

2019 National Convention Report

By Barbara Stump—Nacogdoches, Texas

This convention was superbly organized, thanks to the Rev. John Drayton Chapter and volunteers. Historical sites and gardens showed how long people have dedicated themselves to the land and beautiful spaces, and there are always new ways to see and understand them. Azaleas were at peak bloom, many camellias as well, and each site presented new interpretation material to deepen our experience. Summerville, North Carolina, is a lovely historic city (dating to 1785), but the convention planners had to be creative in setting up events, since no one site in the city could serve our large convention. Luckily the Wyndham and the Hampton Inn were right across the street from one another and served different functions: the plant sale was at the Hampton, and the opening reception, meetings, and banquet were held at the Wyndham, with an outside caterer providing fabulous food. Members could book rooms in either hotel.

The Thursday night March 14 opening reception was held the evening after the afternoon ASA Board of Directors meeting. Main convention organizers Tom and Mary Ann Johnson were introduced, as well as several of the speakers.

Friday, March 15

Boarding buses early, we headed for Middleton Place, then Mepkin Abbey. Along the way we saw lovely North Carolina countryside and had time to chat with friends we only see at conventions.

Middleton Place. Middleton Place is three-centuries-old national historic landmark, and it was bustling with tour groups of older folks like us and school children learning about their local history onsite. Our tour guide was excellent, presenting both the history of the founding families (the Middletons) and botanical and horticultural information. Both Southern Indian azaleas and a variety of camellias

were blooming. Besides covering the Middleton family's Revolutionary War-era history, our guide did not shy away from presenting the role that enslaved Africans played in developing the rice industry along the Ashley River and helping enrich the family.

After the glorious view of the reflecting pool and fountain near the entrance [Photo 1], we walked by the Middleton Oak [Photo 2], then could walk up into sunny parterres [Photo



Photo William C. Miller III

▲ Photo 2—Along the entrance trail, the historic Middleton Oak, *Quercus virginiana*, now estimated to be between 900 and 1000 years old, was a Native American trail marker long before Columbus sailed to America. It has been jointly recognized by the National Arborist Association and the International Society of Arboriculture as "...having lived here at the time of the signing of our constitution." Typically, colonists harvested such Live Oaks for ribs of ocean-going ships; however, the tree has survived the American Revolution, the Civil War, and the evolution of Middleton Place. The tree is regularly inspected by an arboriculturist. (From historical marker and guide information.)

▼ Photo 1—Entrance to Middleton Place Plantation Reflection Pool, with a view of Ashley River in the background.



Photo Barbara Stump

▼ Photo 3—Middleton Place "Sun Garden" parterre, a very formal garden, with its annual planting of tulips, lies just next to the intensely planted camellia garden, with its many straight paths.



Photo Janet B. Miller



Photo Barbara Stump

▲ Photo 4—During our guided tour of Middleton Place, our guide pointed out camellias that survive from the original plantings in the oldest landscaped garden in America.

▼ Photo 5—After our guided garden tours, we had time to roam the various interpretive sites. Just down from a cabin and next to the same rice pond shown on the cover of this issue, was this common American alligator, *Alligator mississippiensis*.



Photo William C. Miller III



Photo William C. Miller III

▲ Photo 6—Sidney Frazier, Vice-president of Horticulture at Middleton Place visited with us about maintaining the historic gardens during lunch in the new Terrace facility.

3] or very shaded walkways of perfectly pruned historic camellias [Photo 4]. From there we saw the Butterfly ponds and the azalea hillside as well as an alligator [Photo 5].

We lunched in a modern-with-rustic decor “Terrace” building newly added to the site. Nearby was “Sarah’s Cabin,” which included an excellent interpretive display with a wide range of details and illustrations about the slave lives at Middleton. During lunch, Sidney Frazier, Vice President of Horticulture at Middleton, greeted us and discussed the work involved in keeping the very old gardens thriving. [Photo 6]

Mepkin Abbey and Luce Garden. This is located on the grounds of a Roman Catholic Cistercian monastery in Monck’s Corner, SC, at the junction of two forks of the Cooper River on the grounds that were previously the Mepkin Plantation. The order graciously allows tourists to visit the Luce Garden and parts of the grounds, yet still preserves their monastic peace and quiet. (A small green sign warned: Private. This is a silent area with no public access.)

The Nancy Bryan Luce Garden was designed by landscape architect Loutrell Briggs for Henry and Clare Boothe Luce. The land was given to the Mepkin Abbey in 1949. This garden design is very formal, with statuary and four garden terraces with wide brick stairs, leading the eye



Photo Barbara Stump

▲ Photo 7—Walking down a wide brick stairway, this is the view down the terraces to the Cooper River at the Luce Garden on the grounds of Mepkin Abbey.

▼ Photo 8—The top terrace of the Luce Garden at Mepkin Abbey is the memorial garden of Clare Boothe Luce and her husband Henry Luce.



Photo Barbara Stump

(and visitors) down the gentle hillside to the river. [Photos 7-8] White Southern Indian azaleas, including 'Mrs. G. G. Gerbing', framed the view. On the upper level is a memorial garden where the Luces are buried. Nearby, where the buses parked, were outstandingly colorful camellias, which Jim Campbell pointed out to me.

A new feature of the grounds nearby is a Columbarium, built right into the edge of a curving ravine. The garden design, statuary, and seating all promoted quiet reflection, with a lovely river view. Following a new bridge across the ravine, we could visit the burial site of the original Revolutionary War-era owner Henry Laurens and his family.

The bus captain on our bus was incredibly informed about all the sites and told us about them on our bus routes. He knew first-hand about Mepkin Abbey, as he is one of their garden volunteers and guides other visiting bus tours to this and other local historic sites.

Friday Night Speakers. After dinner on our own, we gathered in the Wyndham meeting room for two speakers.



Photo William C. Miller III

▲ Photo 9—Kirk Brown, appropriately dressed in period attire, gave a spirited presentation of Frederick Law Olmsted's life and contributions to American horticulture and landscape design.

Both presented the material in first person, as "historic re-enactors." This requires in-depth knowledge of the topic, excellent delivery skills, and appropriate costumes, and is commonly used in historic sites to enhance the visitor's experience of sites, dates, and events.

Kirk Brown, National Outreach Coordinator for Magnolia Plantation and past president of the Garden Writers Association, presented "The Life of Frederick Olmsted," in a first-person narrative style, with PowerPoint illustrations. [Photo 9] Olmsted became known as the "father of American landscape architecture", learning his skills by traveling in Europe and Asia and by working with Calvert Vaux. It grew to be fun to "hear" Frederick "say" to his father, "Father will you give me..." increasing amounts of money as he moved through his various travels and projects. He was an environmental visionary who made the most of every opportunity, always "looking with new eyes" (as Marcel Proust said), seeking and seeing the "genius loci" in each landscape project. He truly felt the future is infinite and taught others to use plants as never seen before. Example projects include the plans for Central Park and Prospect Park in New York, with Calvert Vaux; the Biltmore Estate; and the grounds of Harvard University.

Dontavius Williams is hired several times a year by Magnolia to give his authentic interpretations during the plantation's cultural history events at the slave cabins. This



Photo William C. Miller III

▲ Photo 10—Dontavius Brown, in his representation of Magnolia Plantation slave Adam, helped us understand a little of what slaves' lives were like. In his right hand is a "Blessin' Doll" like he said he used to encourage his son and gave to three lucky members of the audience.



Photo Janet B. Miller

▲ Photo 11—This view of the Magnolia Plantation home is from the vantage point of one of the smooth gravel paths that led to the Ashley River. The influence of the mild North Carolina climate is obvious from the presence of palms, azaleas, camellias, and gray moss tendrils of Spanish moss (*Tillandsia usneoides*) on the Live Oaks, all growing together.

▼ Photo 12— This is the view toward the river, from the back of the Magnolia Plantation home.



Photo Barbara Stump

evening, he presented "A Slave Boy Named Adam." This presentation was the very moving "inside story" of being a slave blacksmith on the Magnolia Plantation. [Photo 10] Part of the presentation was explaining to his son that he not only should help his father trap a possum behind their shack, but that, yes, he should eat it and be thankful for it. He ended by giving a hand-made "blessin' dolls" to three members of the audience.

Both Brown and Williams had us mesmerized and feeling like we'd met the two historic men in person. This was surely a class in the best of "historical interpretation."

Saturday, March 16

After traveling awhile on our buses, we could easily see why this eastern area of South Carolina is called the "low country"—lots of water in forests on either side of our buses.

Magnolia Plantation and Gardens. Not only did Magnolia Plantation and Gardens sponsor the convention, ably assisted by the Reverend John Drayton Chapter members and other local volunteers, but they also put on a great plant sale with donations from various members. And, our convention bags included a copy of "A Watercolor Journey through Charleston's Magnolia Plantation and Its

Gardens" by Margaret Hall Hoyback.¹ This book reprinted actual watercolors of all the sights in the massive plantation and gardens, plus the magnificent mansion. The booklet also included a brief history from their founding in 1680 to date. [Photo 11]

Tram tours could take people on various themed tours—"slave story" or "swamp and wildlife", for example. It was amazing to realize that this wonderful plantation and historic gardens are surrounded by water—the Ashley River on one side, crucial to rice culture and shipping, and swamps with alligators and birds on the other. Our three hours there was not enough time to take in the gardens and these other tours, but we did the best we could. [See Photos 12-13]

During our lunch in the new Conservatory, we were welcomed to Magnolia by Taylor Drayton Nelson, from the 11th generation of the Draytons to own the property. He mentioned the family is still committed to garden preservation and species protection, including storing genetic material,



Photo Barbara Stump

▲ Photo 13—Several walkways led from the Magnolia Plantation home to the Ashley River trail. All were framed with azaleas and camellias allowed to grow tall and pruned to frame the walkways, part of Magnolia's historic signature romantic style.

including that of some of the oldest varieties that still exist, for future regeneration. He left us with an ongoing question, which we all know about: “How do we get people today to be personally involved in gardening?”

Then Ernest Koone gave a brief talk, “Where Have All the Azaleas Gone?” He’s been growing azaleas since he was seven years old, when his dad, a Lockheed engineer, began a nursery “on the side.” His Lazy K Nursery in Pine Mountain, GA, is well known for native, deciduous azaleas. [Photo 14]

Ernest’s concern is for the many “heritage azaleas” that we may be losing because no one is protecting and propagating them. He personally knew both S.D. Coleman senior and junior, Aaron Varnadoe, and Tom Dodd Jr. and III, and knows their material is just part of what needs collecting and protecting. He is particularly concerned about the Aromi Hybrids and those of Earl Sommerville. He stated that, of the wealth of azaleas shown in Galle’s *Azaleas* book², only 10% exist in commerce, and he cannot find the remaining 90%. This is based on an extensive search for 400 azaleas, both evergreen and deciduous. Only 40 could be found in nurseries. The Legacy Project of the ASA is working on such “Heritage Azaleas”, and Magnolia Plantation and Gardens is trying to find them, as well. While he likes the concept of the Legacy Project, the problem is that most of them are in private gardens, not available in public gardens or arboreta, even less in the commercial nursery trade. Also, very few younger people are interested in growing or selling them, with one significant exception: MailOrder Natives, owned by Emily Webb and associated with Auburn University. And, finally, the Azalea Society of America is the only organization in America promoting azaleas.

Ernest has also donated a large collection of his native azaleas to the Reverend John Drayton Chapter and Magnolia Plantation that are now planted in the new Tom and Mary Johnson Native Azalea Garden. [See Photo 15]

Charleston Tea Plantation. This was our final tour of the convention, on Wadamlaw Island, southwest of Charleston. We went in their old-fashioned trolley to tour the whole



Photo William C. Miller III

▲ Photo 14—Ernest Koone III spoke about the need for preserving our many azalea species and cultivars in the Magnolia Plantation Conservatory during Saturday’s lunch.

▼ Photo 15—Ernest Koone gave some of his deciduous azaleas to start this The Native Azalea Garden, honoring Tom and Mary Johnson’s work at Magnolia and preserving azaleas for posterity. This garden will make a nice complement to the many vigorous evergreen azaleas that have grown there many years.



Photo William C. Miller III

growing operation. [Photo 16] Little did we know that this 127-acre thriving tea producing site is the only source of domestically grown tea, or that healthy tea plants can live 600 years. Now owned in partnership with Bigelow Tea, but still run by the Hall family, the crop is grown without chemicals; the site has just the right soil chemistry, rainfall, and sun to produce excellent tea. They harvest the fields from April until October with a modified “unicorn” machine made from parts of tobacco and cotton harvesters (aka “The Green Giant”), which harvests 700 pounds daily during harvest time. This machine does a 36-inch “buzz-cut” first, then after the plants flush out new growth, it cuts the 3”-5”



Photo Barbara Stump

▲ Photo 16—An old-fashioned streetcar-trolley has been made “road-worthy” to take visitors on a full tour of the roads around the growing fields at the Charleston Tea Plantation. It took two trolley tours to show us all around.

▼ Photo 17—This “hybrid” John Deere/tractor-front end loader is poised and ready for months of harvesting flushes of *Camellia sinensis* tips from the many acres of tea plants. In the background, the rows of tea plants have been trimmed to promote the first new growth of the season.



Photo William C. Miller III

flushes repeated during the growing season for processing into tea. [Photo 17] Over 7,000 cuttings are grown on each season to increase the crop. It was great fun to visit their tasting room to sample cold and hot brews and buy tea and associated mementoes.

Saturday Night Annual Meeting and Awards. President Rick Bauer opened the annual meeting with heartfelt thanks to Tom and Mary Ann Johnson and all the Reverend Drayton Chapter members and volunteers for a wonderful convention. He introduced the three new directors for 2020: Dale Berrong, Jim Campbell, and John Simmons.

The primary decisions by the BOD were: 1) Initiate a \$15 annual membership for full-time students. 2) Codify the requirement for society membership for attendance at annual conventions (with limited exceptions determined by convention sponsors). 3) Increase the compensation for an advertising manager, if we secure one.

Two awards were given: The annual “Best Article Award”



Photo William C. Miller III

▲ Photo 18—Texas Chapter member Bart Brechter, Curator the Bayou Bend Gardens in Houston, presented a few reasons to come to the 2020 national convention including many great restaurants and a concurrent event, the annual Houston Livestock Show & Rodeo. Convention details coming soon.

for 2018 went to Charles Andrews for his incredible research and photography for the two-part series “American Azaleas” in the Spring and Summer 2018 issues of *The Azalean*. Then, Vice President Andrews awarded the annual Distinguished Service Award to Ernest Koone (see p. 43).

Bart Brechter, Curator of Gardens at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston, then announced that the next convention would be held in Houston, Texas, from March 12-15, 2020, with assistance from both the River Oaks Garden Club and Texas Chapter members. (Photo 18). The Museum of Fine Arts Houston Bayou Bend and other historic gardens and decorative arts museums will be among the sites we will visit. Check out the ASA website and the Fall 2019 issue of *The Azalean* for further details.

Keynote Address. Keynote speaker Dr. John Nelson, who retired from managing the University of South Carolina Herbarium in 2018, began his presentation with this quote from William Wordsworth: “Nature never did betray the heart that loved her.” [Photo 19] As he explained the complex process of gathering plant specimens from the wild, preserving by drying them in plant presses, and correctly identifying them for posterity, it became obvious that he thoroughly believes in the need for actual plant specimens to be collected and made available for researchers. He taught plant taxonomy and systematic botany at USC. Herbaria have been developed over centuries to guide accurate plant identification and recording. At the USC Herbarium the plants are individually cataloged as “voucher specimens”



Photo William C. Miller III

▲ Photo 19—Keynote speaker Dr. John Nelson, Curator of the University of South Carolina Herbarium.

(dried plant parts that are then labeled in English as well as botanical Latin). Digital photos taken of the specimens and posted on the USC website enable researchers' access to this information. There are ten different herbaria in South Carolina; 320 in the US. He suggested we should "voucher" the rhododendrons in our gardens. He ended his program with beautiful, close-up photographs of primarily deciduous species in SC.

Tom Johnson closed the convention with thanks to all who participated and made it all work so well. [Photo 20]

Additional Special Site: Summerville Azalea Garden

Our bus tour guide recommended several times that we should visit the Summerville Azalea Garden that was just blocks from our hotels. On our way out of town I was fortunate enough to visit it with my Texas Chapter friends, Fred and Nancy Niehaus. Were we ever impressed! The day was overcast and gray, but the mature Formosa azaleas and camellias along several asphalted trails and along a large, sinuous, walled creek were superb. Hurricane Hugo hit this area hard, so the September 22, 1992 park dedication, reads: "Dedicated with abiding gratitude to the thousands of people who assisted us spiritually, physically, and financially during the aftermath of Hurricane Hugo." Besides this, the park shows that local families have invested in the park by contributing benches, statuary, or water features in memory of family or friends. Bill and Janet Miller had also found this, according to their photos. [Photo 21] An entrance kiosk and brochure indicated that this public collection of 23



Photo William C. Miller III

▲ Photo 20—After the keynote speaker, President Tom Johnson of the Reverend John Drayton Chapter gave thanks to the all the chapter members and volunteers who helped with the convention and gave flowers to Magnolia Plantation & Gardens organizers Mary Johnson (l) and Brenda Matthews.

▼ Photo 21—Seven-foot-tall "Heron and the Sun" sculpture by Darrell Davis, in large pool at the Summerville Azalea Garden, was installed in 2003, after winning the 2003 Sculpture in the South Exhibit and Sale.



Photo Janet B. Miller

sculptures is part of a 501(c)(3) program called Sculpture in the South.³ Also part of this program, another series of 23 bird sculptures is located throughout downtown, known as B.I.R.D.S. (Birds in Residence Downtown Summerville) Sculpture Trail.

References

¹ Hoyback, Margaret Hall. February 2000. *A Watercolor Journey through Charleston's Magnolia Plantation and Its Gardens*. Magnolia Plantation Foundation: Charleston, SC.

² Galle, Fred C. *Azaleas*. 1987. Timber Press, Inc.: Portland, Oregon.

³ Sculpture in the South. www.sculptureinthesouth.com or 843-851-7800.

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