SOURCEBOOK
FOR GARDEN ARCHAEOLOGY
Methods, Techniques,
Interpretations and Field Examples

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Chapter 3B
Interpreting the American Garden

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Archaeologists excavating gardens are charged with at least two primary tasks—recovering past landscapes and interpreting them. Having assembled the evidence of a garden’s history through documentary and visual research, excavation, mapping, remote sensing, aerial photography, botanical analysis, and other techniques, the challenge for the archaeologist is to interpret the garden’s significance in its cultural and social context. In American garden archaeology some of the most powerful interpretations have resulted from interdisciplinary research that examines both how people have shaped their environment into a space conceptualized as “garden” and how those spaces in turn shaped their occupants’ behaviors, social relationships, and identities. These analyses privilege the active role of landscape or, as W.J.T. Mitchell has phrased it, positioned landscape as verb rather than noun.¹ They explore the recursive relationships between the producers and consumers of the designed landscapes, examine the ways power is negotiated in and through the gardens, and investigate the meanings of American gardens.

An important contribution of American garden archaeology interpretation has been linking the garden design to systems of social and economic order. Work at colonial and early Republic gardens, particularly in the mid-Atlantic sites such as Bacon’s Castle, Mount Vernon, Monticello, Poplar Forest, Mount Clare, Montpelier, Gunston Hall, Morven, and long-term projects in Colonial Williamsburg and in Historic Annapolis, have provided a rich corpus of evidence for the material culture of these gardens and their meaning in the context of an emerging nation and capitalist economy. Some of these interpretations highlight the gardens’ intersections with European design principles while others gardens are distinctly connected to their American cultural and historical context. For instance, a number of studies have explored how European Baroque town planning principles and Enlightenment philosophies of architectural geometry and proportions were expressed in colonial American gardens in their geometric proportions, optics, and opportunities for surveillance.² At the William Paca House and the Charles Carroll House, both in Annapolis, the geometry of the garden was based on base dimensions of the main dwellings, and both gardens

¹ Mitchell 1984: 1.
² Epperson 2000; Ernst 2003.
created illusions by foreshortening certain views and enhancing others. (fig. 1) These spatial analyses also reveal the ideologies encoded in the landscape design. The gardens situated their owners, who were signers of the Declaration of Independence, as the arbiters of the natural, ordered landscape just as they were authors of a new civic order.

1. Charles Carroll House, Annapolis, Maryland, US, seen from the lowest terrace of the 1770s falling garden (E. Kryder-Reid).

Assertions of political legitimacy and social standing through elite residential garden design share a longstanding legacy with British and European gardening traditions, but other readings of American gardens bring to light aspects of uniquely American social and racial structures. Analyses of plantation landscapes, such as the Hermitage, Mount Airy, Tuckahoe, Gunston Hall, Monticello, and Nomini Hall, reveal how the visual and spatial logic of terracing, building placement, and circulation routes mapped social, gender, and racial hierarchies, structured the visual consumption of the space, shaped work and leisure activities, and controlled access in Virginia plantations. (fig. 2)

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3 Kryder-Reid 1998; Leone & Shackel 1990; Paca-Steele with Wright 1986.

Investigations into the spatiality of power relations in cultural landscapes that include formal and vernacular gardens have similarly informed the construction of gender, class, race, and identity in plantations as well as in sites as varied as Jamaican plantations, industrial towns and mining communities, and internment camps. Work on African-American yardsapes has interpreted their spatial and aesthetic logic as a distinctive tradition within the American landscape. The excavation of the slave quarter, ca 1790-1812, at Poplar Forest has revealed the distinctive use of the yard space, and studies of more recent African-American yard spaces document the continuity of the gardening practices and symbolic meanings in these carefully crafted spaces. (fig. 3) Archaeologists have also interpreted gardens within the context of their spiritual associations, such as the gardens of the Utopian community at Economy, Beaver, Pennsylvania and Native American sacred landscapes.

While excavations of elite residential gardens have received the most attention, another productive area of investigation has been interpretations of public gardens and parks where the design and use of the spaces illuminates broader civic discourses and societal issues. Excavations of Central Park in Manhattan have uncovered the remains.

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8 De Cunzo et al. 1996.
9 Kuwanwisiwma & Ferguson 2009.
of Seneca Village, an African-American community that was displaced to make way for the massive landscaping project in the 1850s.\(^\text{10}\)

![Image of Seneca Village](image)

3. The home of Gyp Packnett, Centerville, Mississippi, US, 1990. The carport contains memorials to his late wife and father as well as a seating area for guests (Courtesy of Grey Gundaker).

For instance, the creation of greens and commons in colonial town plans were central to the construction of community both in colonial times and in the more romanticized 19\(^{\text{th}}\) century image of the New England village.\(^\text{11}\) In the first half of the 19\(^{\text{th}}\) century the introduction of pressurized municipal water systems and growing concerns about public health issues spurred the creation of parks and gardens to provide citizens with the opportunity to enjoy the salubrious effects of clean water and air, and also to celebrate the civic achievement of these vast projects. Views of parks such as Fairmont Park in Philadelphia and the Croton Waterworks in New York capture the civic pride in these early water systems and the boon they were to the safety of the citizenry, which would now have access to clean water, as well as a way to fight fires and keep more hygienic conditions.\(^\text{12}\) Archaeologists have similarly

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\(^\text{10}\) Seneca Village Project: The History and Archaeology of a Community of African-Americans and Irish Immigrants in Nineteenth Century New York City (In 1998, Cynthia Copeland, Nan Rothschild, and Diana Wall formed the Seneca Village Project, which is geared towards the study of the village in an educational context and its commemoration).


\(^\text{11}\) Handsman 1981; Kryder-Reid 2010a.

\(^\text{12}\) Harding 1994; Kryder-Reid 2010a.
been concerned with the therapeutic landscapes of institutions such as those built in asylums for the physically and mentally ill, poor houses, and prisons. These gardens not only gave their residents areas for fresh air and exercise, but also afforded an opportunity to work the earth and engage in the restorative effects of gardening.

Another area of interpretation of American gardens has been their intersection with contemporary societal issues such as urbanization, sustainability, and marginalization. For example, urban landscapes, including garden spaces, have been examined as a record of class identity in 18th century Newport, Rhode Island, and 19th century Lowell, Massachusetts. Stephen Mrozowski has assembled data such as botanical and faunal remains, phytoliths, and soil chemistry to reconstruct the domestic, communal, and industrial spaces that shaped the lives of the city dwellers and to interpret the ways in which historical constructs of class structure and identity were reified by a variety of material and social inequalities. In another example of intersectional urban archaeology’s intersection with pressing social issues, Larry Zimmerman’s excavations of Hillside garden at the James J. Hill House in St. Paul, Minnesota revealed not only the historic gardens of the family estate, but also the use of the gardens as encampments by area homeless. (fig. 4)

He has expanded his investigation of the landscapes of homeless encampments and his work, along with that of Diana Balmori and

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13 Beisaw & Gibb 2009.
15 Mrozowski 2006.
Margaret Morton, reveals practices of placemaking and land use that reveal the agency and spatial practices of urban homeless people.

Another theme of American garden history interpretation has addressed the relationship of horticulture and technology. In early colonial times a challenge for settlers trying to establish gardens was adapting familiar practices for the North American climate and incorporating native plants of the region. William Bartram’s early plant collections were important contributions to documenting new world species, and excavations of his garden in Philadelphia reveal the creation of microclimates to shelter transplanted native specimens (Bartram Botanic Garden). Similarly, excavations of plant propagation structures provide insights into early gardeners’ efforts to cultivate exotic species, such as Mrs. Carroll’s experiments with oranges and pineapples at Mount Clare, Governor Calvert’s hypocaust-heated orangery in Annapolis, and Thomas Jefferson’s experiments at Monticello. In the second half of the 19th century, greenhouse and conservatory construction was made more affordable by advances in building technologies and relatively inexpensive materials. These technological developments helped fuel the passion for raising hybrids and other tender plants that would not otherwise grow in the climate. As investigations at Hampton in Maryland revealed, the availability of roses, camellias, and other exotics also led to the use of an array of vases, pots, urns, and boxes that both showed off the plants and allowed them to be moved inside or out, depending on the season. The expansion of the nursery industry also helped support the growing taste in mass plantings of annuals and other elements of “ bedding out” that characterize many gardens of the period. Changing technologies have also been an important part of contextualizing labor in the garden landscape. For instance, the invention of the lawnmower and other lawn care technologies allowed those of middling income to cultivate rolled and clipped grass lawns that had previously been the mark of elites who had staff or slaves to maintain the greensward and, according to Daniel Ingersoll, to craft the ubiquitous simulacra of suburbia.

Another contribution of American archaeology to garden interpretation has been a concern with a more introspective history of garden restoration and public interpretation. These studies have explored the history of garden restorations and various colonial revival impulses, as well as the construction of the past in historic garden sites.

18 Zimmerman, Singleton & Welch 2010.
20 Fry 2011.
through myriad historical and visual practices such as tourism, commodification, and performance. The recursive relationship of garden design at heritage sites, for example, provides evidence for the politics of memory as historic sites are “restored” and represented in ways that privilege specific interests. Particularly charged are sites that signify national, state, or cultural origins. For example, in the United States seemingly innocuous garden restorations and landscaping at sites such as Jamestown, Plimoth, and the California Missions are implicated in the discourse of postcolonial narrative.\(^{24}\) As part of a broader “heritage archaeology,” the archaeological interpretation of historic gardens necessarily becomes an investigation of the complex relationships between the construction (physical and ideological) of the garden and its reception and consumption over time.\(^{25}\) A critical perspective on the contemporary relevance of archaeology compels excavators of sites open to the public to embrace garden archaeology as a means to empower visitors as active participants in the production of historical knowledge.\(^{26}\) Public programming and public scholarship are also opportunities to highlight the relevance of garden history for contemporary social issues such as sustainability and the development of more inclusive histories. Garden archaeology, particularly at sites that include revival garden styles, such as colonial revival and Mediterranean revival, presents ways to explore the origins of certain dominant historical narratives. Interpretations of these “revival gardens,” whether Anglo-colonial, Hispanic colonial, or other re-creations of a romanticized past, have investigated ways in which present power relations are embedded in the past to legitimize claims of privilege and power.\(^{27}\) Similarly, gardens associated with sites of memorialization present opportunities to investigate the intersection of garden design and commemoration at places of armed conflict and tragedy.

Current trends in garden archaeology interpretation in the United States are informed by emerging issues in other branches of historical archaeology. An increased interest in collaborative research that encourages public discourse and citizen-curated interpretive products is exemplified by work with descendant communities on the history and meaning of landscapes and garden spaces.\(^{28}\) Similar concerns with the relevance and public value of archaeology have led to increased attention to deconstructing the practices of tourism and placemaking.\(^{29}\) Archaeologists are looking beyond formative design and conceptualizing

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\(^{24}\) Hantman 2008; Kryder-Reid 2007.


\(^{26}\) Leone & Kryder-Reid 1992; Yamin 1997.

\(^{27}\) Birnbaum & Hughes 2005; Brinkley 1996; Hosmer 1985; Kryder-Reid 2010b.


\(^{29}\) Handsman 2008; Rubertone 2008.
gardens in more inclusive ways, for example as performative spaces where memorializing behaviors animate commemorative meanings and as multisensory landscapes where sound, smell, and texture are as privileged as the visual experience of the garden. Finally, the archaeology of gardens is also grappling with the ethical issues of interpreting contested spaces where competing interests vie for control of resources and public narratives. For example, the archaeology of landscape and slavery has implications for descendant communities as well as for public interpretations of the sites, and understanding indigenous concepts of landscape is integral to the recognition of rights of Native Americans.

CONCLUSION
The task of reading and interpreting the often ephemeral traces of past gardens is the ongoing challenge for landscape archaeologists, and yet there is much promise and productivity in the pursuit. In addition to the advances in field techniques discussed elsewhere in this book, there is a growing literature of American garden history that makes placing an individual site into its broader context far easier. There have been numerous instances where the archaeological recovery of the evidence has contributed substantively to the understanding of historic gardens, and in some cases, as at Bacon’s Castle, the physical evidence was one of the few surviving clues of the garden’s existence. In other cases, archaeological spatial analysis, particularly in association with iconographic and political interpretation, has led to new ways of reading the landscape. In sum, analysis of a garden’s material culture and its place in the design of the gardens as they were planned and experienced by those who lived and worked in them. In sum, American garden interpretations have sought to analyse the garden’s material culture and landscape design in the context of broader social, economic, and political history; as active inhabited spaces animated by the work, leisure, ideas and agency of individuals; and as cultural heritage resources whose complex meanings continue to be constructed and negotiated over time.

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