Where Do Old Ideas Fit in the New World?

First and foremost, Brunswick, Georgia is an Anglophile’s paradise. Established by a small group of idealistic Englishmen in the late 18th century, the city was intended to serve as a sort of utopian experiment in its design, an economic powerhouse in its function and a military buffer in its placement. No small order for a muddy, marshy, microscopic outpost clinging to the edge of the continent, at the most westward point on the eastern seaboard. Protected from storms, surrounded by fertile land, rich with minerals and covered with timber of the most astonishing strength and resistance to artillery for maritime construction, Brunswick looked to be an opportunity ripe for the picking.

Of course, the founding fathers and benevolent underwriters lived comfortably in their well-provisioned manor houses and London homes, an ocean away from the struggles of an under-supplied colonial outpost. Daily bread for them was an assumption; for the settlers in the dreamed-of new land, it was a questionable commodity, dependent on wrestling a crop from the black soil in a climate that tested the newcomers in every season.

If agriculture equaled destiny in the new world, then ornamental horticulture had to wait until the population stabilized and other matters were settled. Sir Robert Montgomery’s elegant plan for the Margravate of Azilia, a planned community for a hypothetical new world order, dictated that communal garden spots should be placed throughout cities of the future, always planning with nature, not against it. A lovely and futuristic plan, ahead of its time, but many early settlers would have found formal English gardens outlandishy unrealistic in the semi-tropical climate of southeast coastal Georgia.

As soon as land was cleared for something as humble as a modest household kitchen garden, the deer, a resource that was the subject of much euphemistic praise by
colonial organizers, nonchalantly sauntered in at dusk and nibbled up every single new plant. An entire season’s crop could be destroyed by one small group of hungry deer in a night, dismayed colonists reported in their letters to trustees in England. Never mind the promise of impressive income from exporting buckskins, a recent fashion trend in London at the time. The issue was the struggle to survive in a land where the naïve settlers were the foreigners, and the deer were in their proper natural element. Other uninvited guests, such as rabbits and voracious insects, enjoyed the newcomers’ garden efforts as well.

Another adversary was the aggressive indigenous vegetation. An untended garden would be overrun in a matter of weeks by creeper vines, and other vigorous local plants. Clearly, at that point in history, tidy parterres and privet hedges belonged across the sea in England, in the old world and the old life. But the citizens of Brunswick would retain their love for all things British for generations, as the town’s later architecture and gardens would reveal.

A Victorian City
The stability of the population of Brunswick was in peril during the city’s first century after its founding in 1771. Sparsely settled in the best of times, the city was virtually abandoned in wars and other times of crisis. However, some element of attraction remained, luring people back again and again. The stunning beauty of the place and its considerable natural wealth tantalized optimists and inspired businessmen. During the Revolutionary War, the majority of Brunswick’s citizens were Loyalists, sympathetic to the Crown. After the war, Brunswick was one of the few cities in America that did not change the British names of its streets.

The small town struggled through Reconstruction, much as the rest of the South did after the War Between the States, but found a new market niche during the post-war westward expansion. The export of forest products from the coastal pine acreage of the southeastern part of the state put Brunswick back to work and back on the map. The city woke up in the late 1870s to new opportunity and prosperity.

It has often been said that Brunswick is a Victorian town, a curious designation for a municipality that was settled a century earlier. The city became prosperous at that time, when timber was king and the port was busy year-round. Citizens were able to build homes that endured, with a typical late-19th century blend of formality, layers of ornamentation and enthusiastic disregard for restraint. The architecture that now defines its Old Town section is Victorian, with its profusion of styles and materials. Its gardens are decidedly so, with the obvious influence of England as well.
Ladies to the Rescue
The role of women in the period between the War Between the States and World War II leaves much room for study and examination. Modern standards often regard women of that era as repressed, disenfranchised and powerless. Thankfully, the women of Brunswick, Georgia were not burdened with those disparaging observations in their lifetime, for they were busy acting as the guardians of civic beautification and social justice while rearing large families and managing complicated multigenerational households. All accomplished, of course, without the modern conveniences that require a fraction of the time and effort to do such labor-intensive daily chores as laundry and meal preparation.

One timely tactical maneuver perfected by the women of Brunswick, their clubs and Associations was their ability to enlist the aid of the city’s newspaper to convince city fathers to make significant advances in health and beautification. The Ladies Park Association, led by Mrs. D.T. (Mary) Dunn, began to petition the city to remove the public buildings from Hanover Square in 1878. Despite the lack of action by the city, the women began fundraising for beautification projects in 1880. On January 25, 1881, the group ramped up their campaign and made a formal request to the City Commission that public buildings in Hanover Square be removed at once. The Association gave the commission just three days before launching a grassroots campaign via local newspaper editorials to raise public awareness and effectively pressure the city to officially support the effort. This savvy move changed the face of Brunswick. It also began the lengthy process of transforming Hanover Square from a muddy patch of land with a rickety wooden courthouse, jail and civic buildings to a garden spot for all to enjoy.

Not every improvement required such complex politics. Minutes of City Commission meetings from the late 19th century are liberally seasoned with reports of polite, formal requests by the Ladies Park Association, garden clubs and other civic groups, for the city’s modest help in a number of projects. Planting trees or protecting them was a frequent topic discussed by the garden clubs of Brunswick. Although 21st century Americans may see themselves as the pioneers of conservation, women of Brunswick’s garden clubs preceded them by more than a century. An impressive amount of energy was spent on introducing—and passing—municipal legislation that forbade cutting down of the city’s trademark ancient oak trees.

The city’s adoption of the laws at the height of its defining era, full of enthusiasm for anything “modern,” was to its credit. Photographs of Brunswick at the turn of the 20th
century show the characteristic tangle of wires and poles bringing exciting new communications technology of the times to all parts of the city. Trees would normally have been cut down with abandon to make way for “progress.” The current-day presence of so many stately old oak trees is due largely to the efforts of members of the garden clubs of Brunswick throughout the years.

Unwanted Visitors
The major work of returning Hanover Square to the oasis envisioned by Sir Robert Montgomery began with the removal of civic buildings and establishing the “bones” of the garden. But Mrs. Dunn, president of the Ladies Park Association, and her group faced another obstacle in a fight that lasted nearly a decade past their first victory. Livestock had always been allowed to roam, unrestrained, through the city. Almost all private homes of the era had sturdy fences around their property to protect kitchen and ornamental gardens. A number of families that kept dairy cows for their own use staked them out in the city’s marshy areas. This practice persisted until a lengthy period of grading, filling and draining of the entire peninsula upon which Brunswick is situated came to an end in the early 20th century. The cattle apparently thrived on eating the rough marsh grass, but when left to wander freely, preferred the taste of formal garden plants.

In her initial requests to the city, Mrs. Dunn pleaded with officials to “shut up the hogs” and fence Hanover Square. Obviously, plans to create a restful garden were incompatible with a trampled grazing lot littered with animal waste. The ladies continued their pleas even as they filled Hanover Square with an inventory of jasmine, hydrangeas, lilies of several varieties, spirea, wild olive plants and cannas. Finally, in 1891, the city’s Parks Keeper, James S. DeForest, went before the Commission and urgently requested that the park be fenced to avoid its destruction by cows. Despite one last lateral move to refer the request to yet another committee, the Commission did decide to honor the request at last and fence in the park.

The plans called for special gates to be installed that allowed only human visitors to enter. A network of garden paths was first paved with shells, then later with brick, ideal for romantic moonlight strolls—or pushing a baby carriage in the morning sunlight. The gates have long been removed, but traces of the intersection of these walkways with the perimeter fencing were discovered in 2006 when Signature Squares of Brunswick began the extensive renovation of Hanover Square.

The Roots of a Defining Era
Victorian style in garden design is as distinctive as it is in architecture. A brief glimpse back into its historical foundations is worth mentioning, as it reflects directly on the evolution of the very essence of Brunswick, Georgia’s character and charm.

The British Navy was an undisputed global powerhouse in the late 18th and entire 19th centuries. Driven by the necessities of decades of war, British maritime architects and engineers made numerous advances in construction and navigation technology. These innovations also opened the door to scientific exploration societies in
the latter half of the 19th century. During Queen Victoria’s six-decade reign, from 1837-1901, the natural sciences became a topic of intense scholarly and popular interest. Adventure travel and collecting exotic trophies, including thousands of species of plants, was all the rage. But where would the treasure-hunters keep their new discoveries?

From 1796 to 1851 in England, homes with more than eight windows were assessed a special glass tax. The controversial tariff was preferable to an income tax, which required the citizen to disclose what was considered too much personal information to the government. Critics complained that the glass assessment was a “tax on light and air.”

When the tax was in place, homes had been constructed with potential window openings, which were temporarily bricked in for future glazing once the law was repealed—or the owner’s finances allowed the luxury of windows. The glass tax was considered particularly oppressive due to the long dim winters, overcast autumns and foggy springs in the British Isles, when any sunlight was eagerly exploited.

The tax had social implications as well, and effectively separated the merely prosperous from the truly rich. Manor houses of the time that boasted sweeping views of their grounds through large expanses of windows identified their owners as members of an elite class of wealth. Anyone who could afford the taxes on large windows had to be in possession of a certain level of means.

When the glass tax was repealed in 1851, homeowners in England rushed to open up their bricked-in windows, and before long, a new architectural trend emerged: conservatories. These “greenhouse rooms” were added on to existing homes across the British Isles. Not only did the glassed-in additions gather in all the available sunlight, they gave homeowners the delicious feeling of conspicuous wealth. Exotic plants gathered up from sea voyages and other travels were carefully propagated and tenderly cared for in protected indoor environments. The living, growing oddities from around the globe were both status symbols and objects of scientific study in Victorian conservatories.

Once the vista of their property was maximized, Victorians began to yearn for more than the one color of formal English gardens: green. It had been typical up to that point in history for proper gardens to be primarily formal, structured plantings of evergreen hedges such as yew and privet, trimmed into strict geometric configurations. Viewed now from many windows, the monochromatic plantings seemed lackluster.
Property owners searched for new plants that could be hybridized to flourish in the damp, chilly, dim weather—yet deliver rich color and new textures.

Driven by the potential of an emerging market, horticulture became a profitable science and business. New species from around the world were planted alongside more familiar European varieties, and formality was thrown to the winds. Neighbors vied for the most colorful, exotic gardens, full of unfamiliar new plants. Gone were the precise, geometric parterres and manicured hedges; flowers were now mounded in beds that lined walkways and surrounded the house, with heights carefully staggered to afford full visibility of each plant. Specimen plants were placed in the center of circular beds, surrounded by complementary flowers and greenery—a practice called “bedding out.” Nothing was too outrageous or ostentatious. Excess ruled the day, with crowded landscapes echoing the layers of detailed ornamentation inside the home. No parlor was complete without a palm; no garden was complete without a statue.

Across the Atlantic, the influences of Victorian architecture, exploration, horticulture and other aspects of culture and civilization were enormous. As a young nation, the United States arguably labored under somewhat of an inferiority complex for its first century, and beyond. Styles and trends from Europe were highly regarded as more valuable than those native innovations by many prosperous Americans, who hurried to adopt “the latest thing” from England and France. Styles of clothing were copied in exacting detail from European sources. Garden trends were no different; the freewheeling excess of Victorian garden design and the expansion of the natural sciences combined with the availability of land and pioneering spirit of America. Fantastic gardens and estates were built by the lions of economic empires like the Vanderbilts and Astors of the northeast. To say the least, it was the age of exuberantly conspicuous consumption.

If the typical Victorian garden in England seemed a bit crowded with plant materials of various types, then its American counterpart would have been positively tipsy with texture, scent, color and variety. In the coastal southeast, long growing seasons, strong sunshine and much warmer temperatures prompted changes to the habit of simply copying England’s lead.

First, the addition of conservatories in private homes was beyond the means of many American families. Moreover, in the South, a room full of sunny windows might have been seen as liability in hotter months when homes were refuges from the stifling heat and humidity. Southerners favored elaborate gardens and deep, shady porches from which to admire them. Second, gardeners found that species of flowers, particularly roses, which had been hybridized to thrive in the cool mists of Britain, could not withstand the intense sunlight and temperatures of the Southeast.

Armed with the tantalizing resources of rich soil that had not been over-farmed for centuries, an extraordinarily long growing season and a wealth of native plants with which to experiment, gardeners in the coastal South began to develop new plant varieties. The typical American energy zest for enterprise gave birth to a renaissance of the science and art of ornamental horticultural.
By Any Other Name

Roses had been cultivated in America since early plantation days in South Carolina. In addition to their beauty, rose petals were used to distill essential oils for perfumes, soaps and other products. Other flowering plants and herbs were used for medicinal purposes as well. Every housewife had a collection of “receipts” for such products as shampoo, skin lotions, facial care and tonics that were made in the home, not purchased from a shop.

During Victorian times, roses became symbolic of love, with each color representing a different aspect of affection and romance. Tea roses, with their upright growing habit and long stems, were highly prized for use as cut flowers. Their drawback was the need for constant care. Brunswick’s gardeners included them in their plans, of course, but also relied heavily on hardier bush roses, especially Red China varieties, for long blooming seasons and productivity without the need for pruning and pampering. These bush roses did not yield high quality cut flowers, but offered a luxurious covering of brilliant color.

Other plants were prominent in the plans for the city’s largest public garden in Hanover Park. Crinum lilies were used extensively in the earliest of Hanover’s gardens. These massive perennials have large, spiky, pure white blooms surrounded by a spray of long, thin leaves. Floral inventories from 1891 in the city’s archives list several other varieties of lily that added dazzling color and textures. Also included were plants called “jessamines,” which modern gardeners call “jasmine.” These fragrant plants were featured for years in Hanover’s gardens, adding glossy foliage and soft, vine-like shapes in contrast to the more structured crinum lily.

Postcards and Personalities

Picture postcards, popular in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, give us our best opportunity to view Hanover Square’s evolution as a municipal garden space. Between 1900 and 1914, the central garden area around Hanover Square’s fountain changed considerably. A circle of crinum lilies matured into a massive ring, which formed a backdrop for a tier of vibrant red roses. The circular theme was repeated with three large bedded-out areas on the lawn directly east of the fountain. There, a passion for color, texture and form was expressed in a cluster of multi-colored spring and summer annuals in a paintbox of pastel shades.
In a postcard dated 1914, a keen observer can find an endearing clue to the whimsical, die-hard individual personality of Brunswick itself. To the west and slightly south of the fountain, a typical Victorian feature—a singular, exotic specimen of a century plant in full “bloom”—towers over the formal garden space in its gawky, spindly glory. The century plant, Agave Americana, originated in the high deserts of Mexico and can be found growing wild in Europe, South Africa, India and Australia. There is no question that the flowering plant, which can grow to a staggering 30 feet in height, is a guest in the humid, semi-tropical coastal South. Its spiky stalk and spear-sharp top point can grow 5-6 inches per day in its hurry to bloom in its unique form before its demise. It might not “belong” here in the formal sense of the word, but it was certainly welcome. Anything that could take root here and thrive, whether it was a new species, new industry, new citizens from foreign origins or new idea, was welcome. If you could contribute, you could stay and become a part of the community.

The blooming century plant’s aggressively gaunt appearance at the edge of the formal rose garden, with its petticoats of soft annuals flowing out beyond the borders into the lawn, brings to mind a melodramatic Victorian novella scenario of a fully armed, noble savage crashing a Sunday School ice cream social. It was as if all the carefully balanced proper beauty cried out to be interrupted by just one truly strange visitor from a far-away land to prove that Brunswick was, after all, a town that had seen its share of the world’s wonders.

The proper little Anglophile seaport of Brunswick has its hidden strengths. It has gracious streets boasting swoon-worthy layers of massive oaks and magnolias and lovely historic homes, only blocks from a 21st-century technology haven of a modern seaport. There is a charming main avenue, Newcastle Street, lined with quaint shops, restaurants and businesses eager to restore and maintain the city’s fin de siecle character. From that street, bordered with small parks and fountains leading up to Hanover Square’s solid green space, one can see the modern sculpture of the soaring Sidney Lanier Bridge with its steel cables and peaked arch framing the city. Brunswick is the home of the paradoxical, the unexpected camaraderie of old and new, of proper, yet self-declaring, individualism. Somehow we make it all work.