

MERIDIAN HILL PARK AND THE JOSEPHINE BUTLER PARKS CENTER

Recreating the Village Green

BY ERIKA PACKARD

The beautiful golden mansion, now known as the Josephine Butler Parks Center, used to be boarded up and crumbling. It overlooked a park populated by drug dealers. Both the mansion and the park, Meridian Hill (known locally as Malcolm X Park), were conceived with so much potential, but had fallen into dangerous decline. Fortunately, both were rescued by a legion of dedicated volunteers led by Steve Coleman, director of Washington Parks and People, the nonprofit organization headquartered in the mansion that is responsible for the rebirth of Meridian Hill Park.

The mansion was built in 1927 by Mary Foote Henderson, wife of Missouri Senator John B. Henderson. Mrs. Henderson wanted the building to house the Vice President, and she worked tirelessly to transfer some of the grandeur of downtown DC to what was then “country” at the crest of the 16th Street hill. According to Coleman, Mary Henderson was a “smart, no-nonsense visionary who looked at the way things could be and dreamed big.” In her mind, “Why should you have the capital hunkered down in the swamp?”

Henderson didn't manage to have the White House moved to her neighborhood, nor was she successful in her quest to have the Lincoln Memorial installed on the top of the hill. Eventually, though, she built many of the buildings that surround Meridian Hill Park, with the vision of turning 16th Street into Embassy Row.

The land that the park sits on was purchased in 1910 by the United States Government. In 1914, the Department of the Interior hired George Burnap, a landscape architect, to design the park. Burnap drew inspiration from great Arabian, Renaissance, and Italian gardens, including the Villa Borghese. Burnap's original plans were later revised by Horace Peaslee, and in 1914 construction began. In 1933, the grounds became part of the National Parks system.



Josephine Butler Parks Center

The park was conceived as the America's first National Park for the Performing Arts. The Von Trapp family and Pearl Bailey performed there, and Frederick Law Olmstead, Jr. designed a concert space within the park. After the 1970s, though, the park fell into decline and was taken over by drug dealers. Its various nicknames, including “Murder Park,” “Needle Park,” and “Drug Park” kept many people away, and the park became known as one of the most dangerous federal parks in the country.

But local residents began to fight back. Led by Steve Coleman, who lived in the area, a small army of volunteers began venturing into the park at night on patrol. “We wore bright orange hats, and we made it a point to first say ‘hello’ to everyone we encountered.” Such a show

of trust and compassion served the volunteers well, and some of the drug dealers eventually joined Coleman's forces to help clean up the park.

Coleman speaks of “rediscovering the village green.” He says “Meridian Hill is the village green of DC North, where people of all nationalities, races, and economic backgrounds come together. “We're all mammals,” he says, “and at some level we have the need to be together with other humans and to be in nature.” Steve Coleman has been so successful with Meridian Hill that the park is used as a model for park clean-ups worldwide. Crime is down 98% and the park is now considered one of the safest national parks. With Meridian Hill in good shape, Coleman has turned his attention to parks all over the city. His most important project right now is Watts Branch Park in northeast DC. Though he is quite humble about his accomplishments, Coleman has received numerous honors for his work, met presidents and dignitaries, and is considered by many to be a visionary.

Coleman has led scores of volunteers in the restoration of the golden mansion that overlooks the park. The mansion is now called the Josephine Butler Parks Center, and was named for Josephine Butler Parks, Coleman's boss and mentor for cleaning up Meridian Hill. Mary Henderson, who had no children, willed the mansion to her Japanese steward upon her death in 1931, but Henderson's distant relatives sued to block the transfer of the property. They won, and when the building was sold it was, at various times, the Embassy of Brazil, the home of the American Legion, apartments, the Embassy of Hungary, a law firm, and property of the People's Republic of China. By the early 1990s the building sat vacant, and it began to crumble. Its exterior became gray and damaged, and water began to seep in from all sides.

Then Coleman and the staff and volunteers that made

up Washington Parks and People moved in and began restoration. "We didn't have money, but we had a lot of people," says Coleman. About 4,000 volunteers went to work to save the building, just like they had worked to save Meridian Hill Park. When it was time to choose an exterior paint color, Coleman matched a golden hue of a building he had photographed in Italy. The color choice is fitting - while doing the restoration work on the exterior, the original layer of paint was discovered to have been some shade of yellow.

These days the mansion, in addition to headquartering Washington Parks and People, houses about a dozen non-profit agencies that work for various causes. In order to fund their work,



Steve Coleman, Director of Washington Parks and People

Washington Parks and People rents out space in the mansion for events like weddings and dinners. They have their own organic caterer based on-site, and are working on plans for a café in the building. The ballroom of the mansion is particularly lovely, with two original fireplaces, huge windows, and pretty yellow walls. Steve Coleman's own wedding was in the ballroom, about a year ago, and now he and his wife are expecting their first baby. It's got to be a great feeling for Coleman to know that someday soon he'll be able to look out his office in the Josephine Butler Parks Center and see his child playing in the now safe, clean, and beautiful Meridian Park.

The Josephine Butler Parks Center is available for event rental. Please see <http://www.washington-parks.net/parkscenter.html> or call 202.GO.2.PARK (202.462.7275) for more information, or to become involved with Washington Parks and People. ■

Erika Packard is a freelance writer and photographer who tends a community garden plot in Arlington, VA. She can be reached at erikapackard@hotmail.com by anyone interested in being featured in the Home & Garden column, or for freelance writing or photography work on any subject.

We're celebrating our fifth year by offering all our valued customers **25% off** on all merchandise all month long.*

*except soils, mulches, and stones.

Ginkgo & Tuesday are already celebrating FIVE years at Ginkgo Gardens

Save even more on our daily surprise store specials and super weekend surprise savings.

Come in for Spectacular Summer Savings... Save 25% and more every day in July!

We're five! Let's party!

Monday - Friday 8 to 7
Saturday 8 to 6
Sunday 9 to 5

911 11th Street, SE
Washington, DC 20003
202.543.5172

ginkgogardens.com

happy birthday to us!

Mastering Your Own Behavior
Act Right!
1Cor. 9:27

MOUNT SINAI BAPTIST CHURCH • Pastor Tyrone Queen

YOUTH TALENT COMPETITION **COOK OUTS!**

3 FRIDAY NIGHT COOKOUTS
7:00 PM
July 8th-15th-22nd

Prizes
Food • Fun • Fellowship

AGES 10 • 21

ABSOLUTELY Free

GOSPEL or INSPIRATIONAL MATERIAL ONLY
SINGING • POETRY • RAP • GO GO

Bring your special talent, (gospel or inspirational material) and a few friends to the David Durham Christian Education Center
"COOKOUT in the PARKING LOT!"
1646 3rd Street, N.W.
(corner of 3rd & R Street)

Register to Compete
CALL: (202) 210-5337 or E-mail: therightact@yahoo.com

The COMPETITION Finale July 27-29 @ Our 2005 Youth Revival
MOUNT SINAI BAPTIST CHURCH • 1615 3rd Street, N.W. • 7PM Nightly • Rev. Shawn McBride

THE 5TH ANNUAL BROOKLAND HOUSE AND GARDEN TOUR



The home of Jacqueline Dunlavey features extensive gardens around the home and on an adjoining lot.

ed a home that is full of art and color. The couple purchased their home, at 1215 Lawrence St. NE, 25 years ago when Jackson-Jarvis was pregnant with the third of their four children. “We found Brookland and fell in love with the neighborhood,” says Jackson-Jarvis. “The home was a fixer-upper—the porch was propped up with two

sticks.” The front yard was a sloping mess of grass that was eventually replaced with an intricate collection of flowering plants. “The back yard was just clay and mud when we moved in. I hauled in six tons of pea gravel and created what my kids called ‘Jarvis Beach,’” says Jackson-Jarvis. The pea gravel makes lovely paths that wind around trees and flowering plants. Jackson-Jarvis’s mixed-media sculptures provide delightful surprises as they emerge from the foliage that surrounds them. A tall bubbling water fountain and two Buddha-like figures add atmosphere to what Jackson-Jarvis calls her “pseudo-Zen garden.”

Elanora Ivory, of 3630 13th St. NE, found her historic Victorian home in a roundabout way. Her daughter and son-in-law were house hunting in Brookland when they came upon the home. Though they chose not to purchase it, Ivory liked it so much that she bought it. She later found out that the home was built 105 years ago for Ebenezer Southall, who once served as the Bank Examiner for Washington, DC. The seven-bedroom home needed lots of work to bring it back to its original grandeur. As Ivory says with a laugh, “You have to like projects to have a house like this!” The hard work paid off, though, and now the home is stunning.

Jacqueline Dunlavey, owner of a 1937 brick Colonial at 3411 15th St. NE, first looked at the home in 1953, when she was a student at the Catholic University of America. She and her husband, Ronald, then rented the home in 1956. Although they liked the home, they never considered buying it because it had no yard. However, when their landlord offered to sell for a “song,” the Dunlaveys bought the home. When the house next door came on the market they purchased it as well, and gained the yard they were lacking with their original home. The additional lot is now a vegetable garden and a large red raspberry patch. In the half century she has lived there, Dunlavey has seen a lot of changes in the community. “There was a time,” she says, “when people were leaving and moving to the suburbs. Now, they’re coming back.” She credits the success of Brookland as a neighborhood to the “great cohesiveness” in the community.

Also on the tour was Island Jim’s Crab Shack and Tiki Bar, at 901 Monroe St. NE, right across from Colonel Brook’s Mansion. Jim Stiegman, the owner, drew his inspiration from life in the islands, where he liked to “bask in the glorious colors of the gardens.” He got the idea to transplant a bit of that laid-back, tropical atmosphere to DC. Despite what it feels like on a typical summer afternoon, DC does not have a tropical climate, and Island Jim has to sell

or donate his palms come winter. In the spring, though, their replacements arrive on a truck from Florida, ready to sway gently over the tiki torches and “beach” area in the outdoor bar.

The House and Garden Tour, which lasted from 12-5 pm, was capped off by a community picnic held at 1703 Lawrence St. NE. The gathering included tour attendees, homeowners, volunteers, and Brookland Garden Club members. It featured live music by the Archie Edwards Blues Foundation. Each stop along the tour featured an art attraction, ranging from displays of paintings, poetry readings, and musical performances.

Information about the Brookland Garden Club, and the House and Garden Tour, can be found at www.gbhc.org. If you are interested in joining the club or being featured on next year’s tour, please send an e-mail to info@gbhc.org. Note cards featuring pen and ink drawings of each home on this year’s tour can be ordered by calling Jeff Wilson 202.526.6887 (\$10 for 14 cards with envelopes). Proceeds benefit public green space in the Brookland community. ■

Erika Packard is a freelance writer and photographer who tends a community garden plot in Arlington, VA. She can be reached at erikapackard@hotmail.com by anyone interested in being featured in the Home & Garden column.

BY ERIKA PACKARD

The 5th Annual Greater Brookland Garden Club’s House and Garden Tour, featuring 14 locations, was a huge success. With ticket sales approaching 400, Brookland was bustling with visitors on Sunday, June 12th. Up and down the shady, tree-lined streets people could be seen walking from one home to another, fanning themselves with the tour’s cream-colored guide booklet. Those who preferred not to walk in the warm afternoon sun rode one of two air-conditioned buses that provided shuttle service in a continual loop. Each stop featured a home and/or garden and an artistic display or performance.

Each year attendance on the Tour has grown, and many attendees feel that the event continues to get better and better. Jeff Wilson, head of the Brookland Garden Club, organizes the event with the help of many volunteers. According to Wilson, each volunteer, “stayed in their lane and came through in the end” to deliver a successful event.

Though it’s their first year on the tour, the home and garden of Martha Jackson-Jarvis and her husband, Bernard Jarvis, was one of the highlights. Jackson-Jarvis, a sculptor and professional artist, has creat-



Martha Jarvis-Jackson’s garden features her mixed-media sculptures.