

Nathaniel Drake House

Historic and Public Gardens Blended

South Plainfield, NJ

June 8, 2015



Beth Riley, owner of The Potted Garden was retained by the Historical Society of Plainfield in 2015 to create designs for the Drake House, listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The Drake House was originally constructed in 1746 and is one of the few remaining 18th century dwellings in Plainfield, NJ. George Washington stayed at the home during the Battle of Short Hills in 1777. It now serves as the headquarters of the Historical Society of Plainfield.

As the Nathaniel Drake House is significant for its architecture and developmental illustration from colonial farmhouse to gothic revival home, it is assumed that the gardens which once surrounded this home also reflected

similar changes. “The evolutions of the garden styles are an important component which I addressed throughout the design development,” explained Beth.

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During the colonial period, which ranged from 1600 to 1775, colonists did not develop or use garden plans as landscape designers do today. Beth explained that, “gardens of this era were developed based upon the colonists’ basic needs – such as the size of their family, planting gardens around structures such as buildings, walkways and surrounding work areas. Most colonists did not place plants around the foundation of the home, yet this practice emerged during the Victorian era.”

It is probable that functional ‘dooryard gardens’ (containing a mix of herbal, medicinal and flavoring plants) initially flanked the Drake House, affording the original occupants with food for cooking, medicine and fragrance. The south facing exposure (front yard) of the Drake House would have been considered a primary planting location due to its exposure and warmth.

As the years unfolded and occupants of the Drake House changed, a new era was ushered in not only for architecture but for garden design. Beth described that, “the Victorian era gardens were much more decorative than we are accustomed to today. Part of the reason for this was because trees, shrubs and flowers were not utilized to

States during the early 19th century and again during the Colonial Revival era. This variety of boxwood (*Buxus sempervirens* ‘Vardar Valley’) is low growing, offers a subtle deep green reminiscent of the earth tones used on the home’s façade and is extremely disease resistant. Sharing this border is an American native– the perennial geranium *Geranium cantabrigiense*, originally used in colonial herb gardens.

A collection of native shrubs and ferns were curated for the home’s secondary façade, dominated by a turreted porch. *Hydrangea arborescens* (smooth hydrangea), *Clethra alnifolia* (summer sweetshrub), *Magnolia virginiana* (Sweetbay magnolia) in conjunction

”On behalf of the Board of Trustees of the Historical Society of Plainfield – Drake House Museum, I appreciate all your time, talent and effort in creating a beautiful landscape design around the Drake House. The Arbor Day event was wonderful and your work makes this fine old home a highlight of the surrounding neighborhood.”

Nancy Piwowar, President Historical Society of Plainfield

fulfill a specific purpose (medicine), but were now used instead as specimens and a new art form for the exterior of homes. The new approach for this gardening era was the use of plants as specimens, to be noticed and admired.”

The Potted Garden’s primary design goal was to provide a blend of history while practicing real-world public garden practicality. The functions of the gardens are now more cosmetic in nature, easily accessible and extend the enjoyment of the visitor experience.

Next Steps: an Integrated Approach

Following the completion of the reconstructed entry to the Drake House, the replacement of the yew anchors with boxwood opened up the site line to the Drake House doorway, greeting each visitor. Boxwood, a historic element used within the house entry design was introduced to North America from Europe in the mid-1600s and reached its peak popularity in the United

with native ferns were designed for this area, offering a seasonal bloom cycle, varied leaf texture, fragrance and fall foliage.

“Given the wide sweeping space of the Drake House tract, it was imperative to anchor key sections of the land,” says Beth. The addition of the American Chestnut to the front south east lawn initiated this pattern. An additional restoration area was identified by the remaining stumps of a past tree copse in close proximity to the corner of West Front Street and West End Avenue.

Beth was delighted to have access to initial grade renderings of this property, from the Olmsted Brothers, c. 1924. It was evident that at one time magnolias had a presence on the property. Given the lower grade for the section of the lot abutting the wet meadow of Green Brook and upholding the park like setting, magnolias were a key component in the new design developed by The Potted Garden.

The north side of The Drake House lends itself to a sitting garden. Beth describes, “An extension of the interior spaces to exterior garden rooms would have been in alignment with the Drake House plantings and use of outdoor space during the Victorian era.” A natural shape occurs within this footprint based on the location of the home, the slope and the wooded area beyond. As visitors enter this garden room filled with fragrant shrubs, a sitting area is poised at the end of this space. “The vision of this garden space as an exterior sitting room assists in extending the stay of visitors to The Drake House Museum and creates an accessible pocket garden park,” explained Beth. 🌿