

HISTORY of THE ELIZABETHAN GARDENS

Roanoke Island, North Carolina

In 1950, Mrs. Charles Cannon, wife of the North Carolina philanthropist; Mrs. Inglis Fletcher, a North Carolinian and noted historian and author; and Sir Evelyn Wrench, Founder of the English Speaking Union, and Lady Wrench, were visiting Fort Raleigh National Historic Site and *The Lost Colony* outdoor drama on Roanoke Island. The idea came to them to ask The Garden Club of North Carolina, a non-profit organization of 17,000 women, to sponsor a two-acre garden on a ten-acre tract adjoining Fort Raleigh National Park. It was their thinking that the creation of a cultural attraction such as a garden would enhance the value of this area as a permanent memorial to Sir Walter Raleigh's lost colonists.

The matter was presented to The Garden Club at its annual meeting in 1951, at which time the organization voted to build such a garden on property leased for ninety-nine years from the Roanoke Island Historical Association. The original goal was modest...a two-acre garden which was to typify the kind of garden a successful colonist might have built on Roanoke Island had the colonization succeeded. In the meantime, a contractor in Fayetteville, Mr. E. W. Reinecke, told The Garden Club about some valuable garden statuary he was dismantling on the Greenwood Estate of The Honorable John Hay Whitney, Ambassador to The Court of St. James, and Mrs. Whitney in Thomasville, Georgia. He suggested to The Garden Club that Innocenti & Webel, landscape architects of New York, be contacted about this statuary which Mr. Whitney was considering giving to the Metropolitan Museum. The Chairman did contact the architects who became enthusiastic about the proposed garden at the historic site of the first English settlement in the New World. Through the intervention of Mr. Webel, the fantastic gift of an ancient Italian fountain and pool with balustrade, wellhead, sundial, birdbaths, stone steps and benches, dating back beyond the time of Queen Elizabeth I, came to Roanoke Island and The Garden Club of North Carolina. This rich "find" completely altered the original concept of the garden and a more elaborate design had to be adopted.

The internationally renowned landscape firm of Innocenti & Webel was retained by The Garden Club to plan and erect the garden. With the Whitney statuary as his inspiration, Mr. Webel set out to create a garden Elizabethan in spirit and style but adapted to the present. Built on ten acres of indigenous growth, the gardens are the imaginative concept of an Elizabethan pleasure garden. Construction actually began on the historic date of June 2, 1953, the date Queen Elizabeth II was crowned Queen of England. The gardens were formally opened August 18, 1960, on the 373rd anniversary of the birth of Virginia Dare, the first child born in America of English parentage. Thus The Elizabethan gardens came into being.

During the fifty-one years of their existence, the Gardens have progressed to become one of the most unique and beautiful gardens in America for here, and nowhere else, were made the initial attempts of England under Queen Elizabeth I to colonize America. While the colonies planted on Roanoke Island by Sir Walter Raleigh two decades before Jamestown and Plymouth Rock were not permanent, their work was for the interest created by the "Men of Roanoke" did not vanish but led to the making of the permanent English settlements in America.

Since this auspicious beginning of The Gardens, no single event has contributed to its vigorous growth, but history reflects that The Gardens owe their progress to a mingling of little dreams and big vision through a high caliber of leadership, the dedication of thousands of garden club members, an untiring and loyal garden staff and individual donations of furnishings, garden accessories and plants which would fill a book!

The impressive entrance wall of old handmade brick holds great iron gates which once hung at the French Embassy in Washington and were a gift of The Honorable C. Douglas Dillon, Undersecretary of State and later United States Treasurer and Mrs. Dillon.

The Gate House, made of the same old warmly-colored handmade brick from the Silas Lucas kiln in Wilson, North Carolina, before the turn of the century, is modeled after the architecture of a 16th century orangerie with a flagstone floor, hand-hewn beams and a wide door with cross design. Above the entrance is set a sculptural stone coat-of-arms of Elizabeth I.

Inside the Gate House is furnished with rare antique furnishings acquired through years of searching obtained through individual donations. Perhaps the finest is the Jacobean table, with typical Tudor rose carvings, circa early 1500's and a corner cupboard in the first foyer called a "gem" by connoisseurs, made in England of oak, circa 1600's. An English chest, its homemade hardware suggesting it could have belonged to an Elizabethan colonist because of its rich carving and its foreshortening to fit into allotted space (perhaps a ship), is hardly the most outstanding, but presumably one of the oldest pieces in the Gate House, circa 1560-1625.

Adorning the walls are a fine portrait in oil on panel, circa 1592, of Queen Elizabeth I; a 1663 map of Devonshire (home of many of the first colonist who came to Roanoke Island); a panel which lists the names of 91 men, 17 women and 9 children who arrived on three vessels July 22, 1587, with John White as Governor and stayed there to live in the twenty-ninth year of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I and became known in history as the "Lost Colony"; and the coats-of-arms of Queen Elizabeth I and Sir Walter Raleigh, painted on vellum and signed by Sir Anthony Wager, King of Arms. These were especially prepared by the College of Arms in London in 1975 for The Elizabethan Gardens' celebration of the bicentennial year, 1976.

Of special interest is a steel engraving of Compton Castle in Devon where Sir Walter Raleigh may have visited as a child with his mother who was the widow of Otho Gilbert of Compton when she married Walter Raleigh of Fardell, Devon. She was the mother of Sir John, Sir Humphrey and Adrian Gilbert as well as Sir Walter and Sir Carew Raleigh.

Compton Castle (dates from 13th century) where the adolescent Sir Walter Raleigh often visited his half brother, Sir Humphrey Gilbert, and where is 20th century namesake, Commander Walter Raleigh Gilbert and Mrs. Gilbert lived until his death in January 1977.

The Gilberts were honorary members of the Board of Governors of The Elizabethan Garden and made return trips to Roanoke Island and The Gardens.

Today, Commander Gilbert's second son, Geoffrey, and his wife, Angela, visit at Compton with their family of three children and an honorary member of our Board. Geoffrey and Angela came to The Gardens in 1976 to dedicate our portrait of Sir Walter Raleigh and again in 1984 when H.R.H. princess Anne visited The Gardens.

As one enters The Gardens from the Gate Hose, the fragrance of herbs and the handsome white Carrara marble fountain suggests the Elizabethan world. Herbalists can study some forty-five varieties of herbs found here, twenty-three of which are documented in a booklet, Shakespeare's Herbs in the Elizabethan Gardens, written by Huntington Cairns, former secretary of the National Gallery of Art in Washington.

Pine needles carpet the winding walks to the different areas of the Gardens from the courtyard of the Gate House, named for their various plantings – Rhododendron Walk, Uppowoc Walk (Indian name for tobacco), and Presidents' Walk, a 155-foot meandering path so named for past presidents of The Garden Club of North Carolina.

The Mount, centered with the carved Porphyry marble wellhead, which is part of the Whitney collection, is ascended on four sides by stone steps and serves as an axis from which four paths radiate to vistas that form the dominant interests of the Gardens.

To the north is a path lined with yucca, century plants and rare sea holly indigenous to the area, which winds down to a water gate on the shores of Roanoke Sound.

Down the steps to the east is a Carrara marble statue of Virginia Dare, which is the sculptor's idealized version of what Virginia Dare would have looked like had she grown to womanhood. An American sculptor Maria Louise Lander, in Rome in 1859, carved it. After an incredibly hectic existence, including two years at the bottom of the Atlantic ocean due to shipwreck off the coast of Spain, a tenure in the State Hall of History in Raleigh in the early twenties where it became a controversial work of art, a short stay with the Pulitzer prize-winning Paul Green at his estate, "The Oaks", near Chapel Hill who decided to give it to The Gardens, the statue of Virginia Dare finally came to rest about one hundred years after its creation by Miss. Lander. Today Virginia Dare stands at the place of her birth in her own niche at the foot of an ancient live oak, gazing dreamily beyond the trees toward the softened surge of nearby Roanoke Sound. Instead of schoolbooks, she holds a fishnet draped about her waist. About her neck and arms she wears the Indian laces of an Indian princess. Instead of a royal greyhound, a royal heron accompanies her. An Indian legend persists that Virginia did grow up among the Indians and that her spirit roams Roanoke in the form of a white doe. Whatever one elects to believe, Maria Louise Lander's sculpture, Virginia Dare, stands serenely fixed in The Elizabethan Gardens, a figure of quiet hope, wide-browed and intelligent, the first child of the first colony of Elizabethan England, gazing toward the future despite the odds of the history, mystery and fantasy that surround her.

West of the Mount a series of three flights of steps descend to the Sunken Garden – the supreme feature of The Gardens. This square area, consisting of 32 identical parterres outlined in clipped dwarf yaupon, is like a continuing parade of color with its ever-changing displays of ornamental plants. Spring loving pansies in blue, white and yellow are followed in the summer by blue ageratum, white vinca and pink begonias which compliment crepe myrtle standards that bloom for 101 days with their small tufts of watermelon pink crepe flowers. Enclosed by a low, perforated wall of old, handmade brick, the entire area is a centerpiece of The Gardens. The central focal point is the ancient Italian fountain and pool with carved balustrade from the Whitney collection. The coat-of-arms in the fretted stonework is that of the Farnesi family of 16th century Italy.

Statues, also from the Whitney collection, representing Apollo, Diana, Venus and Jupiter, center each of the four quadrants of parterres. An eleven-foot high pleached allee of meticulously groomed yaupon holly with arched openings surrounds the Sunken Garden wall.

Leaving the Sunken Garden to the north is the overlook terrace and a path leading to the overlook of Roanoke Sound. Here in April of 1981, an authentic 16th century gazebo was constructed with period tools, using period techniques.

The octagonal structure of the gazebo is situated at a site overlooking the Roanoke and Currituck Sounds, very possibly the spot where Sir Richard Grenville, Walter Raleigh's cousin, first set foot in 1585 upon his arrival with a fleet of seven ships and 108 men.

Because this site is on Roanoke Island where Sir Walter Raleigh sought to colonize the New World under Elizabeth I, it was the desire of the Board of Governors, according to Mrs. W. Marion Odom, Chairman, to erect as authentic a garden structure of the period as possible. "The museum-going public is becoming increasingly discerning and even critical when restorations sometimes take the form of a move set approach to reconstructed buildings," she said. Therefore, it was the desire and intent of the Board to reproduce what the first settlers might have built had the colony succeeded.

Erik Eckholm and Jim Maron, formerly director of exhibits and interpretation manager, respectively, for Plimoth Plantation in Massachusetts, contracted with the Board of Governors of The Elizabethan Gardens, as consultants in period buildings, to erect the garden structure. Massive hand-hewn oak posts and beams were locked together without the modern nail. Wattle and daub was applied on the exterior of the five bays, leaving three bays open to the wide expanse of waters for visitors to view in the distance the Wright Memorial at Kitty hawk which stands upon the site of man's first flight and also Jockey's Ridge, one of the highest sand dunes east of the Mississippi River.

A thatched roof was absolutely necessary for the finishing touch to the period structure. There were initially two problems – how to obtain thatching material and where to obtain a master thatcher.

Upon reading about Peter Slevin from Donegal, Ireland, who thatched the Ann Hathaway cottage in Stratford in the late fifties and also did many of the roofs in the Public Broadcasting System's "Scarlett Letter" in 1980, Mrs. Odom contacted Mr. Slevin at Plimoth Plantation, where he resided and worked, to advise the Board about the old world craft of thatching with straw. He stated many thatchers still regard Norfolk reed as Britain's finest native grass for thatching. "This reed, Phragmites communis, grows in the area of Norfolk, England," he said, "and is in great demand. Roofs thatched with it by an expert will last sixty to seventy years, with the ridge being replaced every ten to fifteen years."

Armed with this information, contact was made with a reed farmer in Olde Buckeham, Norfolk, England, through Geoffrey Gilbert of Woking, friend of the Gardens. Eleven hundred bundles of the reed was cut in February 1981 at Scales Farm and tied into 24-inch bundles to be shipped stateside to the Gardens for the historic structure.

Having surmounted the problems of the thatch and thatcher, then appeared a third problem – the cost of shipping – which would defeat the whole endeavor. Much to the relief of the Board, Mr. Geoffrey Gilbert was able to explain the historic project to Dart Containerline Limited in Southampton who became enthusiastic about the project and volunteered to use its time, expertise and resources to pick up the reed in Norfolk, transport it Southampton, place the reed upon its line coming to Norfolk, Virginia, and thence send the thatch to Roanoke Island.

The yearlong planning came to fruition upon arrival of the thatch at the Gardens on April 15th 1981. Some six thousand people viewed the construction during the remainder of April and a portion of May, a record-breaking attendance for this time of year.

To the south of the formal Sunken Garden is the sweep of greensward called the Great Lawn where the cast of THE LOST COLONY outdoor drama sometimes performs Elizabethan masques in the summer. On the edge and encircling the Great Lawn are some of the finest specimens of sasanqua and japonica camellias to be found in the South, many a gift from the North Carolina Camellia Society. Also here is one ancient live oak estimated to have been living in 1585 when the first colonists landed.

Horticulturists thrill to the myriad varieties of plants and trees; hybrid lilies originally donated by the N.C. Lily Society; colorful daylilies given by the Hemerocallis Society; and thousands of annuals and perennials planted and maintained by a small but devoted garden staff.

In 1976 Lewis Clarke, an Englishman and a landscape architect in Raleigh designed a cloistered rose garden. The garden is called The Queen's Rose Garden and honors H.M. Queen Elizabeth II. This garden is surrounded on three sides by an eight-foot pierced brick wall made from the same old warmly colored handmade bricks used elsewhere in the Gardens. Already it looks a century old! The fourth side is a mass of mature azaleas at the height of their bloom the last two weeks in April. Access to the rose garden is through handsome brick piers down a walkway centered with a 500-year-old sundial from the Whitney collection. The pathway continues to a natural "throne" reached by three broad steps guarded by old marble lion sculptures and topped with an antique hand-carved white Carrara marble bench canopied by white dogwood trees.

Opposite the pathway are geometric beds featuring grandiflora, hybrid tea and floribunda roses in varying hues from pink to orange to red. Draping the walls is a salmon-pink climber with shrub roses at the base showing pink flowers. A native climber winds its way to the top of the loblolly pine just inside the entrance.

Tucked in among the roses is the rose sent by H.M., Queen Elizabeth II, from the royal rose garden at Windsor Castle. The Queen's Rose Garden was dedicated in honor of Queen Elizabeth II by her emissary, Sir Peter Ramsbotham, British Ambassador, in September, 1976.

There is beauty for all in this lovely year-round garden in its tranquil setting on the shores of Roanoke Sound. But more than a vision of beauty is a thrilling experience of the women of The Garden Club of North Carolina, so aptly described by the late Mrs. Inglis Fletcher on the plaque at the entrance gates as follows:

“Down the centuries English women have built gardens to the glory of God, the beauty of the countryside and the comfort of their souls.”

“The women of the Garden Club of North Carolina have planted this garden in memory of the valiant men and women who founded the first English Colony in America.”

“From this hallowed ground they walked away through the dark forest and into history.”

**SAGA OF VIRGINIA DARE STATUE
IN THE ELIZABETHAN GARDENS
Roanoke Island, North Carolina**

History, mystery and fantasy are combined in the beautiful Elizabethan Gardens which are a memorial to the valiant men and women who, as English colonists, came to Roanoke Island from 1584-1587 and walked “away through the dark forest into history” as the Lost Colony.

History remembers Virginia Dare as the first child born of English parents in the New World. In August, 1585, twenty-two years before Jamestown, 108 Englishmen under the far-reaching hand of Sir Walter Raleigh, managed to sail into what is now called Roanoke Sound and came ashore on an island called Roanoke in what is now Dare County, North Carolina. Having found a safe harbor between the mainland and the Outer Banks, they chose an area covered with live oaks on Roanoke Island overlooking the Roanoke Sound as the site for the first English colony in North America. Later this group returned to England.

Two years later, Raleigh sent a second ship of colonists, this time including women and families. Several weeks after their arrival in July of 1587, Eleanor Dare gave birth August 18, 1587, to a baby girl who was named Virginia after Elizabeth I, England’s Virgin Queen. It was also a name befitting the first English child born in the wilderness of the New World.

Ten days after the birth of his grandchild Virginia Dare, John White, governor of the colony, returned with the ship to England to secure additional supplies. The colonists were left to fend for themselves without the unifying strength of their governor, without the additional supplies and adequate skills in how to deal with the wilderness of a strange and alien land; the various Indian tribes and the whims of nature in this area which vacillated from drought to hurricanes. Because England was at war with Spain and involved in the defeat of the Spanish Armada, Governor John White could not return immediately with his ship of supplies. When he finally was able to return three years later in 1590, there was no trace of the colonists and no visible evidence of a struggle. On a post near the entrance to the settlement the bark had been peeled off and a single enigmatic word carved into the wood – CROATOAN. Possibly this referred to a nearby island of that name or the Croatan Indians who were considered friendly. There was no sight of a cross which had been the prearranged signal of distress. No trace has ever been found of these colonists in subsequent years.

The poignant mystery surrounding the child Virginia Dare lost forever in the great American Wilderness caught at the imagination of Maria Louise Lander of Salem, Massachusetts, and American sculptor. At a very early age, Miss Lander displayed a noticeable ability to fashion wax heads for her broken dolls and so her family decided to support her efforts towards an artistic career. In her late twenties (she was born in 1826) she sailed for Rome where she established her own studio and produced two of her most famous sculptures – Evangeline and Virginia Dare. It is significant that Louise Lander created the figure of a heroine, not from Greece or Rome, but from a haunting legend in her own country.

Using a large pillar of white marble from the quarry of Carrara, Miss Lander began to chisel endless markings of this finely grained stone. After fourteen months of labor, she completed her statue and placed it aboard a sailing vessel en route to Boston. The vessel encountered a severe storm off the coast of Spain and was wrecked, sending its cargo to the bottom. Two years later the ship’s cargo was salvaged, including the statue of Virginia Dare, and Miss Lander was forced to buy back her statue which she restored to its original beauty and exhibited it in Boston where it was greatly admired.

A New York collector reportedly bought it for the sum of \$5000 and brought it to his studio which caught fire and Virginia Dare was again in danger of being destroyed but was saved by a pair of folding doors that were closed. The New York buyer died, the executors refused to confirm the sale, so the statue went back to Miss Lander.

About this time Miss Lander learned North Carolina was to erect a building at the World's Columbian Exposition, which was upcoming in Chicago in 1893, and she wrote a Women's Committee of the North Carolina Commission, offering to sell the statue as a most appropriate ornament for the building. The Committee was interested, since Virginia Dare was born on North Carolina soil, but since no funds were available, the Committee suggested that Miss Lander give the statue to North Carolina where the history of Virginia Dare would always be of interest.

Miss Lander was sixty-seven; her health was frail although she would live for many years more. She loved the Virginia Dare statue. It was her pride and joy and by now it was a friend. Miss Lander decided to keep the statue until her death and will it the State of North Carolina. Three years after her death, in 1926, the statue was formally accepted by the State and exhibited in the Hall of History in Raleigh for all to admire its artistic beauty and form. But it became a controversial work of art, some not being able to see art in a half nude maiden clad in a fish net and complaints came to the Department of Archives and History that the statue was obscene. The fact that it was placed beneath the portraits of three Confederate Generals did not help either!

In 1938, the Hall of History moved to its new home in the Education building and all historical effects were taken except for Virginia Dare. Whether intentional or not, she was left behind in the basement of the old Supreme Court Building. Later she made her way to the office of the late George Ross Pou, State Auditor, where she again became the topic of conversation. One Raleigh newspaper at the time stated: "A Marble Lady, clad only in fish net, whose downs have included one resting place deep under the water off the coast of Spain, and another resting place in the dingy basement of the Supreme Court Building, is up again"!

When THE LOST COLONY drama was written by Paul Green it was decided to send the statue of Virginia Dare to Roanoke Island to be placed in the waterside theatre. In the meantime, Fort Raleigh had become a national historic site and National Park Service officials frowned on the statue being placed at this historic site since there was no authenticated record that Virginia Dare ever lived to maidenhood so the statue remained in its shipping crate backstage at the waterside theatre until after World War II when Albert Q. Bell, builder of the theatre, decided to send it author Paul Green at his Greenwood Estate near Chapel Hill.

The Pulitzer prize-winning Green never got around to erecting the statue on his estate. The Elizabethan Gardens were created on Roanoke Island in the early fifties, Green decided to send the statue to The Gardens to be placed with the famous statuary from the Whitney Estate of Thomasville, Georgia. And so the Virginia Dare statue, surviving shipwreck, fire, abandonment and rebuff, finally came to rest in The Elizabethan Gardens almost one hundred years after her creation.

Today the 'maiden of mystery' stands in her own niche at the foot of an ancient live oak, one of the same species of sea-battered oaks that existed in the area where she was born. She gazes dreamily beyond the trees toward the softened surge of nearby Roanoke Sound. Instead of schoolbooks, she holds a fishnet draped around her waist. About her neck and arms she wears the Indian laces of an Indian princess. Instead of a royal greyhound, a royal heron accompanies her.

Another Indian legend persists that Virginia did grow up among the Indians and that her spirit roams Roanoke in the form a white doe. Whatever one elects to believe, Maria Louise Lander's sculpture of Virginia Dare stands serenely fixed in The Elizabethan Gardens today, a figure of quiet hope, wide-browed and intelligent, the first child of the first colony of Elizabethan England, gazing toward the future despite all the odds of the history, mystery and fantasy that surround her.