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GEDDY GARDEN NEWS

*"Trees are the best monuments that a man can erect to his own memory.
They speak his praises without flattery, and they are blessings to children yet unborn."*
Lord Orrery

Those of us in museum work find it is helpful to be aware of what other museums are doing. By occasionally taking field trips to other historical sites we can compare and contrast interpretive techniques and learn a variety of presentation skills, as well as related historical information.

A group of us recently had the opportunity to take such a trip to Gunston Hall and Mount Vernon. Gunston Hall was the plantation of George Mason and is located about twenty miles south of Washington, D.C., overlooking the Potomac River.

The beautiful house was built in 1755 and is a mansion befitting a man of George Mason's social and political standing. He was the author of the Virginia Declaration of Rights, which served as the model for the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights of the Constitution.

The house contains a collection of 18th-century furnishings. I found it interesting that George Mason loved fine silver and on significant family occasions he commemorated the events by purchasing impressive pieces of silver. Therefore, almost every silver item in his home had special meaning for him.

The grounds and gardens at Gunston Hall held a special interest for me, of course. The outbuildings on the property are reconstructed, but the boxwood lining the 12-foot wide central alley is over 240 years old. Gardens are ephemeral, so even when George Mason was in residence there were changes taking place in the garden due to nature itself.

Until a year ago there was archaeology taking place in the formal gardens in hopes of discovering the appearance of that area of his landscape during his time. Some of the answers lie below the surface of the ground and some lie in writings, records, and drawings. Unfortunately, most of the records with useful garden facts are lost, but one very beneficial document remains. It is a description that was written by his second youngest son, John, recalling his father's 5,500 acre plantation.

He mentioned mulberry and walnut trees and a paled fence that enclosed the kitchen garden. He also mentioned that there were slave quarters. George Mason owned about ninety slaves and John wrote that on the opposite side of the house were some other dwellings for slave families. These sites have been excavated. John was in his sixties when these recollections were written by him, so some feel that he might have been forgetful at that age and might have left out some facts. What was offered by him was sufficient for the recreation of the plantation landscape at Gunston Hall. He wrote of four equal sided beds with pebbled walkways, a bowling green, a cemetery, a deer park, and one-acre beds filled with flowers and enclosed by fences.

The entrance to the plantation consisted of two rows of cherry trees, fifteen on each side, with footpaths between each row. They do not appear there today, but one can imagine the beauty of the ride to the house in the springtime when those cherry trees were in bloom.

By the 19th century the terraced slope to the river was probably developed into falling gardens with flower beds planted on each side of the walkway to the river.

As I mentioned, archaeology was discontinued last year. This was due to lack of funding as Gunston Hall, like so many museums, is suffering financially during these trying economic times. There are hopes and plans for the future, when the economy improves, to continue garden archaeology and possibly reconstruct the slave quarters.

I know the past is not retrievable, but by studying the past we can appreciate and understand some of the values of our forefathers. They had an awareness and an appreciation of the value of the landscape.

Janet Guthrie