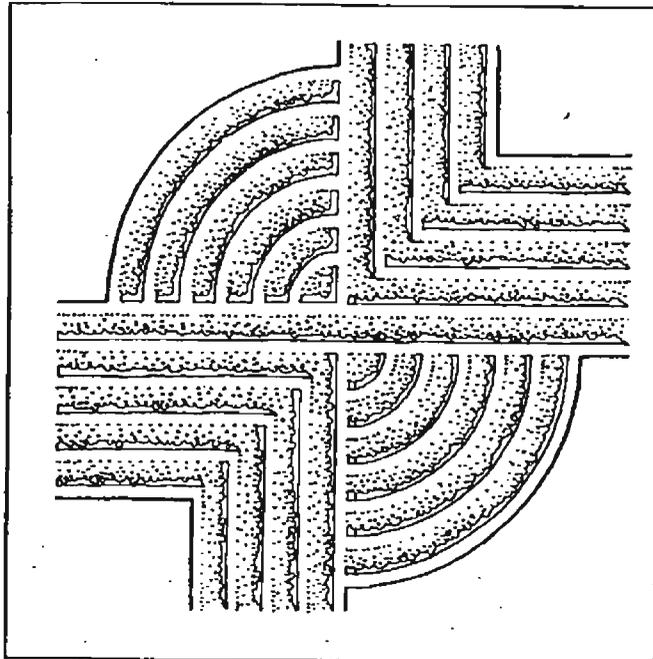


SEARCHING FOR THE ELUSIVE PLANTATION LANDSCAPE AT CROWFIELD



RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION 102

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Chicora Research Contribution 102

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Introduction

The vast majority of archaeological research at South Carolina plantations is compliance related. Traditionally, sites identified during archaeological survey are characterized by relatively large quantities of datable items, architectural remains, food bone, and other tangible artifacts. Such a strategy of site identification in the field can not locate or will totally ignore more intangible aspects of the plantation landscape such as gardens, fence lines, and possibly many utility buildings. Field strategies must change if we are to learn more about actual garden layouts and construction details. In addition, archaeologists should begin formulating research questions which can be addressed at the data recovery level in a compliance setting.

Crowfield is located in Berkley County, South Carolina near the town of Goose Creek, about 12 miles northwest of the city of Charleston. The plantation is situated on a terrace overlooking Huckhole Swamp where inland swamp rice was cultivated in the eighteenth century. Indigo was also an important crop grown on the plantation.

Crowfield is one of the best plantations to stimulate interest in garden archaeology. Said to be one of the most elaborate gardens in the South Carolina low country, it still contains remnants of landscape alteration and remains an impressive site. Visible are building ruins, ponds, earthen berms, and a mount. The site is particularly significant since there have been suggestions that Crowfield provided the stimulus and mental template for the Middleton Place gardens along the Ashley River (Mary Palmer Dargan, personal communication 1992).

The garden was built in the 1730s during Crowfield's ownership by William Middleton. In 1742 Eliza Lucas provided the only first-hand account of the garden and most researchers have given her account high credibility. Her account is quoted at length:

The house stands a mile from but in sight of the road [0.95 mile by today's calculations], and makes a very handsome appearance; as you draw nearer new beauties discover themselves; first the beautiful vine mantling the wall, laden with delicious clusters, next a large pond in the midst of a spacious green presents itself as you enter the gate....From the back door is a wide walk a thousand feet long [nearly exact by measurements today], each side of which nearest the house is a grass plat ornamented in a serpentine manner with flowers; next to that on the right hand [east] is what immediately struck my rural taste, a thicket of young, tall live oaks, where a variety of airy choristers poured forth their melody...Opposite on the left hand [west] is a large square bowling green, sunk a little below the level of the rest of the garden, with a walk quite round bordered by a double row of fine large flowering Laurel and Catalpas -- which afford both shade and beauty. My letter will be of unreasonable length if I don't pass over the mounts, wilderness, etc., and come to the boundary of this charming spot, where is a large fish pond with a mount rising out of the middle of the top of which is level with the dwelling house, and upon it is a Roman temple. On each side are other large fish pond, properly disposed which form a fine prospect of water from the house -- beyond this are the smiling fields dressed in vivid green (quoted in Leiding 1921:24-25).

In 1754 Middleton sold the plantation to William Walter. Walter and the subsequent owners apparently did not reside at the plantation and around 1774 the

plantation gardens were found to be "decaying". In 1776 Rawlins Lowndes purchased the plantation where he and his family occasionally resided through 1784. After this date it is unlikely that any real use was made of the gardens or dwellings at Crowfield and they continued their slow decay.

Research Questions

Initial definitions and basic questions have been largely developed by Hugh Dargan Associates, Inc., the landscape architects primarily responsible for the development of a preservation plan for Crowfield. Due to the complexity of the site, its size, tree canopy, dense understory, previous disturbances, ghosts of physical features, and "eye witness" account of Eliza Lucas in 1742, the landscape architects determined to follow, as closely as possible, the Eliza Lucas description to verify described features.

Chicora's archaeological testing was to concentrate on four items:

- the identification of pathways, concentrating on the interior terrace garden adjacent to the main house, which would also provide information on drainage, construction details, and organization;
- the identification of the "temple" on the island in the north pond,
- the identification of the bowling green, with emphasis on the pathway placement and delineating features, and
- the examination of garden structures.

Unfortunately, delays by the developer eliminated our ability to examine the "temple," since the island on which it is situated was flooded as part of the golf course construction. Likewise, delineation of the bowling green was not possible since about half of the area was incorporated into the 14th tee with significant topographic changes. In spite of these limitations, it was clear that much remained of the garden and that a variety of the questions, especially concerning the pathways, planting or bed areas, and garden features could be addressed through archaeological investigations.

Garden Archaeology

Perhaps the single greatest force in garden design during the seventeenth century was André Le Nôtre, gardener to King Louis XIV and designer of Versailles and Vaux-le-Vicomte. Central to La Nôtre's style was the use of strict geometric forms and lines to direct views and ensure conformity in nature. Other common elements include rigid symmetry; extensive ornamentation with topiary and geometric parterre hedging; and a central walkway which formed the major vista, usually oriented very strongly with the main garden entrance from the mansion. La Nôtre's philosophy was transplanted in England with minor modifications.

By the early eighteenth century there was growing disenchantment with both the reign of the Stuarts in England, and their formal gardens. The topiary which marked these formal gardens was seen as rigid and unnatural. This growing rejection of the formal gardens was called the "picturesque garden movement" (see Banks 1991:69).

Elements of the new, picturesque movement included vast walkways meandering throughout the garden, providing glimpses of different features. Temples were a frequent addition, serving not simply an ornamental function, but also revealing a political message, extolling the virtues of Greek and Roman philosophers. The pastoral, rural landscape became an integral component of the garden through the use of ha-ha walls that allowed animals to graze nearby, but to be separated from

the garden by this "invisible" wall.

It is not uncommon to find a blend of several garden types, especially as the old, formal gardens were beginning to give way to the new, picturesque gardens, and plantation owners sought to participate in the newest English garden styles. As Dargan and Dargan (1989:10-11) illustrate, it is certainly reasonable to expect that William Middleton, with his education in England and very strong ties to that country, would have participated in the early transition from formal gardening to picturesque gardening. Crowfield, for that reason, might be expected to have elements of both (a rigid formality such as the central axis and bowling green, and a loose interpretation of nature such as the mounts, temple, and use of water, and can be considered pivotal in the garden history of the Southeast.

Archaeological Investigations

Because of landscape alterations which deterred us in addressing some of the research questions initially posed, we chose to concentrate on three fairly narrow issues:

First, could evidence of pathways be identified anywhere in the garden?

Second, how was the garden (including berms, planting beds, mounts, and other areas) physically constructed?

Third, how did the various structures relate to the total garden plan?

The questions were chosen not simply because they could be readily answered in the available time frame, but also because they were fundamental and needed to be addressed before any additional work was contemplated at the site. These rather simple questions, then, would serve as a foundation for more extensive, and intensive, future investigations.

Three units were placed on the western berm to determine the presence of a fence line, plantings, or a path along the crest or interior base of the berm. Here, north-south "trench" about 1.4 feet in width was located along the interior berm slope.

Two units were placed just north of the main house to identify any central axis walk in the garden which might have linked the garden to the house. This work, while failing to identify any evidence of a path, did reveal that the interior garden fill was fairly level. In addition, it was discovered that the parterre fill was approximately 0.8 foot in depth which overlaid plow scars. This indicated that the site had been plowed prior to the creation of the garden and mansion.

One unit was placed at the north end of the interior terrace garden into the opening between the earthworks. It was in this area that any prepared pathway would cross from the interior terrace garden to the central gardens. Consequently, it was felt that this area provided the best opportunity to identify a path, if one existed and had left an archaeological footprint. No evidence for a path was observed.

Several units were placed on the eastern berm to confirm the findings on the western berm; that no path was present, although there was evidence for plantings at the interior base. One of these units was excavated to the old humus layer. The berm itself was constructed of well mixed basket loads of sandy fill. Here a feature similar to the trench found in the west berm was located. Upon excavation this feature was found to represent dark soil fill, piled up prior to the placement of the sandy fill on the interior of the garden or on the berm. These features are interpreted to be pockets of dark, rich soil intended as a

planting bed or row, parallel to the earth berm.

Excavations were also placed along the east and south exterior of the east garden structure in an effort to locate paths. None were found.

A small slot trench was also placed at the toe of the garden mount in the western half of the central garden area. This excavation was undertaken in order to examine the fill of the mount. It was found to be basket loaded, indicating intentional construction. Unlike the berms, which were largely constructed of sandy clay or sandy loam, the mount was constructed of a light reddish-tan clay sand, well compacted. It may be that the clay served as a cap to sandy fill, but this was not determined in these investigations. A clay cap would have reduced the erosion of the mount structure, which today is rather steep and would likely have had steps to its summit.

All of the excavations, excepting ones adjacent to the main house, contained very few artifacts. This was not surprising, since the garden was a show piece where little garbage would be allowed to accumulate.

Turning way from the excavations and to the various structures, our work revealed the outlines or footprints of five structures, and identified the presence of one additional structure. These buildings include the main house, two flankers symmetrically arranged on either side, and two garden structures in the northeast and northwest corners of the interior terrace garden. In addition to these five previously known structures, a privy was found approximately 20 feet west of the west flanker. A small unit was placed inside of the privy where a large number of artifacts were encountered that date to the mid-eighteenth century.

The Gardens

Prior to the construction of the garden in the early eighteenth century, the lands were being cultivated for upland crops, such as corn. When Middleton determined to build his settlement on this site, the first step was not clearing the land, since it was already under cultivation, but rather laying out the garden. In some areas this was accomplished by the removal of the plowzone, piling the soil to form a rough outline of the earthworks to be constructed. Middleton, therefore, was able to begin his work with a "blank canvas," creating an image entirely unique and clearly recognizing the "genius of the place."

The next phase of the garden construction must have been the excavation of the various water devices, such as the circular pond at the south and the series of fish ponds at the north. These ponds produced approximately 1,300,000 cubic feet of spoil. Our research has revealed that a large quantity, perhaps all, went into not simply the earthworks, but also raising the elevation of the garden about a foot from the original ground surface. As the garden area was being filled, Middleton or his designer was careful to insure that a "trough" of fertile soil was placed at the interior toe of the earthen berms on the interior terrace garden. These would later serve as beds for the plantings on each side of the garden.

The earthworks, including the berms and mounts, were built from loads of sandy clay or clay sand. These features would have been carefully formed and rolled to compact the soil (see Favretti 1989:Figure 2). In the interior terrace garden they were topped off with a relatively thin veneer of top soil, presumably just enough to grow grass, creating a pastoral scene. The use of such berms was apparently widespread and found later at Middleton Place. Favretti (1989:3a) illustrates similar berms from Claremont in Surrey, England from the early eighteenth century. Unlike Crowfield, however, the Claremont berms were planted in trees.

There is no evidence of in situ brick, shell, gravel, or sand pathways

within the Crowfield garden to date. There are two possible explanations. The first is that Crowfield did not have such paths, relying instead on packed earth. Certainly the increased elevation of the garden would promote drainage and such pathways of dirt are known to have existed. The alternative explanation is that the paths were constructed of brick and have been totally robbed. At the present time the evidence, however, fails to tilt the scales toward one or the other explanation.

Summary

The archaeological investigations revealed the carefully arranged buildings forming the main settlement, including the mansion, two flankers connected to the mansion by a screening wall, and a privy. Laid out in a very common Palladian style, the mansion and flankers begin to establish the symmetrical landscape. The screening wall perhaps intended to serve as a boundary for the garden, or perhaps intended to connect the various structures, forming one immense facade as visitors rode down the mile-long avenue to the house. Unfortunately, this avenue no longer exists, having been incorporated into the Crowfield development and golf course. The gardens, however, were not isolated from the house, but rather encompassed the house, making the dwelling a part of the total experience.

The first view visitors had of the garden was probably the "moon" pond to the south of the main house. Carefully designed to serve as a reflecting pool, it is clearly an integral part of the overall garden arrangement, being surrounded by green lawn. This panel of lawn may have been the prologue to the garden, combined with the avenue and house, setting the stage.

Entering the garden north of the main house there was the parterre, artificially raised about a foot from the surrounding elevation and encompassed by earthen berms on the east, west, and north sides. To the south the brick screen wall may have served to isolate the garden from the outside world. While there is no extant evidence of pathways, the history of the site makes it impossible to rule out their prior existence. Such parterres were often used for ornamental flower arrangements and Lucas observed that the area was "ornamented in a serpentine manner with flowers".

This main portion of the interior terrace garden was filled with up to a foot of spoil coming from the excavation of the ponds and canals during initial garden construction. More fill was used to create the berms. The central garden area and the associated earthworks received only a shallow dressing of top soil, just sufficient to support grass. The one exception to this was along the interior edge of the berm where there was a linear planting bed perhaps constructed to allow larger shrubs adequate root penetration.

East of the parterre is the bosquet or small compartment of trees, shrubs, or other tall, large plants, similar to a thicket. Nothing of this remains today, the area having been intensively logged and eventually covered by the seventeenth and eighteenth fairways. To the west was the bowling green, or level lawn often used for playing bowls, also frequently used for parties and other entertainment. The bowling green may have originally been enclosed by a continuation of the berms, which are still present to the east and south, the remainder now obliterated by golf course construction which has covered perhaps half of this feature.

Lucas reports that the bowling green was lower than the main garden, suggesting that it might not have received the same degree of filling common to other portions of the garden. Yet today the topography reveals that this area is about 0.3 foot higher than the garden to the east.

At the northern corners of this interior terrace garden were two small brick structures. The one remaining in good condition measures about 10 feet square and was originally plastered. This plaster was originally finished with

a blue pigment.

Previous testing by Elliott (1987:73) revealed sparse remains dominated by architectural debris, including nails and window glass. There is no evidence of any prepared floor. While the structures may have served as planting sheds, cold frames, or other utilitarian purposes, the limited excavation has failed to provide convincing evidence of use. The absence of flooring and absence of special purpose remains (such as glass bell jars or planters or agricultural tools) argues against a utilitarian interpretation. The presence of blue plaster on the eastern structure argues that it was probably not a dovecote. Curiously, the structure resembles the exedras of Bacon's Castle, having nearly identical measurements (although the Bacon's Castle examples are three sided) (Lucchetti 1990:332-35). Exedras were small "niches" used for contemplation, often having a bench, but little else. Of course, these structures may also have served as follies or eye catchers, typical of Theatrical Gardens (see Banks 1991:76).

While only just mentioned by Lucas, the Crowfield garden apparently had not only the one mount present today, but originally at least two. Lucas, however, may have been referring to the elevations at the north end of the interior terrace garden. In addition, there was a wilderness, perhaps another bosquet. All of these features appear to have occupied the central garden area. The one mount still present was constructed, or at least capped, with clay. It's elevation approximately 10 feet higher than the surrounding ground level would have provided a view of at least the garden, if not the surrounding rice fields and plantation landscape.

At the north end of the garden were the canals and the lake that served to terminate the garden tour, as well as to provide water control for rice cultivation and an area of fish cultivation. Unfortunately the mount in the center of the large pond has now been flooded, precluding investigation of its "Roman temple." Likewise, golf course construction and associated development construction may have altered the shape and topography of portions of the flanking canals. Through time the original flow of water through these devices may have also changed. Still preserved, however, is the crescent shaped "viewing structure," which allowed the garden to be viewed from its north edge.

Conclusion

Even this limited field work was able to address some very basic questions about the layout and construction of the Crowfield gardens. Because gardens were a universal part of the man-made plantation landscape, constructed by enslaved labor and conceived by the elite class, they are ideo-technic artifacts symbolizing the ideological rationalizations for the social system. As Kelly-Dargan (1983:64) observes "...landscape movement[s] lay in political, cultural, and economic causes".

Archaeologists must begin to look for these gardens and accept their significance to landscape and plantation archaeology. This will require interdisciplinary studies incorporating archaeology, architectural history, landscape preservation, and landscape architecture. For instance, by working in conjunction with the landscape architects at Hugh Dargan and Associates we have learned more about the gardens than by working separately.

Unfortunately, compliance archaeology is oriented toward traditional methods and perceptions, where the presence of tangible artifacts often determine the significance of an archaeological site. As noted at Crowfield, very few artifacts were encountered in the excavations. In addition, without careful study of the soil, the basket loaded fill in the parterre could have been misinterpreted as subsoil. Normally, such an area would be ignored or unrecognized, particularly if there was no clear above ground evidence for garden earthworks. Fault does not lie only with the archaeologist but also with regulatory agencies who perceive site significance in a traditional fashion.

The profession must strive to break out of some rather narrow views if we are serious about either our study of the past or about our efforts to preserve that heritage. Current efforts to explore plantation landscapes and gardens may be too little, too late, given nearly 30 years of unbridled compliance archaeology which emphasized the obvious, while ignoring the more complex issues of the Southern plantation.

This paper, we hope, is a call to review and expand our research goals, reinitiate interdisciplinary research, and recognize that if we fail to adequately explore these and other aspects of the plantation today, there will be few opportunities tomorrow.

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