

HISTORIC RESIDENTIAL LANDSCAPES IN GEORGIA

Georgia's historic houses do not exist in a vacuum, but rather in physical settings that are often landscaped. In some instances, this landscaping simply complements the historic house and its architectural features. In other instances, landscaping is a significant historic resource in and of itself, equal in importance to the architecture of the house, and equally worthy of preservation.

To most people, historic residential landscapes are not as apparent as historic architecture. Landscapes do not sort themselves into neat categories corresponding to architectural styles or types. Moreover, the history of residential landscaping in Georgia is not one of simple progression from one "style" to another; landscaping trends and fashions tend to overlap and even merge, more so than architectural styles. Historic landscapes by their very nature are dynamic. They change with the seasons, and they change over time as plants grow, mature, decay, die, and are replaced. Finally, Georgia's landscaping has been studied less than its architecture. It is no wonder, then, that Georgia's historic residential landscapes have been considered secondary to its architecture!

Recent research and analysis by Catherine Howett at the University of Georgia and by the Historic Preservation Section of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources have shed new light on the state's historic residential landscapes. This new information can help us better understand, appreciate, and preserve Georgia's landscape legacy.

Historic residential landscapes generally consist of four main components: **gardens; yards; grounds** beyond the immediate yard if the property is extensive; and **larger surroundings**. Gardens, yards, and grounds are typically landscaped according to prevailing trends, fashions, or conventions. Larger surroundings correspond to the major settlement patterns of the state: rural, small town, urban, and suburban.

The making of Georgia's historic residential landscapes—the actual putting together of basic landscape components—involved at least four major variables: (1) the site itself, its size, shape, topography, hydrology, soils, vegetation, orientation, and previous development; (2) prevailing landscape styles, fashions, trends, or conventions, whether "high-style" or vernacular; (3) the intentions and capabilities of the landscape designer, whether a trained landscape architect or a homeowner with an avocational interest in gardening; and (4) the availability of time, money, labor, and materials. The complexity of this process is responsible for the diversity of Georgia's landscapes. The state's mild climate, varied geography, and abundance of water have further encouraged a variety of landscape developments.

Out of this complex landscaping process came at least ten major types or forms of historic residential landscapes:

- The landscape of work
- Ornamental yards
- The swept yard
- The Downingsque landscape
- The horticultural landscape
- New South landscaping
- Landscape revivals at the turn of the century
- Craftsman landscaping
- 20th-century suburban landscaping
- The landscape of play

Examples of each type survive today in Georgia's "living places."

The Landscape of Work

Among Georgia's earliest and most basic forms of historic residential landscaping is what might be called "the landscape of work." This is also among the most common and most enduring landscape form.

As its name suggests, the landscape of work was, first and foremost, functional. Occurring primarily in a rural-agricultural setting, it brought a sense of order, neatness, and efficiency to the working environment of the farm. It met practical, everyday needs yet, at the same time, reflected traditional values of rural life. The landscape of work, it might be said, made a virtue out of necessity.

Major components include a farmhouse, outbuildings, outdoor activity areas, a well, a small "kitchen garden" in a side or rear yard, agricultural fields and woodlots, and sometimes a small grove of fruit or nut trees. These components are linked by networks of paths, fences, and functional sight lines. Everything is arranged according to a simple, practical, but not always rigid geometry of straight lines and rectangles. There is often a straight path, unpaved, through the front yard from the road to the front door; this path frequently "extends" through the central hallway of the farmhouse to a rear porch and the back yard. Porches, both front and rear, and trees in the front and back yards provide shade for the house and outdoor activities.

The landscape of work is usually bordered by similar landscapes on adjacent farms or by the natural, usually wooded environment. It occurs primarily on farms of all sizes, dating from the 18th century to the present.

Ornamental Yards

Contemporary with the landscape of work but radically different was the "ornamental farm." Inspired by 18th-century English estates, this form of landscaping transformed the entire landscape of work into a work of landscape architecture. The end result was a working farm with the appearance of a public park. Several attempts to create ornamental farms were made along the Georgia coast during the late 18th century. No complete examples survive.

An offshoot of the ornamental-farm approach was extremely popular across Georgia throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. This derivative form might be called the "ornamental yard." Many examples still exist.

In the ornamental yard, a central core of land within a larger landscape of work, usually around or adjacent to the main house, is heavily embellished with formal landscaping. This is primarily aesthetic in nature and contributes little if anything to the basic operations of the property. It is generally self-contained; sometimes literally enclosed by fences, walls, or terraces; sometimes delineated by dramatic changes in landscape treatment. Usually it is situated along with the house on a high point of ground.

The "island" of formal landscaping in the ornamental yard is embellished in various ways. One, most common in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, is through enclosed, geometric gardens or planting beds (parterres), clearly separated from the surrounding landscape of work by fences, walls, hedges, or terraced slopes. Another way, common after the middle of the 19th century, is through a more informal, picturesque arrangement of trees, shrubbery, and lawn. This park-like area might be clearly delineated from the surrounding landscape of work, or it might blend into it, with the lawn becoming pasture or field and trees becoming forest or woodlot. Other design treatments include axial and semi-circular tree-lined driveways and paths. Occasionally outbuildings such as a plantation office might be worked into the design of the ornamental yard.

Because of the nature of this type of landscaping and the amount of space required, the ornamental yard occurs primarily in rural settings and on the fringes of towns and cities; occasionally it is found on larger residential lots in communities. A popular "in-town" version of the ornamental yard, featuring small, enclosed, geometric gardens, usually but not always in the back yard, is found on smaller residential lots in towns and cities.

The Swept Yard

Combining traditional virtues of rural life and its landscape of work with emerging notions of aesthetics and the ornamental yard is that peculiarly Southern form of landscaping known as the "swept yard." Extremely popular throughout Georgia during the 18th and 19th centuries, this vernacular interpretation of the ornamental yard has virtually disappeared from today's landscape.

As its name implies, the swept yard featured a dirt yard cleanly swept of all grass, weeds, and other ground cover. Almost always it was the front yard that was swept, although the area often extended to the side and rear yards as well. The yard frequently was covered with a thin layer of sand.

Whether sanded or not, the ground surface usually was "finished off" with sweeping ornamental patterns.

The overall arrangement of swept yards varied greatly. Some were merely cleared areas in the middle of a traditional landscape of work. Others, particularly front yards, were arranged in formal geometric patterns, with the swept areas defining paths and low planting beds. Still others were more informally and picturesquely arranged with trees and shrubbery. Usually the swept area was set off from the surrounding landscape of work by walls, fences, walks, or terraces.

The historical popularity of the swept yard is undeniable. Reasons for this popularity, like those of many vernacular traditions, are less certain. Some historians believe that yards were swept because grass, considered a weed, was deemed unsightly and indicative of poor housekeeping. Others think that swept yards dried out the ground and prevented "miasma." Still others believe that clean yards discouraged mice, rats, snakes, and other forms of vermin from taking up residence close to the house. Whatever the reason, the swept yard was a dominant residential landscape convention in Georgia until the late 19th century, when it was replaced by that contemporary landscape convention, the lawn.

The Downingsque Landscape

New forms of residential landscaping were introduced to Georgia toward the middle of the 19th century. Most were inspired by the ideas of Alexander Jackson Downing of New York who achieved national fame, if not fortune, for popularizing "English" landscaping in America through a series of books, magazine articles, and lectures.

The new "Downingsque" landscapes were meticulously designed yet informal in appearance. They featured a picturesque or naturalistic aesthetic which was in sharp contrast to the rigid geometries of European landscape conventions. They also were broadly expansive, integrating all four components of the residential landscape—gardens, yards, grounds, and surroundings—into a single unified "landscape composition." Downing also argued that only certain architectural styles, like the Gothic Revival, were compatible with these new landscape forms. He railed against such "incompatibilities" as four-square white-painted houses, like those of the Greek Revival style, set starkly amidst naturalistic landscapes.

Downing's landscapes were less popular in the South than in the North. Nevertheless, Downing's designs spread across Georgia through his books and through articles in popular horticultural and agricultural magazines. He gained a Southern disciple in Jarvis Van Buren of Clarkesville who created several genuine Downing's "compositions" in north Georgia by combining Gothic Revival architecture and picturesque landscaping. Other good examples of Downing's landscaping are rare. They are generally found in towns or cities, associated with high-style Gothic Revival houses or in the country where they provide the setting for seasonal retreats.

The Horticultural Landscape

Paralleling the development of Downing's landscapes and sometimes merging with them (although Downing would not have approved!) was a landscape phenomenon that some historians have called "the horticultural landscape." Beginning in the mid-19th century, it became possible to obtain exotic plants from all over the world, and interest was heightened by clubs and magazines devoted to horticulture. This led to the planting of exotic specimen plants in the domestic landscape—plants whose primary purpose was to display their beauty or uniqueness.

Ways in which these new, exotic specimen plants were introduced into the domestic landscape varied. In some instances, plants were simply set down into the existing landscape, usually in the front yard, for better or worse. In other cases, the entire landscape would be arranged or rearranged to highlight a few selected specimens. More frequently, plants would be worked into an existing landscape. At its extreme the horticultural landscape took on a plants-for-plants'-sake character.

The horticultural landscape was most popular until the turn of the century, although the tradition is still with us today. Specimen plants can be found on display all across the state.

New South Landscaping

During the latter decades of the 19th century, residential landscaping activity in Georgia reached an all-time high. In terms of sheer quantity, this era represents the hey-day of Georgia's domestic landscaping. Statewide, more residential properties were landscaped—more trees planted, more lawns

seeded, more designs drawn, more articles and books published—than ever before. More of this historic landscaping survives today than from any other period. Corresponding as it does to Henry Grady's "New South" in Georgia, this popular late-Victorian landscaping might best be called the landscape of the New South.

"New South landscaping" in Georgia, like the landscaping in much of the country at the time, can be described as a popular, mass-marketed version of the earlier Downingsque landscaping with elements of the horticultural landscape and the ornamental yard worked in for good measure. The overall effect of New South landscaping is informal—what one historian of Georgia landscaping has termed "picturesque randomness." This aesthetic is the same as the "picturesque eclecticism" characterizing late-Victorian architectural design and interior decorating. And it often suffers the same ironic, unfortunate fate: its carefully contrived picturesque randomness is frequently misconstrued as the absence of landscaping principles and designs!

Chief characteristics of New South landscaping are its informal, almost casual quality and its great variety of landscape features. Soft, curvilinear lines and contours rather than hard geometric edges mark the various landscaped areas. Most features, particularly trees and shrubbery, are blended together for overall effect, although the occasional specimen plant or landscape object may be highlighted. Carpets of grass, appearing in quantity for the first time in Georgia, create broad lawns that tie together various landscapes elements. New fences, if they occur at all, are made nearly transparent by the use of cast iron and wire; frequently they are replaced by low retaining walls, curbs, and hedges. Flower beds highlight the predominantly green landscape. The landscape of work, if present at all, is relegated to remote areas of the property and screened from view. The traditional components of residential landscaping—the gardens, yard, grounds, and surroundings—are suffused into a larger park-like landscaped environment.

New South landscaping transformed the appearance of Georgia. It was most pronounced, however, in towns and cities where increasing numbers of houses were built to accommodate the state's rapidly expanding population.

Within this urban environment—newly built houses with newly landscaped grounds—the New South landscape produced yet another new landscape form: that of the residential neighborhood. Created from the composite of individually landscaped yards and from the results of new community landscaping activities by local governments and civic organizations, the landscape of 19th-century neighborhoods took on many

of the characteristics still associated with them today: tree-lined streets, bordered by curbs and sidewalks, with uniformly set-back houses, and spacious front yards informally landscaped and blended together, all creating the appearance of a large landscaped park. This "streetscape" distinguishes Georgia's late 19th-century neighborhoods from the residential landscaping which had preceded them and from the suburban landscaping which would follow.

New South landscaping was the agent for yet another new phenomenon: the wholesale re-landscaping of older residential properties. This made the New South landscape transformation even more complete and led to the demise of much of the state's prior residential landscaping. In some instances, new elements and features were merely worked into an existing landscape. In other cases, existing landscapes were wholly remodeled, literally torn up and done over, in the pervasive style of the New South. Fences in particular were banished, either by being made transparent through the use of cast iron or wire or by being literally pulled down and replaced by hedges, retaining walls, and landscaped ditches known as "ha-has."

Landscape Revivals

At the turn of the century, there was a backlash against the rampant picturesque randomness of New South landscaping, just as there was a reaction to the picturesque eclecticism of late Victorian architecture. This backlash came from several quarters: from the emerging profession of landscape architecture, which wanted to impose a greater and more evident sense of "design" on the landscape; from the waves of classical revivalism sweeping through the world of architecture; from new interest in English vernacular design traditions; and from growing interest in colonial and early American landscaping.

Reaction to New South landscaping manifested in four different ways. One was the reproduction of historic landscapes, usually French or Italian, all classically inspired, with all of their geometric complexities, usually at the hands of professional landscape architects working for wealthy clients. Another was the less exact interpretation of historic landscape styles, scaled down to smaller residential properties, and carried out by landscape architects or trained commercial gardeners. A third was the loose interpretation of English vernacular landscaping, sometimes called "cottage" landscaping, with its emphasis on naturalness and simplicity. The fourth was the imitation of colonial and early American gardens, usually more fanciful

than factual, given the absence of authentic examples and reliable documentation.

Early 20th-century landscape revivals occurred on country, suburban, and urban estates, in the newer, more "up-scale" suburban developments, and occasionally in smaller cities and towns. They often corresponded to residential architectural styles. A Mediterranean villa, for example, would be given an "Italian" landscape, while a Tudor Revival house would be given an "English" landscape. Apart from the occasional plantation and country estate, they are almost never found in rural areas.

Craftsman Landscaping

Shadowing turn-of-the-century landscape revivals, but contrasting with them at virtually every step, is a little-researched early 20th-century domestic landscape movement that, for want of a better term, might be called "Craftsman" landscaping. Paralleling the development of Craftsman architecture and interior design, and apparently inspired by the same interest in arts and crafts, Craftsman landscaping was the standard accompaniment to the many new Craftsman-style bungalows which were built in Georgia cities and small towns. It is similar in many respects to the English vernacular revivals of the same period but scaled down to the more modest size of the bungalow house lot.

Craftsman landscaping displays a cozy, homey quality, informal but not random, carefully crafted to make the most of small suburban lots. Lawns, trees, shrubbery, and flower beds are standard features. Fences are nowhere to be seen. Natural material, especially stone, is used in the construction of retaining walls, patios, and walks. Porches, patios, and trellises lessen the distinction between inside and outside. A new element appears in the Craftsman landscape: the driveway for the automobile. Often its impact in the front yard is minimized by reducing it to two narrow parallel strips of pavement, with grass between.

Many Craftsman landscapes survive today, yet little research has been done on this aspect of Georgia's residential landscaping.

20th-Century Suburban Landscaping

The early 20th century brought yet another new development: the large-scale landscaped suburb. Here was a new form of residential development in Georgia, one which took shape literally overnight, generally on the outskirts of established cities and towns, and on a scale not previously experienced. It had no landscape traditions to adhere to and no conventions to follow apart from the standard "residential park" model of English and American suburban development.

In most instances, landscaping of these new suburban developments followed the proven model—the residential park. Resulting characteristics are: an overall irregular or curvilinear arrangement of streets, fitted into rather than imposed upon the natural topography of the ground; relatively large and irregularly shaped lots; retention of existing natural features of the site, including topography and vegetation; uniform setback of houses, creating generally broad or deep front yards; retention of unsuitable building lots as natural open space; and the introduction of small "domestic" landscapes on each lot, consisting primarily of open lawns, trees, and shrubbery. Shrubby was kept close to the house, rather than dispersed throughout the landscape, to hide the foundation line and to integrate the architecture with the setting. (From this new development comes our present-day convention of foundation planting.) New utilities such as electrical and telephone wires and gas pipes were increasingly relegated underground.

The development of landscaped suburbs brought with it a new way of creating a neighborhood landscape. Previously, most neighborhoods in Georgia had developed incrementally over the years, and landscaping was done in the same way by individual property owners. But in new suburbs, development and landscaping took place in a relatively short period of time, largely at the hands of a single developer and according to an overall plan. As a result, the effect was frequently one of uniformity. Within this overall framework, individual property owners then made their own smaller-scale landscape improvements. Questions of compatibility or conformance arose immediately and were resolved in a variety of ways. Some suburban developers took a hands-off approach, and let individual property owners do whatever they wanted, subject to the peer pressure of their neighbors. Others incorporated landscape specifications into deed covenants and subdivision design guidelines. Still others developed all the landscaping themselves, down to the last foundation shrub, before selling individual properties, in the hopes that this overall design would perpetuate itself. In most cases, by intent or otherwise, a relatively uniform suburban residential landscape was the result.

The Landscape of Play

A recent development in Georgia's residential landscaping is the emergence of what might be called "the landscape of play."

In this form, the front yard is generally but not always given over to public purposes with its landscaping contributing to the overall residential-park environment of the neighborhood. Its overall appearance is little compromised by practical or recreational conveniences. The back yard, however, is entirely given over to private leisure-time pursuits, including avocational landscaping. Hedges and fences, rock and rose gardens, patios and decks, barbecue pits and swimming pools, children's play equipment and a woodpile for weekend fires in the fireplace, perhaps even a satellite dish antenna or a recreational vehicle, all coexist in the back yard. In extreme cases, the landscape of play spills over into the side and front yards, creating yet another residential landscape form, one that is completely opposite in every respect from the landscape of work, Georgia's first landscape tradition.

This document is based on a larger manuscript prepared by Catherine Howett at the University of Georgia for the Historic Preservation Section of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources.

