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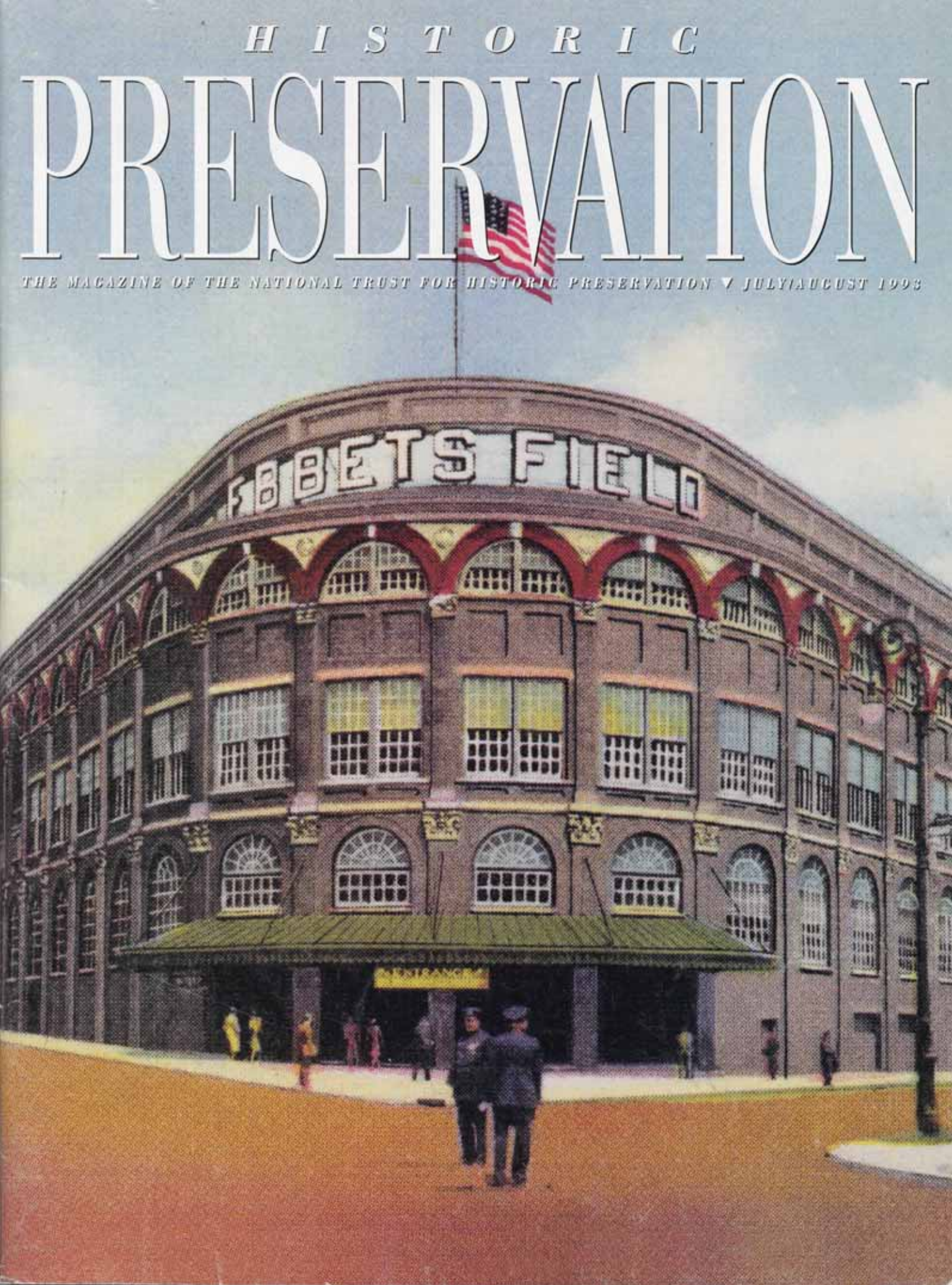

Buried Treasures

An eighteenth-century pleasure garden is unearthed by the Historic Annapolis Foundation.

By Kathleen McCormick

It's hard to imagine that the grounds of the eighteenth-century William Paca House in Annapolis, Maryland, were ever anything but an excellent example of a colonial "pleasure garden." But archival photographs that show the painstaking excavation of the site help explain why this is considered one of the early success stories in garden restoration. Even now, almost three decades after the beginning of the restoration, St. Clair Wright relishes the series of discoveries that led to this seemingly mature and undisturbed landscape. Dressed in shades of loden and apple green, Wright seems a natural part of the two-acre garden in which undulating grassy terraces are separated and defined by evergreens in various hues. Her rubber shoe-clad foot taps the spot where archaeologists uncovered the stone steps she suspected were hiding beneath a former parking lot. With a sweep of her hand, she shows where nine feet of earth and a bus station obliterated a corner of the "wilderness garden" at the lower end of the walled compound.

The property is important for several reasons. William Paca was a signer of the Declaration of Independence and a governor of Maryland. Although only twenty-two years old, Paca had grand designs in 1763 when he married Molly Chew, a wealthy young Annapolis woman, and began constructing his house and garden. He built a Georgian-style brick house with flanking wings and connecting hyphens, the first of its kind in Annapolis. His plans for a brick-walled pleasure garden with five terraces were equally grand, suggesting that he planned the house and garden simultaneously. Paca's was one of six terraced gardens of the period in the Annapolis area, but his in particular exhibited the influences of the gardens that he had visited while studying in England.

Paca sold his showcase in 1780, and his personal papers were destroyed some years later in a house fire. The Annapolis property changed hands several times through the nineteenth century, and in 1907 the house became part of the 200-room Carvel Hall Hotel, which was built over most of the garden; the remaining land was filled in and leveled for a parking lot, gas station, and bus depot.

By 1965 the garden and its history were all but lost. When Historic Annapolis found out that a developer planned to raze the Paca House along with Carvel Hall, it raised $275,000 to buy the house and begin its restoration. Wright, then president of Historic Annapolis, was a keen amateur gardener and horticultural historian. When she discovered that the Paca grounds were still available for high-rise development, she says, "we had to find a

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The chapel of the U.S. Naval Academy rises above the terraced grounds of the William Paca House, all traces of which had long been covered over.

reason for the state to buy this property." So she dug into the *Annals of Annapolis* and found a nineteenth-century reference to a fine garden on the site. With this documentation she convinced the Maryland legislature to buy the land for $340,000 in 1966 and to provide funds (matched by the federal government) to restore the garden. In 1972 the state leased the garden to Historic Annapolis with the proviso that it recreate the garden.

Over the course of the next three years, archaeologists uncovered a perimeter wall, bridge footings, the terraces' limestone steps, a deep depression for the pond, and the foundations of a pavilion and springhouse, as well as a sophisticated underground drainage system. Some 125 woody samples from the original plants in the garden were sent to Williamsburg for identification.

Unearthing the archaeological traces was only the beginning. Wright and other researchers pored through pre-Revolutionary War documents, newspaper ads, and order books and discovered such references as a letter from a tenant in the late 1790s who wrote that the Paca House had "the finest garden in Annapolis in which there is a spring, a cold bathhouse well fitted up, and a running stream!" They found a sepia drawing of the garden dating to 1888 that showed the grand allée. And they examined Paca's portrait by Charles Willson Peale painted against a background that they supposed to be a fictional garden. Three years into the research, when they discovered a letter from Peale that said he had painted Paca in his garden, "we felt like we'd been given a gift," recalls Wright.

Landscape architect Laurance Brigham designed a garden based on the archaeology, the analysis of plant materials, and further research into period gardens in Annapolis. The main allée is aligned off-center with one of the hyphens, and flanking it are the four parterres created by hedges with patterned plantings incorporating flowers, roses, holly, and boxwood. Along the east wall is a kitchen and herb garden with eighteenth-century plants. Along the west wall, laburnum, wisteria, and double musk roses drape an arbor. On the two lower terraces are more informal areas—a stream, a pond in the shape of a fish, and the wilderness garden with the springhouse, cold bathhouse, and the pavilion from which Paca and his visitors could view the garden to the south and the Chesapeake Bay to the north.

This wilderness is the best documented part of the Paca garden because "it wasn't

disturbed by the footings of the hotel," says Barbara Paca, a landscape architect and horticultural historian—and a direct descendant of William Paca. It is also unique in American garden restorations. In William Paca's day, creating a wild area in a formal garden "was a very odd thing to do, especially in a town garden," explains Paca; the concept was just coming into vogue on large English estates. William Paca's version was a formal wilderness—relatively small, highly contrived in geometry and plantings, and complicated with small decorative buildings.

Wright and others involved in the restoration of the wilderness garden referred to Philip Miller's 1737 edition of *The Gardener's Dictionary* for the proper proportions and plantings. Along winding paths and beneath trees in this hilly little area bloom yellow primroses, blue anemones, swamp iris, laurel, ferns, and the tiny cerise blossoms of the spigelia, or Indian pink, which was used medicinally by the Indians and the colonists.

The propagation of such native plants as spigelia is an important component of the Paca Garden's mission of growing plants that were popular here and in Europe between 1760 and 1780. Each year garden director Lucy dos Passos Coggin, her horticultural staff, and volunteers from the Garden Guild try to grow new selections. This summer in the kitchen garden they are growing pineapples, ginger root, tobacco, peanuts, and bloody butcher corn, a coarse, red-kerneled variety similar to that used to make porridge in Paca's day. "We're trying to find plants with a more particular provenance—say, from Annapolis or Maryland," explains Coggin.

Even now, nearly three decades after the hidden garden was saved and more than two decades since the restored garden was opened, the friends of the Paca garden are not resting on their laurels. Research done in recent years suggests that this garden's design might be too elaborate for its era. But rather than rip up the terraces and parterres to simplify them, Coggin says, "perhaps we'd just change the interpretation to explain this garden in the context of a 1969 restoration."

Skillful research and sheer will undoubtedly contributed to St. Clair Wright's winning the National Trust's coveted Crowninshield Award in 1968 for founding Historic Annapolis. Her preservation prize money, she says proudly, is invested in the Paca garden's stone-colored Chippendale-style bridge. You have to believe her when she says, "If you put your mind to it, anything can be accomplished." ▼