive farmland. Through the 19th and early 20th centuries, Kingsessing was home to a number of commercial nurseries, including Robert Buist's Rosedale, and continued to play a major role in the global horticultural economy. Subtle clues to Southwest Philadelphia's pastoral past abound across the broader landscape, in extant buildings like John Bartram's house and seed house, Hamilton's mansion and stables, the 1764 farmhouse on Vogdes Street, St. James' Church, and the Blue Bell Tavern, as well as in greenhouses and other structures destroyed long ago, revealed via subterranean excavation.

In other words, for historians, archaeologists, and researchers attempting to make invisible histories and connections across generations visible, both The Woodlands and Bartram's Garden provide rich grounds for study. Archaeologists and historians reconstruct the past by digging up trash middens and analyzing decayed plant matter. Centuries-old witness trees and their descendants, which the Bartrams, Hamilton, Buist and others gifted, traded and propagated, provide a valuable historic record. Even the prolific competitive species that exotic plant collector William Hamilton first introduced to North America that take over vacant buildings and obscure abandoned infrastructure connect past to present. (We have Hamilton to thank for importing the particularly aggressive paper mulberry and Ailanthus trees among others, and, in some cases, the Bartram family nursery for propagating and selling them to the masses.) Remnants of seeds and plants discovered stashed in floorboards and crevices by crafty rodents offer other clues. And, of course, written documentation like maps, letters, drawings, plant lists and other ephemera provide a valuable resource for cross-checking physical evidence.



In the early 1990s, carefully folded seed packets were discovered between joists in The Woodlands' attic floor. | Photo: Starr Herr-Cardillo

For a site like The Woodlands, which lacks a collection of furniture or objects, archaeological discoveries of physical remnants across the site become especially valuable, explained Jessica Baumert, who has served as the site's executive director since 2011. Many historic house collections, she elaborated, tend to include higher-end art, furniture and books that demonstrate wealth and aspiration. In contrast, "some things that we've found during digs at The Woodlands include a servant's uniform button, flower pot fragments and kitchen waste like animal bones and oyster shells," she said. "These objects give us more insight into day-to-day life here in the 18th century than, say, a Chippendale chair would."

For 30 years, the physical remnants that have fascinated and confounded archaeologists are The Woodlands' and Bartram's lost greenhouses, which, if found, would corroborate researchers' hypotheses about the botanical experiments and exchanges that link the two sites. Most recently, archaeobotanist Chantel White and her team from Penn's Center for the Analysis of Archaeological Materials are building on past work carried out by Fry and archaeologist Sarah Chesney, searching for remnants of William Hamilton's massive greenhouse, which was destroyed in the 19th century when the site became a cemetery. So far the team has found only fragments of what was once there, even far below grade, leading them to believe the structure, having outlived its use with the turnover of the estate, was thoroughly destroyed to make way for carriage parking and turnaround for the cemetery.

Gardens Are for People



One of the many “grave gardens” maintained by volunteers at The Woodlands. | Photo: Peter Woodall

Deciphering the earlier history of a landscape that’s been altered as successive generations of change erode and disrupt physical evidence can be a real challenge, said White. Undeterred, she hopes in the most recent excavation at The Woodlands to investigate an area where the estate’s garden laborers lived, which could lead to a more nuanced understanding of the day-to-day labor, experience and expertise necessary to cultivate and care for the gardens and farms all along the Lower Schuylkill. Estate owners like Hamilton rarely performed any actual physical labor on their properties. Rather, they would outline

detailed instructions to be executed by gardeners, some of whom were enslaved or indentured servants. Hamilton corresponded regularly with George Hilton, a Black man indentured as one of his head gardeners.

At Bartram's Garden, historians Sharece Blakney and Fry together had been investigating the roles enslaved, indentured or free African Americans might have played in the Bartrams' botanical enterprise, with no clear conclusions yet. The study of Bartram's labor history complements Blakney's broader research on the African American history of the Kingsessing region.

For those who today steward these sites, the still-to-be-discovered human stories are as compelling as the beauty of the historic landscapes and buildings.

"There are still so many gaps in every aspect of the story," Baumert said. "We don't know how many gardeners there were at The Woodlands, and we don't really know much about the relationship between the Hiltons and William Hamilton." Hamilton's life itself remains somewhat of a mystery; he never married and died a bachelor. Many of his papers were destroyed, perhaps at his request, due to his status as a known loyalist. "Sometimes I think that makes it more fun."



Harvesting kale at Sankofa Community Farm, located at Bartram's Garden. | Photo courtesy of Sankofa Community Farm

“Gardens are for people,” said Miranda Mote, a garden and landscape historian based in Philadelphia. “Garden history has to be interdisciplinary. There’s always a human dimension.” Today, the sociocultural landscape of Southwest Philadelphia couldn’t be more different than it was 250 years ago. As sprawling estates gave way to factories, refineries, railroads and slaughterhouses, the river grew thick with pollution. Improved regulation, particularly through the Clean Water Act, has helped keep rampant pollution in check, but Kingsessing, the community immediately surrounding Bartram’s Garden and one of the city’s poorest and most racially segregated neighborhoods, exemplifies the devastating effects of environmental racism.

The Woodlands and Bartram’s Garden have done an excellent job at fostering human connection in the present by making both sites accessible and welcoming to their surrounding neighborhoods. Inclusive and innovative public programming has made these significant cultural landscapes vital resources for their communities. The Woodlands, for example, engages more than 100 volunteer gardeners to tend “cradle graves”—Victorian-era planter-style gardens—on-site each growing season. Bartram’s offers community boating and fishing, as well as a long-running, highly successful community farm and garden.

“The one thing I think Bartram’s as an institution is doing absolutely right on is [making] a true investment in the future of gardening in the city,” said Mote, “in addition to a writing of history that’s more accurate,” particularly, she noted, through the Sankofa Community Farm—a “spiritually centered farm” that brings together high schoolers, neighbors, and volunteers from the local community to connect with farming practices and foodways rooted in the African Diaspora. The gardeners collaborate in planting, cultivating and harvesting, and then selling what they grow at local farmer’s markets. “What I see evolving at Bartram’s now is programming that captures the spirit of what it really takes to build garden culture in a city like Philadelphia,” said Mote, “as opposed to a mission that’s solely focused on the prestige of whatever that garden is or figures associated with it.”

In other words, while these preserved, verdant oases may seem like isolated anomalies in their dense urban neighborhoods, both Bartram’s and The Woodlands are deeply connected to their storied and still-to-be-discovered past, as well as to the future of Southwest Philadelphia and those who call it home.
