

The Lafayette Museum—Historic Home and Gardens

By *Connie Guthrey, Linda Alesi, and Lisa Chance*



[Editor's Note: This article is the fourth in a series of preview pieces for the Azalea Society of America's Annual Meeting in March 2022.]

Placed on the National Register of Historic Places on June 18, 1975, the Lafayette Museum—Historic Home and Gardens is located in the heart of downtown Lafayette, Louisiana, and proudly bears the honor of being Lafayette's first museum and the only museum in the parish located on its original site. The original structure was built in the early 1800s by Jean Mouton, the founder of Vermilionville. The town was renamed Lafayette in 1884.

The building consisted of one large room, which still stands today, along with a detached kitchen, which unfortunately no longer exists. The kitchen was connected to the main building by a "dog-trot" or open walkway. The one-room house used "*briquelette entre poteaux*" construction, a technique typical of the more affluent homeowners of that era. It was used as Jean Mouton's Maison Dimanche or Sunday House when the family came to town to attend church services. Jean's son, Alexandre Mouton, a United States senator and Louisiana's 11th governor, added three rooms to the structure and made it his home after his marriage in 1826 to Zelia Rousseau. After purchasing the house in 1894, Dr. W. G. Mills added the second and third floors along with a cupola.

In May of 1954, 24 civic-minded Lafayette ladies who called themselves "Les Vingt-Quatre" (the 24) purchased the property. Les Vingt-Quatre's mission was "sharing and promoting the history and culture of Acadiana by collecting, preserving, exhibiting, and interpreting artifacts related to the families and time

in which they lived in the house and the events that contributed to the development of Lafayette and the surrounding area." Over time it has been restored to its 1850's grandeur and serves as a repository of the history and culture of Acadiana under the guidance and care of the board members of The Lafayette Museum Association, who also serve the Les Vingt-Quatre Club.

Bicentennial Garden Dedication

In 1976, the Lafayette Bicentennial Commission officially dedicated the formal colonial garden located behind the museum, which is located on Lafayette Street. Hundreds of people attended the two-day dedication presented in both English and French. Among the honored guests at the dedication hosted by the Les Vingt-Quatre Club were Mr. and Mrs. John Gidiere, who served as co-chairs of the garden project. The restored garden featured colonial plantings enhanced with brick walkways and benches. Camille Thibodeaux, the gardener who executed most of the work, was also present. The Lafayette Bicentennial Commission presented two markers, one in English and one in French, to the Lafayette Museum Association President, Mrs. J.J. Davidson, making the garden an official Bicentennial site.

A Walk Through the Garden

Today, a walk through the Lafayette Museum's historic grounds and gardens remains a delightful experience for museum visitors every season of the year thanks to the passionate and dedicated care of past and present members of the Les Vingt-Quatre grounds and

'George Lindley Taber' and 'Mrs. G.G. Gerbing' azaleas growing in front of the museum's Potato House.



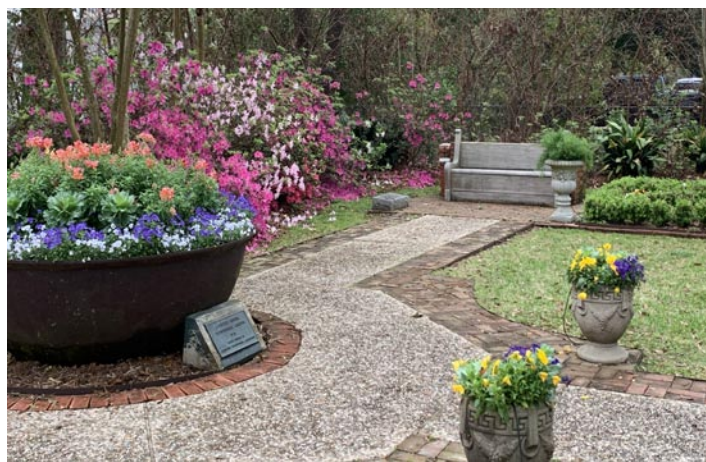
garden committee. Azaleas, camellias, and a variety of plants can be enjoyed in both the gardens located in the front yard of the museum and its Bicentennial Garden located behind the museum. The Jean Mouton Live Oak, registered by the Live Oak Society as a Centenarian, along with the Governor Alexandre Mouton Oak, registered as a Junior League, create a graceful and stately presence in the backyard gardens.

In the spring, 'Pink Formosum' azaleas bloom along the front white picket fence of the museum property. 'Pink Formosum' is a broadleaf, evergreen bush that grows up to 5 to 8 feet tall and spreads 5 to 10 feet across, while producing a large, single three-inch flower. The pink flowers have a bluish cast, and the foliage is a rich green all year long. Grouped in front of the museum porch are 'Conversation Piece' azaleas. Multicolored late spring blooms produce unique pink flowers that can range from dark pink to nearly white on the same plant standing against rich, dark-green foliage. Striking pink to a range of rosy shades, blooms can measure up to four inches across as the white blossoms on the same plant unfurl to expose wavy-edged petals with bright pink to deep crimson centers. At maturity, these broadleaf reblooming hybrid evergreens range from 2 to 5 feet in height and can spread to 3 to 5 feet in width.

Interspersed among an established 'Governor Mouton' camellia are 'Pink Ruffles' Belgian Indian hybrid azaleas. This mid-season, spring-blooming plant produces bright hot-pink, semi-double, 2 -inch formal, elegant blooms with ruffled edges showcased on medium green foliage. The 'Pink Ruffles' is a low-growing azalea, maturing at 2 to 4 feet in height with a spread of 2 to 3 feet, making it a midsize shrub. Gracing the front of the Potato House located on the museum side yard, are 'George Lindley Taber' azaleas, which boast soft bubble-gum pink, springtime trumpet-shaped blossoms that profusely hide the foliage making it a favorite landscaping shrub. The lightly perfumed aroma of the variegated blossoms have deep pink spots near the top that make them resemble orchid blooms. This evergreen can mature to 12 feet high while spreading up to 10 feet across.

Bicentennial Garden

Boarded on three sides of the museum's Bicentennial Garden is a mixture of 'Purple Formosum', 'Pink Formosum', 'George Lindley Taber', and 'Mrs. G. G. Gerbing' azaleas fronting an established screen of viburnum and crape myrtle trees. Small groupings of 'Pink Ruffles', Red Ruffles', and George Lindley Taber' azaleas can also be found in the gardens and along the pathways. A spring-blooming azalea, the 'Purple Formosum', Southern Indian hybrid, produces



Mature 'Purple Formosum' and 'George Lindley Taber' azaleas bordering the Bicentennial Garden.

rich purple, single-form blooms. In spring, lush green evergreen foliage emerges as light green before maturing to a deep green hue. The 'Purple Formosum' azalea with its vigorous upright growth habit generally matures from 6 to 8 feet in height spreading 5 to 6 feet wide. The 'Mrs. G.G. Gerbing', with its pure white flowers exploding in early spring on light green foliage makes it highly popular in the museum garden. This heavy bloomer with its large 3-inch diameter blooms can produce smaller, shorter reblooms in early to mid-fall. The overall growth form is spreading and measuring 5 to 10 feet wide and 5 to 8 feet in height.

Venues in the Garden

The historic house museum, filled with collections of Acadiana's rich history and culture, and its lovely grounds and gardens have played host to Mardi Gras events, cocktail parties, teas, weddings, and holiday parties. With azaleas in full bloom, the members of Lafayette Museum Association are particularly proud to showcase the museum's grounds and garden annually as a stop on Lafayette's Azalea Trail.

The Lafayette Museum at 1122 Lafayette Street is open Tuesday through Saturday, 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Find us online at www.lafayettmuseum.com or www.facebook.com/lafayettmuseum.

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