



WASHINGTON, DC

Dumbarton Oaks Park

Farrand's Garden in the Valley



Dumbarton Oaks Park, located in the Georgetown section of Washington, DC, occupies 27 acres of a valley through which flows a small, unnamed tributary stream of Rock Creek. On this site, noted landscape architect Beatrix Farrand created the gardens and grounds of Dumbarton Oaks. Considered a landscape masterpiece, the design for Dumbarton Oaks included the well-known formal gardens. It is not well-known, however, that Farrand also created a naturalistic landscape garden in the valley below which is called Dumbarton Oaks Park. Today, four challenges must be resolved in order to preserve Farrand's lovely "garden in the valley": 1) the management of ever-increasing storm water flows caused by upstream urban and suburban development; 2) the preservation of deteriorated architectural features; 3) the control of overgrown and invasive vegetation; and 4) the identification of reliable and continuing funding for routine and seasonal maintenance and for interpretation. The National Park Service (NPS) now manages Dumbarton Oaks Park: support is needed to help the NPS secure funding to preserve and manage this important public landscape.

HISTORY

The history and significance and current condition of Dumbarton Oaks Park has been extensively described and documented in narratives such as a Cultural Landscape Report and a nomination to the National Register of Historic Places . This



information in this history section is adapted with guidance from Maureen Joseph and Kay Fanning, PhD, and from text found in Cultural Landscape Report: Dumbarton Oaks Park, Rock Creek Park (Part 1), 2000 and the Dumbarton Oaks Park, National Register Nomination (2004).

Dumbarton Oaks Park is located in the northwest portion of Washington, D.C., in historic Georgetown. The park is one of several units administered for the NPS by the Superintendent of Rock Creek Park. Dumbarton Oaks Park occupies 27 acres of a valley through which flows a small, unnamed tributary stream of Rock Creek. The valley was originally part of the estate known as Dumbarton Oaks, located on “R” Street on the heights of Georgetown. The site has a rich eighteenth and nineteenth-century history. However, diplomat Robert Woods Bliss and his wife Mildred Barnes Bliss, who owned Dumbarton Oaks from 1920 to 1940, transformed the landscape. During the Bliss’ ownership, the various areas of the estate were fully integrated within the extensive landscape design created for the property by landscape architect, Beatrix Farrand (1872-1959). Farrand worked for the Blisses primarily from 1921 to 1940, although she continued to consult and make revisions to the gardens’ design until 1951. The gardens particularly reflect Mildred Bliss’s passion, and she was intimately involved with Farrand in each step of the design process.

In the valley portion of the estate, Farrand created a naturalistic landscape, a “wild” garden, where an abundance of herbaceous plants and spring-flowering bulbs were sown and allowed to naturalize within open woodland along the stream and in meadows stretching across a hillside. This wild valley garden Dumbarton Oaks formed the ultimate destination of a progression through its gardens, which began with formal, classical terraces near the house, and proceeded through increasingly less formal gardens down a slope before arriving at the wild garden in the valley. The meandering circulation that Farrand laid out is, in essence, a circular walk, which leads a visitor through a varied, yet logical, sequence of garden rooms, culminating in the “wild” garden with its natural flowing stream, woodland plantings and grassy meadows.

Farrand worked closely with Mildred Bliss to create the illusion of a country estate in the city. The valley garden provided a backdrop to the whole of the Dumbarton Oaks estate, fostering the illusion of a pastoral retreat of almost limitless extent through its carefully designed woodlands and meadows, which shielded it from the surrounding city, and its subtle manipulation of scale and space. Throughout the design process, Dumbarton Oaks remained a superb example of a successful creative collaboration between patron and artist. Today, Farrand’s work at Dumbarton Oaks is considered to be the crowning project of her career.

By 1940 Dumbarton Oaks was complete. In that same year, the Blisses donated their residence, their preeminent art collection, as well as the other buildings and formal gardens on the upper levels of the estate, to Harvard University. The University continues to maintain this portion as Dumbarton Oaks Gardens and Grounds. The Blisses gave the lower, stream valley garden – Dumbarton Oaks Park – to the federal government. By subdividing the property and giving portions of the estate to these two entities, the Blisses ensured, in different ways, the landscape legacy of Farrand’s extraordinary work.

In the ensuing years, Dumbarton Oaks Park has suffered from the inadvertent effect of limited physical and financial resources. Fortunately, the National Park Service was able to give the valley garden a level of care that preserved the design well into the 1960s. A change in NPS management philosophy and jurisdictional boundaries in the early 1970s as well as impacts from the physical development of adjacent properties marked the beginning of the slow decline that affected Dumbarton Oaks Park in profound ways. Although incremental in nature, the change was dramatic. Within two decades, invasive vegetation grew unchecked, running rampant into the woodland and open meadows; structural features deteriorated due to lack of funding for routine maintenance; and uncontrolled storm water run-off eroded the stream banks. The park’s design was so fragmented by overgrown vegetation that Farrand’s intended progression and its intimate scale had been lost. This physical deterioration, in turn, undermined public awareness and appreciation for the park’s original naturalistic design and beauty. The park’s condition also contrasted strikingly to the well-cared formal gardens at Dumbarton Oaks.



The true significance of Dumbarton Oaks Park was not brought to light until the mid-1980s, at which point the damage was already extensive. From that point forward the National Park Service has worked to reclaim this lost garden. The NPS addressed the situation with a Historic American Buildings survey (1989), and later with a series of landscape studies, support from a Friends' group, and service-based initiatives including an ambitious two-part Cultural Landscape Report. Efforts during this period emphasized the need to understand and document the park's history, analyze its condition, and make specific treatment recommendations for its stabilization and its eventual restoration.

In making the decision to restore Dumbarton Oaks Park, the National Park Service focused on the significance of the park as a historic designed landscape. Fully aware of the long-term commitment required for complete restoration, park managers acknowledged the need to recognize the property's cultural significance. Although the goal is for the park's restoration in accordance with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards and guidelines for the treatment of Cultural Landscapes, a limited amount of rehabilitation will also be undertaken to respond to current use, new regulations, changing environmental factors, and ever-changing maintenance criteria.

Dumbarton Oaks Park has recently been listed on the National Register of Historic Places because of its association with the lives of persons significant in our past; and because it embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, and represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values. The Park is important for its association with the philanthropists and art collectors Robert Woods Bliss and Mildred Bliss. As an integral component of the overall design for the Dumbarton Oaks estate, the Park is part of one of the most extensive Beaux-Arts estate gardens in the U.S. and a significant element in the most important remaining design by Beatrix Farrand — a woman famed for her designed landscapes and for her contributions to the field of landscape architecture. Farrand was a pioneer woman landscape architect of national importance and the only female among the founding members of the American Society of Landscape Architects (1899). The gardens as a whole also are intimately related to the Blisses' mission for the Dumbarton Oaks collections and research programs, providing an idyllic oasis for scholars engaged in a wide range of humanistic study.

Additionally, Dumbarton Oaks Park is important as an example of a naturalistic garden with Arts and Crafts details. Its simple, rustic, stone and wood frame structures and features use local materials and reflect the work of skilled craftsmen. Vines were grown over many structures to tie them into the landscape. The park is also an example of a "wild garden," a popular approach to naturalistic gardening in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A wide variety of both native and exotic plants, particularly shrubs, bulbs, perennials, and herbaceous materials, were planted in groupings that resembled their natural patterns of growth.

THE THREAT

Dumbarton Oaks Park is one of the most significant designed historic landscapes in the National Park system. Because Beatrix Farrand's work at Dumbarton Oaks appears to retain more integrity than any other surviving Farrand landscape, the preservation and protection of the stream valley portion of her original design are all the more important. Although recently stabilized in limited ways, the stream, which flows through the valley, its related structures, and the park's naturalistic plantings remain threatened because of four factors:

one | Ever-increasing storm water flows caused by upstream urban and suburban development: Excessive storm water has significantly eroded the stream banks and the primary walking paths. It also has damaged the 18 stone waterfall dams, which were constructed in the stream as special water features. In the last eight years, NPS staff, Friends of Montrose and Dumbarton Oaks Park, The Georgetown Garden Club, the Student Conservation Association, Youth Conservation Corps, AmeriCorps, and the NPS Historic Preservation Training Center all have worked to stabilize water features, sandbag dam walls and stream banks, and annually remove sediment from the stream. However, these temporary measures are repeatedly



overcome or washed out. The dams, architectural features, and stream bank paths and plantings cannot be stabilized for the long term and permanently restored until storm water originating outside the park is brought under control. The construction of a storm water detention pond is currently under consideration and waiting funding.

two | Deteriorated architectural features: The distinctive features of the park are in various states of decline and deterioration. The most serious degradation has occurred along both sides of the stream, where the primary walking paths and rustic stone structures are located. The structures include the 18 waterfall dams, two arbors, several benches, footbridges, two vintage pump houses, and the primary paths. As mentioned above, storm water runoff has undermined the area along and adjacent to the structures. Restoration of the structures is contingent upon the completion of an upstream detention pond that will reduce flows and water levels during storm events. Once the pond is constructed, restoration can begin on all the character-defining structural features. When the restoration of the paths and the structures is complete, walking, strolling, and viewing (the essential and primary visitor experiences in this historic designed landscape) can continued as Farrand originally intended.

three | Overgrown and invasive vegetation: With the assistance of the grounds staff of Dumbarton Oaks, as well as the Friends and Garden Club groups, the Forsythia Hill area was cut, weeded and replanted several years ago. However, the NPS continues to be challenged in its efforts to maintain the area and to provide the same level of attention on a regular basis. In response to this situation, NPS staff have developed a set of recommendations for preservation and restoration of all vegetation in Dumbarton Oaks Park , including the canopy and sentinel trees, shrub masses, groundcover, and drifts of herbaceous plants and bulbs. This multi-year project will also address removing all non-contributing and invasive plant materials, which compromise the spatial organization or have an adverse impact on other landscape features. Monitoring and maintenance of areas treated for plant removal will also be required prior to installation of the new plant materials. In addition, the project covers plant selection and installation. The plan, the removal program, and the planting will focus on the following areas located within the park: Beech Grove, slopes on Forsythia Hill and along the Hazel Walk, stream banks on the north and south sides, the sylvan pools, meadows, and the designed, transitional, and border woodlands.

four | Lack of established funding for routine and seasonal maintenance and for interpretation: The National Park Service recognizes the critical need to secure acceptable staffing levels for routine maintenance and for sustaining the park's restoration. In addition, a fully integrated interpretive program should also be incorporated into park operations.

HOW TO HELP

Dumbarton Oaks Park needs public support to secure much needed funding. The tenuous condition of Dumbarton Oaks Park will continue in its current holding pattern unless the NPS can secure funding for the primary areas of concern, to:

- Control storm water and improve water quality
- Restore architectural features and garden structures to their historic character
- Eliminate invasive vegetation and rejuvenate and/or replant historic plantings
- Develop sustained maintenance and interpretive programs

To date, the National Park Service has received both grants and in-kind support for the restoration of Dumbarton Oaks Park from the following organizations: The Friends of Montrose and Dumbarton Oaks Park; Dumbarton Oaks Gardens and Grounds (Harvard University), the Georgetown Garden Club, The Garden Conservancy, the Student Conservation Association, AmeriCorps, US ICOMOS, and American Airlines (The National Park Foundation). You can help this effort by:



- Sending a donation designated for Dumbarton Oaks Park to the Greater Washington National Park Fund at www.gwnpf.org .
- Volunteering your time to help in the restoration of Dumbarton Oaks Park. Contact the Superintendent, Rock Creek Park, 3545 Williamsburg Lane, NW, Washington , DC 20008 or ROCR_superintendent@nps.gov.