



# Magnolia

*Magnolia grandiflora*  
The Laurel Tree of Carolina  
Catesby's *Natural History*, 1743

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## *Blount Mansion: An Urban Oasis in Knoxville*

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Tucked into a tree-shaded corner of downtown Knoxville, Tennessee, a National Historic Landmark property and its historic garden comprise an urban oasis amidst glass towers and concrete freeways. As one of the city's few remaining antebellum structures, Blount Mansion serves as a reminder of the time when Tennessee was just gaining statehood and Knoxville was on the outer edge of a rapidly expanding young nation. The gardens at Blount Mansion represent an eighty-five-year-old partnership formed in 1934 between the Blount Mansion Association (BMA) and the Knoxville Garden Club (KGC), both of which were formed in the early 1920s.

William Blount, born in Bertie County, North Carolina in 1749, descended from a family of prominent entrepreneurs and landowners. He served as a paymaster and quartermaster of North Carolina troops during the American Revolution, and afterwards represented the new state in the Continental Congress. In 1787, Blount was a delegate to the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. He signed the U.S. Constitution for North Carolina and campaigned for the ratification of the document in his home state. In 1790, President George Washington appointed Blount the first and only governor of the Territory of the United States South of the River Ohio—commonly known as the Southwest Territory—a restive frontier expanse, which Blount subsequently shepherded into admission to the Union as the state of Tennessee in 1796.

Blount came to the area originally known as White's Fort in 1791, christening it "Knoxville" in honor of Secretary of War Henry Knox, and designating it the territorial capital. Here, Blount built a house on the corner of Hill Avenue and State Street. The frame and clapboard dwelling served as Blount's home until his untimely passing at the age of fifty in 1800. Blount's family retained possession of the property until 1818. The house changed hands many times over the next 107 years, until the



*Blount Mansion Garden, present-day view looking Northeast.*

Photo by Vaiden Taylor.

threat of demolition in 1925 to make way for a parking lot brought Mary Boyce Temple and the Bonny Kate Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution to the rescue. The Blount Mansion Association was formed to preserve the house as a museum for future generations, and the house was officially opened as a museum the next year.

From the time the museum opened, the BMA wanted both to preserve the house and improve the landscape, but the fledgling organization's budget difficulties forced it to

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# CALENDAR

**April 2-4, 2020. “Natchitoches in the Red River Valley: Confluence of Cultures,”** The 42<sup>nd</sup> annual meeting of the Alliance for Historic Landscape Preservation will take place in Natchitoches, the oldest permanent settlement in the Louisiana Purchase. The three-day conference begins with an introduction to the El Camino Real de los Tejas and site of Los Adaes, the former capitol of Spanish Texas. The meeting includes tours of St. Augustine Church, Cane River Creole National Historical Park, plus Magnolia, Melrose, Oakland, and Cherokee Plantations, and ends with a banquet at the Cane River Brewery. Visit: <http://ahlp.org/annual-meetings/annual-meeting-2020/>

**April 4, 2020. Annual Garden Gala Plant Sale,** hosted by the Stephen F. Austin State University’s SFA Garden at the Pineywoods Native Plant Center in historic Nacogdoches, Texas. The event benefits the SFA Mast Arboretum, PNPC, Ruby M. Mize Azalea Garden and Gayla Mize Garden, along with educational programs at SFA Gardens. Visit: [sfagardens.org](http://sfagardens.org) or call (936)468-4129.

**April 17-19, 2020. “Celebrate Planet Earth: Giving Back with our Gardens,”** the 74<sup>th</sup> annual Colonial Williamsburg garden conference, in honor of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Earth Day. The keynote speaker, Joe Lamp’l, is a national gardening television host of *Growing a Greener World*. Additional speakers include Dr. Jeff Gillman on organic gardening; David Mizejewski, spokesperson for the National Wildlife Association; and authors Anne Spafford and Nancy Lawson. Visit: <https://www.colonialwilliamsburg.com/learn/conferences/garden-symposium>

**April 18-25, 2020. Historic Garden Week in Virginia** organized by the Garden Club of Virginia. Described as “America’s largest Open House,” this eight-day statewide event provides visitors a unique opportunity to see unforgettable gardens at the peak of Virginia’s springtime color, as well as beautiful houses and over 2,300 flower arrangements by Garden Club of Virginia members. Visit: [www.vagardenweek.org](http://www.vagardenweek.org).

**April 24-26, 2020. 38<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the Southern Garden History Society, at George Washington’s Mount Vernon.** See details on

following page. Visit [www.southerngardenhistory.org/events/annual-meeting](http://www.southerngardenhistory.org/events/annual-meeting) for registration details and updates. Rooms have been set aside at the Holiday Inn & Suites at 625 First Street, Alexandria, Virginia 22314. Be sure to make reservations by **April 2** at the Holiday Inn group rate booking link or by calling (703) 548-6300.

**May 1-2, 2020. Georgia SGHS State Ambassadors’ Gathering in Historic Rosewell.** SGHS members are invited to a Friday evening wine and cheese event prior to the Garden Club of Georgia program on Saturday, “Mansions in a Mill Town,” which will include tours of antebellum homes and gardens in Rosewell, Georgia. Visit: <http://gardenclub.uga.edu/historic.html#hbgp>

**May 14-September, 2020. “A Landscape Saved: The Garden Club of Virginia at 100,”** an exhibition at the Virginia Museum of History & Culture, in Richmond, VA. To commemorate GCV’s centenary, this exhibit tells the colorful, courageous, and impressive history of three generations of activists who have produced a strong statewide voice for conservation, gardening, and education. Visit: [virginiahistory.org/exhibitions/](http://virginiahistory.org/exhibitions/)

**May 30, 2020 - Mississippi State Ambassadors’ Gathering at the Eudora Welty House & Garden** in Jackson, MS. From 1:00-3:30 pm SGHS members are invited to learn about photographing your garden, with tips from Garden Club of America award-winning photographers. Welty’s own garden photography will also be discussed, tours of the Welty House will be given, and Susan Haltom and Cecile Wardlaw will lead members around the Welty garden. Call (601) 353-7762 if you plan to attend.

**June 14-19, 2020. 24<sup>th</sup> Annual Historic Landscape Institute: “Preserving Jefferson’s Gardens and Landscapes.”** This one-week course uses Monticello’s gardens and landscapes and the University of Virginia as outdoor classrooms to study historic landscape preservation. Lectures, workshops, field trips, and practical working experiences introduce students to the fields of landscape history, garden restoration, and historical horticulture. Visit: [www.monticello.org/hli](http://www.monticello.org/hli)

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focus on the structure and make only minor alterations to the surrounding grounds. In 1934, the KGC bridged the gap by making an offer to install and maintain a proper garden at the young museum.

The KGC dates to 1923, when Mrs. John S. Brown and her garden-loving friends organized the club. They were admitted to the Garden Club of America in 1932 and took on the management of Blount Mansion's gardens a scant two years later.<sup>1</sup> However, due to the privations of the Great Depression, followed immediately by World War II, their plans for the museum did not fully flower until 1947, when William Pitkin's 1941 designs for the landscape were implemented.<sup>2</sup>

Pitkin's plan, which represented the first formal landscape design for Blount Mansion, included an herb garden and a sunken garden area as well as herringbone brick paths, a bell, and a rustic well. Descendants of Charles McClung, the surveyor Blount appointed to lay out Knoxville's first streets, donated a sundial for the new garden.<sup>3</sup>

A new era arrived for Blount Mansion and its gardens in 1958 following the reconstruction of the kitchen as a stand-alone building in its original location, which disrupted Pitkin's design, as well as the restoration of Governor Blount's office, which had served as the museum caretaker's quarters until that time. At this pivotal moment, BMA, led by Mrs. Hugh van Deventer, and the KGC retained the services of Alden Hopkins, the highly regarded landscape architect on staff at Colonial Williamsburg. Hopkins was well known for his Colonial Revival-style designs, including the Pavilion Gardens at the University of Virginia and the gardens at Gunston Hall, home of founding father George Mason.<sup>4</sup> Mrs. van Deventer and the two Knoxville organizations tasked Hopkins with designing an "authentic" eighteenth-century garden for Blount Mansion.<sup>5</sup>

In his redesign of the gardens in Knoxville, Hopkins retained some elements of Pitkin's original plan, yet

significantly altered the landscape in the rear of the mansion. Hopkins placed great emphasis on simplifying the layout of the grounds, explaining, "[a] great necessity in this garden as it now exists is for simplification of spaces and of small plant materials to reduce labor and time in

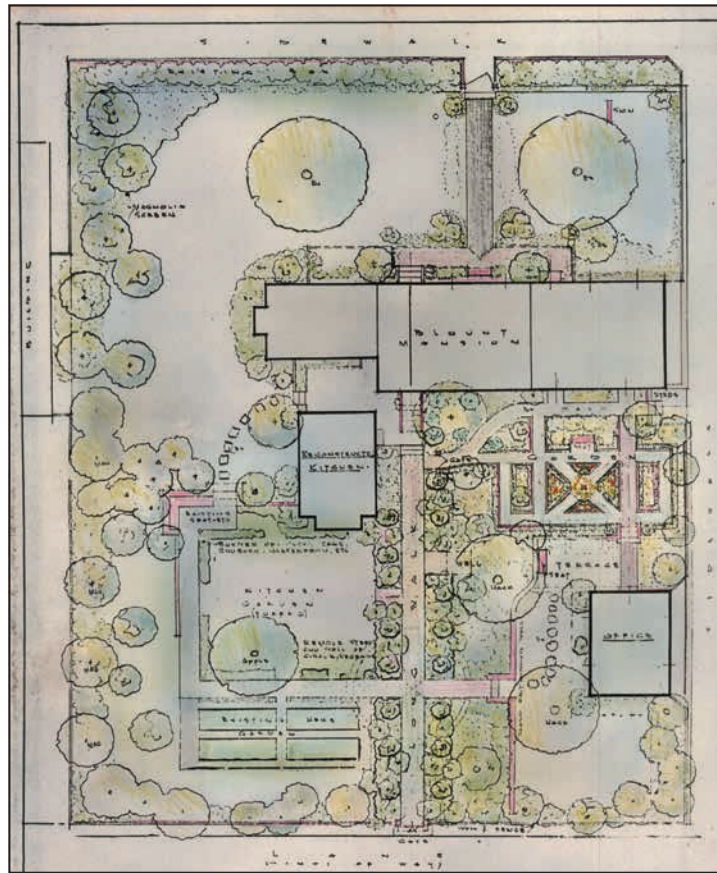
maintenance. There are too many small corners and beds with perennials, etc. which call for hand work and time."<sup>6</sup> Hopkins developed a planting list that drew heavily on his work at Colonial Williamsburg. The plants on the list were common to the late eighteenth century, including ornamentals along with culinary and medicinal herbs.<sup>7</sup>

Hopkins' reimagining of Pitkin's earlier plan made use of many existing elements. The brick retaining walls, bench, and steps to the west of the newly rebuilt kitchen building, and the existing lawn were retained, as was a rustic well. Hopkins changed the grading of the yard to remove the

steps and wall on the long brick walk leading to the back door of the house. He removed the sunken garden on the south end of the walk and added a gate to connect it to the new parking area. The sundial was moved from the center of the garden and placed at the end of the long walk. The existing plantings were redesigned to include a dense grouping of American boxwoods to line the walk and to remove some of the higher maintenance perennials, which simplified the work needed to maintain the gardens. Hopkins' design also called for the addition of a brick terrace and a redesign of Pitkin's formal parterre just south of the house between it and Governor Blount's newly reopened office.<sup>8</sup>

Shortly after submitting his first drawings for the garden redesign, Hopkins died suddenly of a brain aneurism. The BMA and the KGC reached out to his associate at Williamsburg, Donald Parker, to complete Hopkins' plans and to see the project to completion.<sup>9</sup> This began a long and fruitful collaboration with Parker that

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Alden Hopkins Original Plan.

Courtesy Blount Mansion Association.

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lasted well into the 1970s.

Since Donald Parker had worked closely with Hopkins through the years, he was familiar with the project in Knoxville. However, Parker's heavy existing workload and his assumption of the role of principal landscape architect at Colonial Williamsburg resulted in a delay between Hopkins' death and the beginning of his involvement with the work at Blount Mansion.

Parker altered Hopkins' original design by removing a parterre garden close to the southeast corner of the house, resulting in a surprise archaeological discovery that further changed plans. When workmen began to remove the existing bricks, they discovered a subterranean room, which was later proven to be a cooling room—a structure similar to a root cellar. The BMA decided to restore the cooling room and forego the planned parterre. The National Park Service helpfully submitted drawings that were used to influence the way the cooling room was rebuilt.<sup>10</sup>

In 1963, the Blount Mansion Association acquired the house directly across State Street from the Mansion, known as the Craighead-Jackson House. Built in 1818, the Craighead-Jackson House is a wonderful example of urban late-Georgian architecture. Built of bricks handmade by John Craighead's slaves, it is one of the oldest surviving brick structures in downtown Knoxville.<sup>11</sup>

The house reopened in 1965 following a two-year renovation, and served as Blount Mansion's visitors center until 1997, when the current facility was opened on the opposite side of the mansion. The grounds surrounding the Craighead-Jackson House were thrown into disarray by the renovation process and needed to be redesigned. Landscape architect W. C. Frincke submitted a basic plan in 1965. His design included space for a parterre, flowering trees, dense underplanting, and called for walkways and benches.<sup>12</sup> The basic elements of this scheme were implemented over the next few years, but the resulting garden did not live up to the expectations of the BMA or the KGC.

In 1972, the Knoxville Garden Study Club, an organization of younger women affiliated with the KGC, retained prominent

landscape architect Edith Henderson to design a more appropriate parterre garden behind the Craighead-Jackson House.<sup>13</sup> Henderson was one of the first women in the country to become an accredited landscape architect. She graduated from the Lowthorpe School of Landscape Architecture and earned a BS from Simmons College both in 1934. Henderson went on to have a very successful career in Atlanta. Her most prominent work included Clark Howell Homes, a public housing project, and First Presbyterian Church of Atlanta.<sup>14</sup>

Henderson's design for the Craighead-Jackson garden included a geometric boxwood parterre surrounded by Southern magnolias and a variety of flowering native trees, including, dogwoods, redbuds, and crabapples. Flowerbeds between the boxwoods were festooned with colorful tulips and pansies in the winter and spring, and yellow French marigolds during the summer and fall months. The diminutive yet enchanting garden fit the space perfectly and complemented the work done by Hopkins and Parker in the main garden behind Blount Mansion.<sup>15</sup>

In contrast to the well-tended gardens immediately surrounding Blount Mansion, the beguiling garden Henderson designed in the rear of the Craighead-Jackson House has become neglected and overgrown over the ensuing four decades. The Southern magnolia trees, once appropriate to the scale of the small parterre, have grown to tower over the garden. Their dense branches have choked out all the other trees, and the magnolia's gnarled roots have wrecked the brick-paved paths. In 2019, the Blount Mansion Association initiated an ambitious plan to restore this once-charming garden to its original luster, while making modest changes to Henderson's original plan. The large Southern magnolia trees will be replaced



*Blount Mansion, present-day photograph of façade.*

Photo by John Haas.

with smaller varieties such as Sweet Bay or Little Gem, and all the now-vanished original native trees will be replanted. The costs of this restoration are being underwritten in large part by numerous Tennessee chapters of the Daughters of the American Revolution, with each chapter sponsoring a single new tree.

From its earliest days as a historic house museum, Blount Mansion has been blessed to partner with the Knoxville Garden Club to complement our National Historic Landmark structure with an appropriate garden. As the organization embarks on the restoration of the Craighead-Jackson Garden with support from the same heritage organization, which saved the mansion nearly a century ago, we are guided by the same high standards and principals that led those women to hire only the best landscape professionals to refine this unique and special place over so many decades. We are hopeful that, working together as in the past, we will lead Blount Mansion into its second century as a museum in a manner worthy of their example. And going forward we know that our friends and partners in the Knoxville Garden Club will be alongside us, making sure the historic gardens at Blount Mansion look their best and remain a verdant garden in the heart of downtown Knoxville.

#### Endnotes

- 1 "History" The Knoxville Garden Club. Accessed December 13, 2019. <https://www.theknoxvillegardenclub.org/history>
- 2 William Chase Pitkin, Jr. 1884-1972. For more information, visit the website of the Cultural Landscape Foundation at <https://tclf.org/pioneer/william-pitkin>.
- 3 Opperman, Joseph. et al. "Historic Structures Report, Cultural Landscape Report and Master Plan." Winston-Salem: Opperman and Associates, 2015 pg. 52
- 4 "Alden Hopkins: 1905-1960." The Cultural Landscape Foundation. Accessed December 13, 2019. <http://tclf.org/pioneer/alden-hopkins>
- 5 Opperman, Joseph. et al. "Historic Structures Report, Cultural Landscape Report and Master Plan." Winston-Salem: Opperman and Associates, 2015. 57
- 6 Ibid. 58
- 7 Hopkins, Alden. 08/1960, "Landscape Design Plan & Restoration," Project# 138, from Blount Mansion Association Archives.
- 8 Ibid.



Blount Mansion Garden, Pitkin plan and planting.

Courtesy Blount Mansion Association.

- 9 Donald H. Parker, 1922-1998. For more information, visit the website of the Cultural Landscape Foundation at <https://tclf.org/pioneer/donald-h-parker>.
- 10 Parker, Donald H. 9/27/1962, "Garden Restoration by the Garden Club of Knoxville," plan 138/2, version 3.2.63, from Blount Mansion Association Archives.
- 11 Opperman, Joseph. et al. "Historic Structures Report, Cultural Landscape Report and Master Plan." Winston-Salem: Opperman and Associates, 2015 pg. 125-126
- 12 Frincke, W.C. 03/1969 "Site plan for Craighead-Jackson House" from the Blount Mansion Association Archives.
- 13 Edith Harrison Henderson, 1911-2005. For more information, visit the website of the Cultural Landscape Foundation at <https://tclf.org/pioneer/edith-harrison-henderson/biography-edith-harrison-henderson>.
- 14 "Donald H. Parker 1922-1998." The Cultural Landscape Foundation. Accessed December 13, 2019. <http://tclf.org/pioneer/donald-h-parker>
- 15 Henderson, Edith H. 1972 "For Garden Study Club. Craighead Jackson House ca. 1818," from Blount Mansion Association Archives.

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Blount Mansion, south elevation, 1955. Jim Thompson photograph (Jim Thompson Co.)

Courtesy Blount Mansion Association.