



Magnolia grandiflora
The Laurel Tree of Carolina
Catesby's *Natural History*, 1743

Magnolia

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Dumbarton Oaks Garden and Park: A Celebration

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Nearly 100 years after they were first conceived, the gardens at Dumbarton Oaks are regarded as an icon among landscape architects, historians, and garden visitors the world over. However, they are not as universally well known nor as fully appreciated as they should be. In 1985, landscape architect and scholar Diane Kostial McGuire recounted in *Beatrix Farrand's American Landscapes* that a disappointed visitor wanted to know "where are the flowers?" and "where is the color?" After all, the visitor complained, she had come all the way from California where gardens were all about display and vibrant color. "There are so many things you could do here to make this a real garden," she concluded.¹ Part of the problem lies in the fact that Dumbarton Oaks is not a typical American garden dependent on horticultural displays, well-worn paths, signage, and teashops. Instead, it is an extraordinary accomplishment conceived and executed in a remarkable partnership between the client and the designer. Together they created a magical sequence of designed spaces or rooms, ranging from formal to informal, that progressed through the garden, while taking into consideration texture and incidents of alternating light and shade.

When Robert Woods Bliss and his wife, Mildred Barnes Bliss, first spied The Oaks in Georgetown, they thought it had the possibilities of becoming their country home in Washington as well as a future institution for their scholarly interests and collections. After returning to the United States from Paris in 1920 during his long career as a diplomat, Robert Woods Bliss invited the renowned landscape gardener and family friend, Beatrix Farrand, to view the property. It consisted of a south-facing house built in 1801 with a classical orangery set on 53 acres of



Beatrix Farrand in her New York office, 1927.

land that included a range of dilapidated farm buildings. On the positive side, there were numerous fine old trees, but the steeply sloping ground itself presented a serious challenge. The house, which was set on a hill, commanded

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fine views, but the land seriously dropped 100 feet down to the creek below. Despite these challenges, Beatrix Farrand created her undisputed masterpiece. According to Walter Muir Whitehead, “the gardens represent the skill of Mrs. Farrand and Mrs. Bliss in constructing an enchanting landscape out of magnificent trees that are on slopes so varied and in places so steep as to present a great challenge in design.”²

In June 1922, Beatrix Farrand prepared a detailed eight-page memo for Mildred Bliss outlining her preliminary design and planting suggestions for the property, and by 1923 the layout was well advanced and construction underway.³ At the time of the commission, Farrand was well established in her career dedicated to prestigious private commissions as well as important campus consultations. She was also familiar with Washington, having consulted on the National Cathedral in the early days of her career, and later, in 1913, she had designed the East Garden at the White House. Dumbarton Oaks, however, would prove to be her most challenging and significant commission. As Mildred Bliss wrote, “the gardens at Dumbarton Oaks were perhaps one of the most difficult problems presented to her, for she found not only an existing and rather dominating house and an unusually wide variety of grades, but also the very definite personal preferences of the owners with their special interest in design and texture.”⁴ In 1960, Lanning Roper, the renowned American landscape architect who worked mostly in England, recounted that “the gardens of Dumbarton Oaks are the product of the harmony of these two dynamic minds. Through their very close cooperation the garden evolved, each conceiving, adapting and re-evaluating her own ideas in the light of experience and the best considered opinion of the other.”⁵ From the start, Mildred Bliss had a vision of what she wanted to create, inspired in part by years of living abroad and her extensive travels, while Beatrix Farrand had “taste, the ‘know how’ and the courage of her convictions as well as her unflagging energy—all important characters for such a partnership.” The resulting gardens are “brilliantly adapted to a difficult site and rich in decorative detail and planning.”⁶

To add to the challenge, the Blisses were away from Washington for the first 10 years, the active years of the creation of the gardens. In January 1923, Robert Bliss was appointed minister to Sweden, which necessitated living abroad for five years, and then in 1927, he was appointed Ambassador to Argentina for six years. During these years when the Blisses were mostly absent, Farrand and her team proposed ideas, prepared sketches, and for some of the more important architectural features, such as steps, small structures, and benches, her office

prepared life-size cardboard mock-ups for the clients’ approval. As for planting suggestions, Mildred Bliss herself was a knowledgeable horticulturist, so there was much back and forth about specific selections. Although they sometimes had differing ideas, a mutual respect for one another brought out the best in the two personalities. As Farrand wrote, “What I shall try and do with The Oaks is to simply be your gardening pair of hands, carrying out your ideas.”⁷ Mildred envisioned a garden to be lived in, balancing private family areas with grander spaces for the Blisses’ extensive diplomatic entertaining. Mildred was a connoisseur of fountains and other antique ornament that needed to be incorporated into the scheme. As well, her knowledge of classical gardens mandated the importance of architectural features, such as walls, steps, paths, and small structures, all of which jibed with Farrand’s sensibilities to garden design.

The brilliance of the garden conception lies in its response to the topography, letting the land itself dictate the design, from formal terraces where the land was mainly flat to more naturalistic gardens where the grounds sloped steeply. The result was a blend of Italian terraces, French ornamental features, English flower borders, and a romantic woodland dell. It was unlike anything that had been created in America before. According to landscape historian Georgina Masson, Farrand drew upon these disparate elements to create a garden scene “uniquely her own.”⁸ The placement of the individual terraces near the house, including a large rose garden that served as the centerpiece, was dictated by the existing trees, such as copper beech, black oak, and American beech. Farrand had learned her lessons thoroughly from Prof. Charles Sprague Sargent, Gertrude Jekyll, and William Robinson, whose various influences can be strongly felt throughout

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Mildred and Robert Woods Bliss in the Rose Garden, 1936.

Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections.

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Dumbarton Oaks. In the end, Farrand's creation was a green garden rather than a traditional themed flower garden such as those she had designed for Thomas Newbold at Bellefield in 1912 and Edward Harkness at Eolia in 1919, and, in 1926, her penultimate flower garden, the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Garden. Part of the reasoning for her solution at Dumbarton Oaks was the important fact that it was a two-season garden—spring and fall—with a green interlude in winter—and heavily dependent on majestic trees and ornamental shrubs.

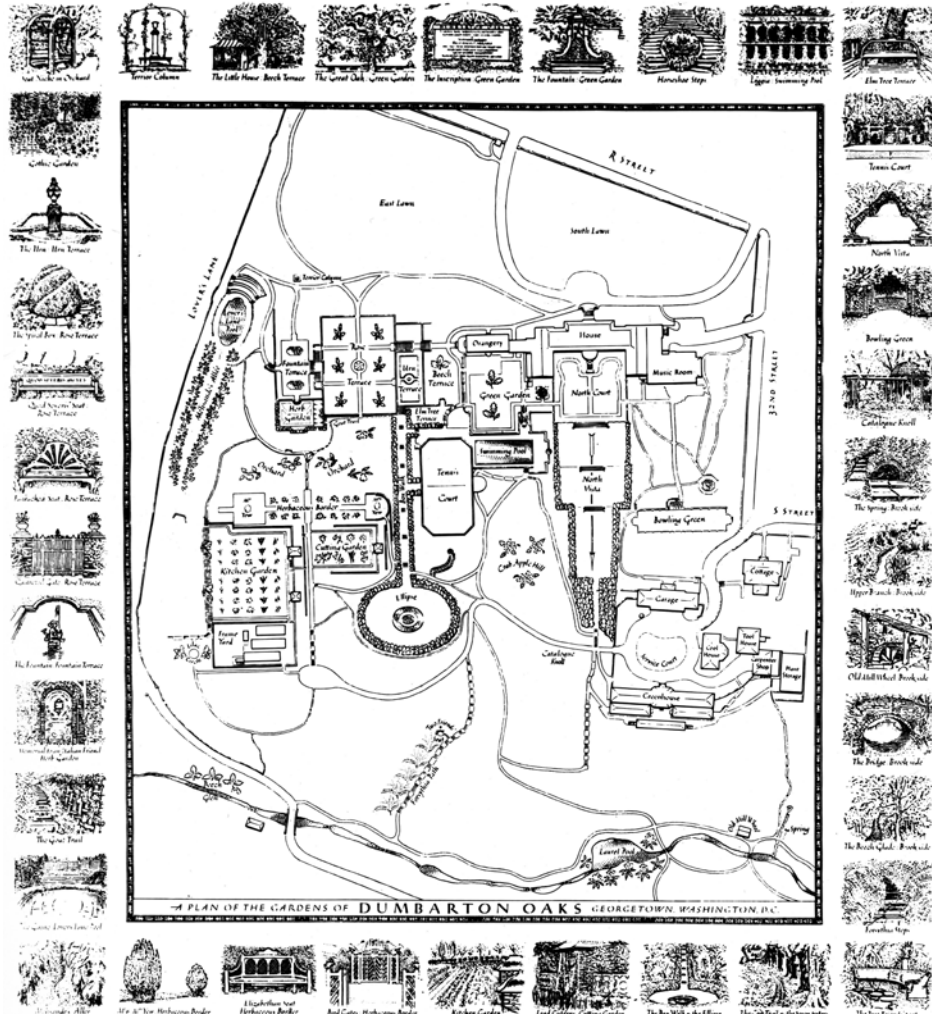
By 1935, when the gardens were fully developed, the Blissess commissioned Rudolph Ruzicka to prepare the first plan showing the finished layout. The plan included depictions of 38 garden spaces, with delightful vignettes showing each area or feature. Although the gardens were a masterpiece, Farrand's years at Dumbarton Oaks were not only challenging but also exhausting. When she began in 1921, she was at the peak of her career, juggling several residential commissions

at once as well as challenging campus consultations, but by the early 1940s, she was looking forward to peaceful retirement years at Reef Point, in Maine. The Blisses, who intended to turn over their entire estate to Harvard University after their deaths, decided to make the transfer earlier due to the impending war. Their gift to Harvard in 1940 included the house and formal gardens (approximately 16 acres) and an additional 10 acres were transferred to the Danish government for their embassy complex. They also donated 27 acres of the adjacent naturalistic woodland gardens to the National Park Service

for use as a public park.

Dumbarton Oaks Park, as it is now called, consists of the woodlands bordering the creek below the formal terrace gardens. They illustrate many of Farrand's ideas that she had absorbed from Robinson. "The so-called natural garden," she wrote, "is the most difficult to fit in with its surroundings" due to no set line to act as a backbone.⁹ Those once-enchancing gardens were a "highly designed composition of meadows, woods, and stream, with waterfalls, bridges, and a reflecting pond anchoring the landscape."¹⁰

They were opened to the public in the mid-1940s, but due to maintenance issues, slid downhill for many decades. Unlike Dumbarton Oaks, the naturalistic garden quickly became overgrown with invasive species, while crumbling stonework and storm water damage were ongoing challenges. Fortunately, Farrand's unique landscape has been rescued in recent years by the Dumbarton Oaks Park



Plan of the grounds by Rudolph Ruzicka, 1935.

Conservancy, whose mission is to revitalize and maintain Farrand's only surviving naturalistic garden while meeting the challenges of sustainability in an urban environment.¹¹

When Dumbarton Oaks entered this second phase, it quickly became apparent that long-term care of the ornamental gardens needed to be addressed. The gardens, which had never been easy to maintain in the Blissess' era due to the hilly terrain and the rigorous replacement of plants, among other issues, would quickly become a serious challenge if there were no guidelines. With this in mind, and at Harvard's invitation, Farrand prepared

detailed maintenance instructions for the upper gardens, but not those in the adjacent naturalistic park that was not part of Harvard. Farrand prepared the first draft of the comprehensive plant book in 1944, but it lay forgotten until it was rediscovered by Diane McGuire and published in 1980 as *Beatrix Farrand's Plant Book for Dumbarton Oaks*. It stands as a unique document for one of the greatest gardens in America, "the cornerstone on which the plan for the preservation of the gardens at Dumbarton Oaks is based."¹² The book acknowledges Farrand's understanding that without detailed guidance, maintenance standards would be lowered under institutional ownership. In explicit detail, Farrand recommended measures to be taken when plants needed replacement, the various levels of maintenance required, and steps that were not advised. Seventy-five years later, her advice still rings true.

It is hard to know what Farrand thought of the transfer of a complex private garden to institutional ownership. In 1944, after the transfer was complete and during her tenure as an advisor, she wrote: "The house and its surroundings are a single unit at Dumbarton Oaks. From the students' library, the trees, lawns, and terraces are the outdoor expressions of the continuing and living studies to which the farsightedness of the

givers have dedicated the enterprise."¹³ By 1951, Farrand found it increasingly difficult to continue in an advisory role for a research institution rather than a private client, so she bowed out as a gardens advisor, although she happily helped Mildred Bliss develop her garden library. During the early years of the institutional phase, Bliss had continued to develop the upper gardens, mostly in collaboration with Ruth Havey, who began working in Farrand's office around 1929. Havey made an enormous contribution to the present appearance of the gardens, working on a redesign and ornamentation of the North Vista and the Arbor Terrace as well as her most famous addition, the Pebble Garden in 1960. In 1956, Alden Hopkins redesigned the Ellipse after the original boxwood hedge died, replacing it with a double row of pleached hornbeams. Harvard employed several landscape consultants, namely Robert Patterson, who had worked at Reef Point and the Arnold Arboretum, and also Donald Smith, who had also worked at Reef Point and later became superintendent of the gardens and grounds at Dumbarton Oaks until his retirement in 1992.

When it opened to the public in the mid-1940s, Dumbarton Oaks became known around the world. Henry Francis duPont, who also had a world-class garden

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Photo credit Richard Cheek. Judith B Tankard Collection.

Rose Garden from upper terrace, 2008.

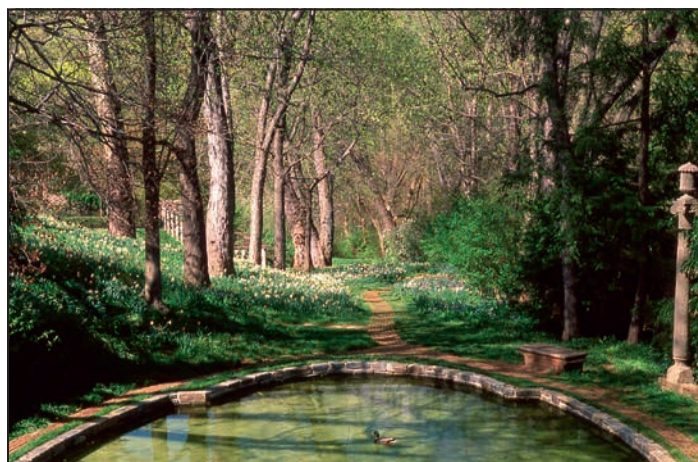


Photo credit Richard Cheek. Judith B Tankard Collection.

Lovers' Lane Pool, 2008.

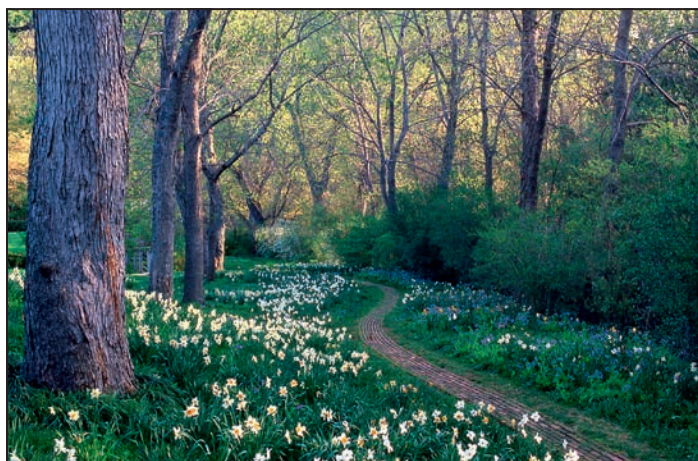


Photo credit Richard Cheek. Judith B Tankard Collection.

Mélissande's Allée, 2008.



Photo credit Richard Cheek. Judith B Tankard Collection.

Fountain Terrace, 2008.

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at Winterthur, wrote to Mildred Bliss in 1949 to say he admired the gardens, its upkeep, and above all its collection of benches. Today Dumbarton Oaks remains one of America's outstanding gardens and a tribute to Beatrix Farrand's immense capabilities as a designer. In 1980, Farrand's contribution to the profession of landscape architecture was celebrated in a Dumbarton Oaks Colloquium, while emerging landscape architects, such as Michael Van Valkenburgh, benefitted from Dumbarton Oaks Fellowships which had been established by the Blisses. Numerous landscape architects and garden scholars were quick to recognize Farrand's extraordinary accomplishment at Dumbarton Oaks and her career and gardens continue to be celebrated in books, articles, and documentaries.

Over the years Mildred Bliss and Beatrix Farrand had enjoyed a close personal relationship, writing letters to one another as "MilRob" and "Trix." In 1950, for instance, Farrand sent the Blisses a sprig of white heather from Reef Point in memory of their visits.¹⁴ Mildred Bliss provided the final accolade when she wrote, "Dumbarton Oaks has its own personality sculptured from Beatrix Farrand's knowledge and wisdom and from the daydreams and

vision of the owners."¹⁵ After Beatrix Farrand died in 1959, the Blisses erected a memorial tablet in the Green Terrace:

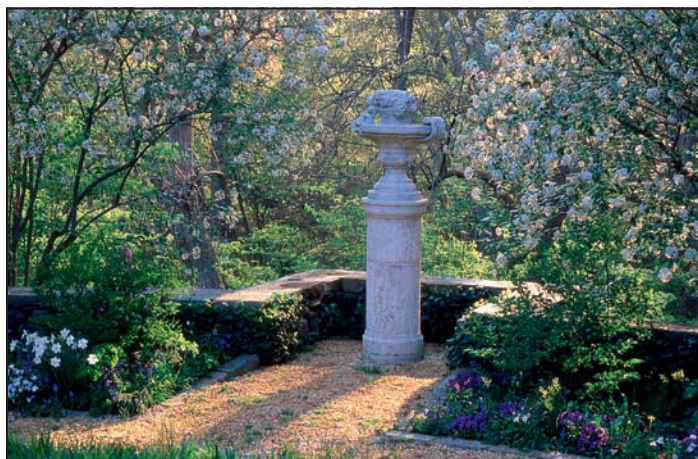
May kindly stars guard the dreams born beneath the spreading branches of Dumbarton Oaks. Dedicated to the friendship of Beatrix Farrand and to succeeding generations of seekers after Truth.

Many thanks to Gail Griffin, Director of Gardens and Grounds, Dumbarton Oaks (retired); Lindsey Milstein, President, Dumbarton Oaks Park Conservancy; and Anatole Tchikine, Curator of Rare Books, Garden and Landscape Studies, Dumbarton Oaks.

Judith B Tankard is a landscape historian and the author of Beatrix Farrand: Private Gardens, Public Landscapes (New York: Monacelli Press, 2009)

Endnotes

- 1 Diane Kostial McGuire, "Plants and Planting Design," *Beatrix Farrand's American Landscapes: Her Gardens & Campuses* (New York: Sagapress, 1985), 63.
- 2 Walter Muir Whitehead, *Dumbarton Oaks: The History of a Georgetown House and Garden, 1800-1966* (Cambridge:



Urn Terrace, 2008.

Photo credit Richard Cheek, Judith B Tankard Collection.



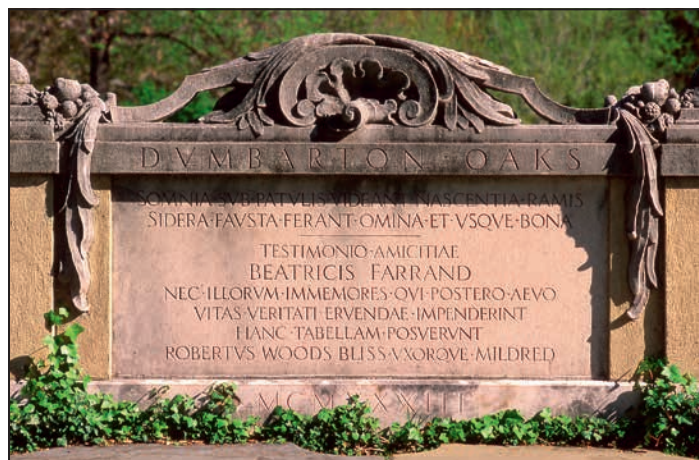
Pebble Garden designed by Ruth Havey, 2008.

Photo credit Richard Cheek, Judith B Tankard Collection.



Wisteria on chains in North Vista, 2008.

Photo credit Richard Cheek, Judith B Tankard Collection.



Tribute panel in Green Garden, 2008.

Photo credit Richard Cheek, Judith B Tankard Collection.