

GREEN SPRING
4601 Green Spring Road
Alexandria
Independent City
Virginia

HALS VA-68
HALS VA-68

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

GREEN SPRING

HALS NO. VA-68

Location: 4601 Green Spring Road, Alexandria, Virginia

The Beatrix Farrand Landscape is located within Green Spring Gardens, a 31-acre public garden and historic site owned by the Fairfax County Park Authority. The park lies east of Annandale, Virginia, north of Little River Turnpike (Route 236) and east of Braddock Road (Route 620).

NRIS # 03001089

HABS VA-277

Latitude: 38.824538, Longitude: -77.157315 (Center of property, Google Earth, WGS84)

Significance: The Beatrix Farrand Landscape at Green Spring is one of the few surviving gardens of this acknowledged master of twentieth century landscape design. In 1942, Beatrix Farrand (1872-1959) designed the landscape surrounding the ca. 1784 house for Green Spring's last private owners, Michael and Belinda Straight. Farrand is widely held to be America's first influential female landscape architect, coming of age as the profession itself was being formally recognized. In 1899, she was the only woman amongst the eleven founding members of the American Society of Landscape Architects.¹ From the 1890s to the 1950s, she designed over 200 gardens — for private residences, large private estates, public parks, botanic gardens, college campuses, and the Woodrow Wilson White House.² Her recognized masterpiece, the gardens of Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, D.C., is considered the apogee of her career.

The landscape at Green Spring is modest in scope compared to Farrand's many grand scale commissions, but all of its essential elements are intact and demonstrate her signature design principles, including clarity of contour, integration of house and garden, and transition from formal to informal landscapes. She undertook it as she was approaching the end of her decades-long work at Dumbarton Oaks, at the pinnacle of her profession. It was her only documented garden in Virginia and one of her last residential projects. She drew a sketch plan and personally superintended much of the work. She likely performed the job gratis, as a favor to Michael Straight's mother, Farrand's

¹ Norman T. Newton, *Design on the Land: The Development of Landscape Architecture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 387.

² Jane Brown, *Beatrix, The Gardening Life of Beatrix Jones Farrand, 1872-1959* (New York: Viking, 1995), 203 (List of Commissions).

longtime client and close friend Dorothy Whitney Straight Elmhirst.³ In 2014, the Garden Club of Virginia restored core features of Farrand's Green Spring garden room, which is one of only fourteen gardens by the great designer still existing in the United States.⁴ Green Spring's small-scale Beatrix Farrand landscape showcases the inspiring simplicity of much of her work and helps to increase public recognition of her important legacy in American landscape design.

Description: The Beatrix Farrand Landscape immediately surrounds Green Spring's ca. 1784 Historic House, where the topography is fairly flat with gentle undulations. The house is located on a slight rise, surveying the front lawn to the southwest. To the northeast of the Farrand landscape, a ravine falls to the stream bed of Turkeycock Run. At its closest point, the drop-off begins approximately 12 feet from the curved stone wall that delineates Farrand's garden room behind the house. Most features of Farrand's landscape design at Green Spring are in evidence today and all of its key elements are intact, though some significant alterations were made after its installation.

The Original Farrand Landscape, 1940s

Farrand's 1942 preliminary sketch plan for the area surrounding the house is dated October 30, 1942.⁵ It specified three discrete components: a front lawn (south façade), a large semicircular formal garden with a grass lawn behind the house (north façade) and transitional and screening plantings both near and beyond the house and garden.

The front lawn was enclosed by a stone wall, fencing and a curved gravel driveway. At that time Green Spring Road, a public roadway, skirted the lawn to the south within 150 feet of the front door. Farrand designed a low stone retaining wall to create a terrace that separated the property from Green Spring Road. Fencing extended beyond the wall to further delineate the southern edge of the lawn. The rest of the lawn was bound by a looped gravel driveway that came off Green Spring Road, passed along the front of the house and curved back to meet the road. Farrand suggested scattered plantings of hemlocks,

³ Michael Straight, in-person interviews by Sherrie L. Chapman, 11-12 September, 2002, Fairfax County Park Authority Collections: on file at Green Spring Gardens.

⁴ Beatrix Farrand Society, "Links: Projects Designed by Beatrix Farrand," <http://www.beatrixfarrandsociety.org/links/> (accessed 1 July, 2016).

⁵ Beatrix Farrand, *Preliminary Sketch Plan for the Property of Michael Straight Esq. at Fairfax County, Virginia*, October 30, 1942, Beatrix Jones Farrand Collection, Environmental Design Archives, University of California at Berkeley.

flowering trees, and deciduous shrubs to further define this area and to screen the house from Green Spring Road and Little River Turnpike.

A drawn centerline on the plan indicates that Farrand intended a balance between the driveway-defined front lawn and the symmetry of the house. The line continues from the front lawn (through the house) to the rear of the house where Farrand's plan provided for her principal landscape feature for Green Spring: a formal garden room comprised of a large, single-terraced grass lawn bound by a 147' curved stone retaining wall and a crescent of American boxwood (*Buxus sempervirens*).

The ground sloped down away from the house. Under Farrand's direction the entire area was levelled and a retaining wall added.⁶ Approximately 130 feet from the house, the wall is 6' tall at its highest point. It was constructed as a free-standing dry-stacked wall in two distinct layers: a lower portion of rose quartz topped by a section of granite. This might suggest separate construction phases, but all available documentary evidence indicates that the wall was built at one time under Farrand's supervision.⁷ A curved boxwood hedge - a pure half circle approximately 160' long formed by thirty-three plants which were already growing on the property - was planted in front of the wall and centered on the house, enclosing the lawn and creating a well-defined garden room.

Informal transitional plantings linked the formal crescent lawn with a log cabin and a barn to the east of the house and to the fields, woods, and ponds that lay beyond to the north and east; arrowed lines indicate these connections on the plan, which called for "Hemlocks under existing locusts," "Dogwoods and Crabs backed by Hollies and a few Pines" and "Tupelos and Gum Trees" farther north "Beyond the pond."⁸

Farrand drew an "Evergreen Screen Planting" for a service area on the west side of the home and balanced this with a mirror image planting of shrubs to the east. However, foundation plantings at the front and rear elevations of the house are conspicuously absent from her sketch. If she intended the removal of existing plants, her clients, Michael and Belinda Straight, were not persuaded: all Straight-era photographs of the house show a line of boxwood at the front and rear elevations.⁹ Also absent from Farrand's plan are two mature black walnut

⁶ Michael Straight, in-person interviews by Sherrie L. Chapman.

⁷ Versar, Inc. Springfield, Virginia, *Green Spring Gardens Cultural Landscape Report*, Prepared for Fairfax County Park Authority (October 2009), 3-31.

⁸ Shaffer, Wilson, Sarver & Gray, PC and GTM Architects, *Green Spring Historic Structures Report*, Prepared for Fairfax County Park Authority (July 2006), 6.6, 6.7 (Descriptions of the barn and log cabin); Beatrix Farrand, *Preliminary Sketch Plan for the Property of Michael Straight Esq. at Fairfax County Virginia*.

⁹ Photographs on file at Green Spring Gardens.

trees (*Juglans nigra*), one on either side of the crescent lawn, suggesting that she wanted them removed. However, one still stands today, close to the hedge just to the north of the house; its counterpart, a victim of old age, was removed in 2013.

While the Straights deviated from some of Farrand's proposals for future plantings, a ca. 1943 aerial photograph (taken by Michael Straight) of the newly-installed landscape clearly shows that they kept close to the original concepts laid out in her 1942 sketch plan for Green Spring.¹⁰ The photograph shows the driveway encircling the front lawn, which in turn framed the front of the house; evergreen plantings along the southern edge of the lawn screened the house from the road; the low, dense, evergreen boxwood crescent hedge formalized the landscape behind the house and clearly defined the space as a garden room; and transitional plantings created more informal viewsheds that gave way to uncultivated fields and woodland beyond. The photograph shows a near exact realization of Farrand's design sketch. However, her clients did make some significant changes later.

Changes to the Beatrix Farrand Landscape, 1950s

The Straights planted two saucer magnolia trees (*Magnolia x soulangiana*), one close to each end of the boxwood hedge, which survive today.

More importantly, in the early 1950s, the Straights opened a gap in the crescent hedge to provide direct access from their lawn garden room to features they had developed beyond it. One boxwood approximately in the center of the hedge was removed to create a passageway leading to four stone steps that were built through Farrand's retaining wall.¹¹ The steps led to an area of informal azalea garden rooms and pathways. One path led to a stairway and a wooden bridge (no longer extant) spanning Turkeycock Run.¹² On the other side of the stream lay two ponds, a tennis court and barbecue pits. Family photographs show two Chinese statues framing the Straight-era portal through the Farrand box hedge.¹³

¹⁰ Michael Straight, aerial photograph of house and Beatrix Farrand landscape looking north, (winter 1942-43): on file at Green Spring Gardens.

¹¹ John Quast, Jr. recalls helping his father (Green Spring groundskeeper for the Straights) remove the boxwood and that an outside contractor came to build the steps. (John Quast, Jr., personal communication with Deborah Waugh, June 2015.)

¹² Shaffer, Wilson, Sarver & Gray, PC and GTM Architects. *Green Spring Historic Structures Report*, 6.9.

¹³ Photographs on file at Green Spring Gardens.

Changes to the Beatrix Farrand Landscape, 1980s-2000s

Michael and Belinda Straight conveyed the property to the Fairfax County Park Authority in 1970 to be developed as a public park that was conceived early on as a horticulture center and historic site.¹⁴ In spite of significant modifications and additions, the Park Authority's transformation of Green Spring from a small private estate to a public garden and horticulture center had minimal impact on the Beatrix Farrand landscape.

A small section of Farrand's south wall terracing the front lawn was removed, though a large section remains intact today. The front lawn driveway loop that branched from Green Spring Road on Farrand's sketch plan was partially removed in 1995 when the section of the road passing through the park ceased to be a public thoroughfare and became, in part, an extension of the parking lot. (Reestablishing the entire circular driveway as a walkway has been identified as a Farrand landscape feature under consideration for future restoration.)¹⁵

Many of the trees indicated on Farrand's plan and planted by the Straights survive, although there were some losses, notably several stands of hemlocks on the front lawn area.¹⁶ The barn and cabin noted on her plan that formed part of her intended viewshed to the east were deemed beyond repair by the Park Authority and removed in the early 1980s.

More significantly, in 1989, a continuous perennial border - named the Mixed Border - with an ornate brick edging was added in front of Farrand's semicircular boxwood hedge, effectively closing off the Straight-era passageway. The border was dedicated to Mary Fahringer, a former member of the Fairfax County History Commission who had been instrumental in developing Green Spring as a horticultural park in the 1970s. The edging was not perfectly centered on the hedge; nor did it harmonize with Farrand's minimalist approach to the design. The border's planting schemes reflected Farrand's taste, but evolved over time, with the incorporation of tropical plants, to become more exuberant than those typically associated with her borders.

By the late 1990s, and into the 2000s, the key elements of Farrand's crescent garden room were showing significant signs of deterioration. The garden retained a high level of historic integrity, but restoration was needed to ensure the survival of Farrand's plants and hardscape. The skillfully constructed dry-

¹⁴ Fairfax County Park Authority, *General Management Plan and Conceptual Development Plan for Green Spring*, (1992), Introduction.

¹⁵ Fairfax County Park Authority, *Green Spring Gardens Master Plan Revision*, (April 2016), 67.

¹⁶ Michael Straight, in-person interviews by Sherrie L. Chapman.

stacked curved retaining wall was still standing after more than sixty years. However, over time, as the soil settled unevenly, stones moved and the higher sections began to loosen and subside. The boxwood hedge, grown irregularly tall and ragged, was in declining health.

Restoration of Green Spring's Beatrix Farrand Garden, 2014

In 2011, in accordance with recommendations outlined in the site's 2009 cultural landscape report treatment plan, Green Spring officially requested the help of the Restoration Committee of the Garden Club of Virginia (GCV) to restore the key elements of Beatrix Farrand's formal garden room at Green Spring, the principal focus of her 1942 design for Michael and Belinda Straight.¹⁷ Landscape architect William D. Rieley of Rieley & Associates led the project, which was completed in 2014 and officially presented to the Park Authority on June 10, 2015. GCV is a private, non-profit organization established in 1920 and comprised of 47 clubs and 3,300 members; it is Virginia's first environmental conservation organization.¹⁸ "*GCV exists to celebrate the beauty of the land, to conserve the gifts of nature and to challenge future generations to build on this heritage.*"¹⁹

The stone retaining wall was completely dismantled and rebuilt, using only the granite and rose quartz from Farrand's original construction. Though not designed by Farrand, the Straight-era steps through the wall were retained and restored.

The boxwoods forming the crescent hedge were trimmed and re-shaped and Green Spring horticulturists formulated an initial treatment plan for rejuvenation. GCV planted an additional American box to fill in the Straight-era passageway in the hedge, thus conforming to Farrand's original design of a continuous line of box. Ultimately, the original thirty-two boxwood plants will be replaced to preserve Farrand's vision of a uniform, horizontal border for the garden room.

Though not in Farrand's plan, the perennial Mixed Border in front of the hedge was retained and redesigned by GCV. The 1989 edging was removed and replaced with a simple, unobtrusive brick edging that better conforms to the site's geometry. The planting plan for the border - to be maintained by Green Spring horticulturists - is based on Farrand's compositions for several of her important commissions.

The rationale for the restoration project decisions is discussed in the next section.

¹⁷ Versar, Inc. Springfield, Virginia. *Green Spring Gardens Cultural Landscape Report*, 8-4, 8.5, 8-6.

¹⁸ The Garden Club of Virginia, "About GCV," <http://www.gevirginia.org/main/about> (accessed on 12 July, 2016).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

While there have been additions to and losses from the landscape created by Beatrix Farrand at Green Spring, the principal elements of her 1942 design are extant. The basic spatial organization is unchanged. Surviving features include a large section of the south terrace wall, and an expansive view shed to the east of the Historic House. The salient features of the formal garden room behind the house are in their near-original state. The north crescent lawn remains terraced according to Farrand's specifications. The boxwoods that she planted to delineate it continue to border her curved stone retaining wall, which, complete with all the original stones, is completely intact.

History: Green Spring's primary historical significance relates to the concurrent work, in 1942, of two American masters of design: restoration architect Walter Macomber (1895-1987) and Beatrix Farrand. Macomber, a former restoration architect at Colonial Williamsburg and Mount Vernon, added a two-story wing to each side of the house and a sun porch to the east side, and redecorated the entire interior in the Colonial Revival style. At the same time, Farrand created the first ornamental landscape at Green Spring. Both designers' work has survived largely intact and is significant on a national level as a unique combination of twentieth century architectural and landscape design.²⁰ The collective work is the basis for Green Spring's 2003 listing on the National Register and its designation as a Virginia Historic Landmark in the same year. It is commemorated by a State of Virginia Historical Highway Marker that was dedicated in 2010. However, the site had a long, rich history before its notable 1942 remodeling.

Green Spring Farm

Green Spring's development reflects the land use history of northern Virginia, evolving over three centuries from an expansive agricultural landscape to a small country estate bordered by increasing suburban residential and commercial development. The property has a long chain of ownership, but four individuals characterize Green Spring's historic eras of residency.²¹

John Moss (died 1808) began to assemble the acreage that was to comprise Green Spring Farm in 1777 and built the house during the period 1784-86.²² His

²⁰ Sherrie L. Chapman, "National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form," U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2003.

²¹ Shaffer, Wilson, Sarver & Gray, PC and GTM Architects, *Green Spring Historic Structures Report*, 2-5 (History of property's chain of ownership: purchases, sales and transfers).

²² *Fairfax County Deed Book*, J2, 272; Edward R. Cook, William J. Callahan Jr., and Camille Wells, *Dendrochronological Analysis of Green Spring House, Alexandria, Fairfax County, Virginia* (2008), on file at Green Spring Gardens.

sons William and Thomas successively inherited the house and worked the Moss Farm (approximately 500 acres) from 1809 until Thomas' death in 1835, cultivating tobacco and later diversifying into corn, wheat, orchards, and dairy farming.²³ All men were active in Fairfax County government and politics.²⁴

Fountain Beattie (1840-1928) farmed the property (340 acres) after the Civil War, from 1878 to 1913. He specialized in fruit farming and operated a licensed distillery in the property's ca. 1830 springhouse. During the war he was a member of Mosby's Rangers and John Singleton Mosby's most trusted confidante.²⁵ The two men remained lifelong friends and the elderly Mosby was a frequent visitor to "The Old Captain Beattie Farm."²⁶

From 1942 to 1970, Michael Whitney Straight (1916-2004) and his wife Belinda Compton Straight (1920-2015) were the last private owners of Green Spring Farm, by then reduced to 32 acres. (The family left Green Spring in 1966 and rented it out until 1969.) For several years they raised small herds of Hereford cattle for beef, but by the late 1950s all farming operations at Green Spring had ended.²⁷ Within months of moving in, the Straights commissioned the landmark work by Macomber and Farrand. In 1970, they conveyed the house, outbuildings and 18.34 acres to Fairfax County.²⁸ This formed the core for the future Green Spring Gardens. Michael Straight was a member of the prominent Whitney family. Educated at Cambridge University in England, he held many positions in public life, including publisher and editor of *The New Republic*, the liberal magazine of commentary on politics and the arts founded by his parents, and deputy chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts. He also authored several books and plays. His 1983 autobiography *After Long Silence* tells the story of his involvement during and after his undergraduate years with the men who later formed the notorious Cambridge spy ring.²⁹ Belinda Straight was a nationally-respected child psychiatrist who practiced in Washington D.C. from

²³ The first known use of the Green Spring(s) name was in 1853 when it was placed in trust on behalf of Richard B. Lloyd. *Fairfax County Deed Book*, S3, 362.

²⁴ Ross D. Netherton, and Ruby Waldeck, *The Fairfax County Courthouse*, Fairfax, VA: County Office of Comprehensive Planning, 1977.

²⁵ John W. Munson, *Reminiscences of a Mosby Guerilla*, (New York: Moffat, Yard and Company, 1906), 40.

²⁶ "At Absolute Auction, The Old Capt. Beattie Farm" advertisement, *The Washington Post*, June 22, 1924, R5.

²⁷ Nan Netherton, "Notes on Conversation with Mr. and Mrs. Michael Straight," December 8, 1968, Fairfax County Park Authority Collections: on file at Green Spring Gardens.

²⁸ Fairfax County Park Authority, *Green Spring Gardens Master Plan Revision* (April 2016), 10

²⁹ Michael Straight, *After Long Silence*, (New York: Collins, 1983).

1952 to 2007. The Straights raised five children in their renovated Green Spring home, and entertained many guests of national and international renown on the lawn of their spacious garden room.

Biography of Beatrix Farrand

When Beatrix Farrand came to Green Spring in 1942 to make a garden for the Straights she was at the peak of her celebrated career, which had begun almost fifty years earlier.

The early and swift ascent of Farrand's career was propelled by the demand for a distinct landscape architecture style for America's elite during the "Country Place Era," a period that lasted roughly between 1890 and 1930. America's industrial success produced a roll call of Gilded Age millionaires who were eager to spend money on gardens for their luxurious estates, and Farrand's own social pedigree gave her easy access to a roster of clients that represented the cream of East Coast society.

Farrand was born Beatrix Jones in New York City on June 19, 1872. Her parents, Frederic Rhinelander Jones and Mary Cadwalader Jones, both from wealthy families, were well connected in New York social circles. The family summered at their vacation home Reef Point in fashionable Bar Harbor, Maine. It was in the garden at Reef Point that young Beatrix Jones first became aware of an incipient talent for landscape design.³⁰

Farrand's parents divorced when she was 10 and her father remained mostly absent from her life. Her mother, an independent-minded social reformer and prominent literary hostess, was also part-time agent for her former sister-in-law, novelist Edith Wharton. Farrand and her paternal aunt were close and collaborated on parts of the landscape and gardens for Wharton's Lenox, Massachusetts "Country Place" home, The Mount. In 1903, Wharton published a series of articles in *Century Magazine*, which were later published as *Italian Villas and Their Gardens*.³¹ Her knowledge of Italian gardens likely informed her niece's appreciation of the Italianate style, of which she became a practitioner. In 1895, Farrand made a grand tour of Europe, seeing for herself the gardens of Italy, as well as those of Germany, Holland, France, Scotland, and England.

America's first professional degree program in landscape architecture was

³⁰ Judith B. Tankard, *Beatrix Farrand: Private Gardens, Public Landscapes* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 2009), 12.

³¹ Edith Wharton, *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* (New York: Century, 1904).

established in 1900 by Frederick Law Olmstead at Harvard's Graduate School of Design. However, women were not admitted until 1942 (coincidentally the year that a 70-year-old Farrand created the landscape at Green Spring, with all her major commissions behind her.) Largely self-taught, Farrand immersed herself in the work of influential gardeners like England's Gertrude Jekyll and William Robinson. She also benefitted from the patronage of extraordinary mentors like Charles Sprague Sargent, director of Harvard's Arnold Arboretum. Sargent nurtured her innate talent and drive by inviting her to live with his family while she studied horticulture and landscape design at the arboretum.

Her family's social prominence, along with Wharton's connections, opened doors for the young woman who had decided to take her passion for gardening beyond the then socially acceptable level of pastime. At 20, Farrand started her business from a room in her mother's Manhattan brownstone, designing gardens for the Country Place set. Soon she began to receive major estate commissions. Her client list included Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, philanthropist banker Anson Phelps Stokes, and insurance magnate Percy Chubb. Her early commissions and writings, along with her place in high society, attracted sufficient attention for her to be invited, in 1899, to become a founding member of the American Society of Landscape Architects. She was only 27 at the time and the only woman amongst the original 11 members.³²

In 1913, at the age of 41, Beatrix Jones became Beatrix Farrand when she married distinguished scholar Max Farrand, then chair of the history department at Yale. Their partnership was a happy one that evidently hindered neither in the pursuit of their respective careers.³³ Farrand decided to forgo the use of the then-customary honorific "Mrs." in all matters professional: "Beatrix Farrand" alone would serve as her trade name.³⁴

After the First World War and the Great Depression, the focus of landscape architecture projects shifted away from private residences and estates towards public and institutional works. Farrand undertook many significant college campus projects, serving as chief consulting landscape architect to Princeton from 1912-1943, Yale from 1922 to 1945, the University of Chicago from 1929 to 1936, Oberlin from 1939 to 1946, and the California Institute of Technology

³² Judith B. Tankard, 39

³³ Eleanor M. McPeck, "A Biographical Note" in *Beatrix Farrand's American Landscapes, Her Gardens and Campuses*, eds. Diana Balmori, Diane Kostial-McGuire, and Eleanor M. McPeck (Sagaponack, New York: Sagapress, Inc., 1985), 24.

³⁴ Diana Balmori, "Campus Work and Public Landscapes" in *Beatrix Farrand's American Landscapes, Her Gardens and Campuses*, eds. Diana Balmori, Diane Kostial-McGuire, and Eleanor M. McPeck (Sagaponack, New York: Sagapress, Inc., 1985), 146.

at Pasadena from 1928 to 1938.³⁵

Farrand spent the last chapter of her working life focused on establishing an educational study center for landscape design at Reef Point, her inherited home in Maine. In 1935, she and Max Farrand established the Reef Point Gardens Corporation, where she dedicated herself to assembling an extensive research library and developing the landscape as teaching gardens for students. The project ultimately foundered on issues of taxes and funding and, in 1955, a bitterly disappointed, and by then widowed, Farrand had the home demolished and the gardens dismantled. The contents of the library, including all her own papers and drawings, were donated to the University of California at Berkeley.³⁶ Her final home was at Garland Farm in Bar Harbor, where she made her last garden and lived quietly until her death in 1959.

Many of Farrand's most demanding commissions occupied her on and off for decades. She developed and maintained the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Garden at Seal Harbor, Maine for Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller from 1926 to 1950. Her widely acclaimed suite of gardens at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, D.C., designed for Mildred and Robert Woods Bliss, kept her busy from 1921 to 1947. These long-term associations often produced close friendships between the designer and her clients. One of the closest and most enduring of these relationships was with Dorothy Whitney Straight Elmhirst, mother of Michael Straight for whom Beatrix Farrand designed the garden at Green Spring.

Circumstances of Farrand's Green Spring Project

Having designed gardens for his two childhood homes, Beatrix Farrand had been a familiar figure in Michael Straight's life long before she came to Green Spring in 1942. Farrand and Michael's parents, Dorothy and Willard Straight, moved within in the same social orbit and, like many of her upper crust friends and acquaintances, the Straights became her clients.

Dorothy Payne Whitney (1887-1968) had inherited millions from her father, William C. Whitney, a transit tycoon and former Secretary of the Navy. Her lifetime of philanthropic work extended to women's rights, pacifist causes, social and labor reform, and support of the arts. She became the first president of the Association of Junior Leagues International in 1921 and founded, with her first husband Willard Dickerman Straight (1880-1918), *Asia* magazine and the weekly journal *The New Republic*.

³⁵ Versar, Inc. Springfield, Virginia. *Green Spring Gardens Cultural Landscape Report*, 2-42

³⁶ Environmental Design Archives, University of California at Berkeley, "Farrand, Beatrix," <http://archives.ced.berkeley.edu/collections/farrand-beatrix>

The couple spent the first six months of their marriage in Beijing, China, where Michael's father was on diplomatic mission. Returning to New York in the wake of the Chinese Revolution in 1911, Willard Straight went to work at J.P. Morgan and Company, and their three children were born: Whitney in 1912, Beatrice in 1914 and Michael in 1916.

Farrand began working for the couple at their Old Westbury, Long Island estate in 1914. Her first project for them was a "Chinese"-style garden, a request no doubt inspired by their stay in China and their acquisition of assorted Chinese statuary.³⁷ Farrand created a sequence of Chinese-inspired elements: a walled flower garden leading to an allée of pavilions and a swimming pool garden beyond. Chinese stone dogs guarded the entrance.³⁸

Willard Straight died during the 1918 Spanish influenza pandemic while serving in the United States Army in France during World War I, but Farrand continued to work intermittently for Dorothy on the Old Westbury estate - and to direct the maintenance of the "Chinese" garden - until the late 1940s.

When she remarried and moved to England, Michael Straight's mother had another large-scale project for her friend Beatrix. In 1925, Dorothy purchased Dartington Hall, a medieval estate of over 1,000 acres in Devon, where she and her second husband, Englishman Leonard Elmhirst, founded a progressive co-educational school, arts center and agrarian center. They referred to this multi-faceted - and unconventional - enterprise as "The Dartington Experiment."³⁹

The estate was almost derelict and the Elmhirsts commissioned architects and landscapers to restore the buildings and grounds. In 1933, they called in Farrand, who accepted the project with alacrity and devised plans to redefine the landscape right away. Farrand drew up a plan for the quadrangle courtyard (originally the jousting court), encircling it with a cobbled drive and planting the walls extensively. She also added three woodland walks, developed along existing pathways. Dorothy Elmhirst's Dartington is the only known example of Farrand's landscaping work outside the United States.⁴⁰ For six years the project took her happily back and forth across the Atlantic, collaborating with her friends Dorothy and Leonard. The two women maintained a lively correspondence in between her visits and Dorothy's own interest in gardening

³⁷ Michael Straight, in-person interviews by Sherrie L. Chapman

³⁸ Brown 107.

³⁹ Dartington Hall, "The Elmhirsts and Dartington: how it all began," <https://www.dartington.org/about/our-history/> (accessed July 13, 2016.)

⁴⁰ Dartington Hall, "Beatrix Farrand's Courtyard Paving," <https://www.dartington.org/about/our-history/history-of-our-listed-gardens/> (accessed July 13, 2016.)

intensified.⁴¹ Farrand's time at Dartington was cut short by the outbreak of World War II, but would remain for her "an abiding symbol of friendship."⁴²

Beatrix Farrand at Green Spring

Dorothy's son Michael and his wife Belinda were in their twenties and expecting their first child when Farrand arrived at Green Spring in the fall of 1942. Like his mother's Dartington Hall, Michael's much smaller estate was run-down, the house in disrepair and surrounded by weeds.⁴³ It is unknown whether Farrand was first approached by Dorothy or by Michael with the request to impose order upon his landscape. He later acknowledged that Green Spring was an insignificant undertaking for her, but convenient, being just a short drive from Dumbarton Oaks.⁴⁴ Mother and son later expressed their impressions of Farrand in similar terms. Shortly after Farrand's death, Dorothy wrote about her friend's regal demeanor, her consummate professionalism, and boundless energy.⁴⁵ Michael later recalled Farrand's austere and imposing bearing and no-nonsense attitude as she focused briskly on the task at hand. He also recognized that she had probably taken it on as a favor to her old friend Dorothy and hadn't charged them a fee; he noted that she was close to his mother and fond of them as a young couple.⁴⁶

The time that Farrand devoted to her landscape at Green Spring was indeed limited, in part because the United States was by then at war so domestic construction projects were about to be shut down and materials diverted to the war effort. However, she gave it her focused, personal attention. She visited several times, providing the preliminary sketch plan in short order and commandeering members of the Dumbarton Oaks crew to complete the work, which she herself directed in the field.⁴⁷

The extent to which Farrand and architect Walter Macomber directly

⁴¹ Brown, 167.

⁴² Ibid. 168.

⁴³ Michael Straight, *On Green Spring Farm: The Life and Times of One Family in Fairfax County, Virginia, 1942-1966* (Berkeley, California: Devon Press, 2004), XV.

⁴⁴ Ibid. XVI.

⁴⁵ Brown, 192

⁴⁶ Michael Straight, in-person interviews by Sherrie L. Chapman.

⁴⁷ Belinda Straight, in-person interview by Sherrie L. Chapman, September 30, 2002, Fairfax County Park Authority Collections: on file at Green Spring Gardens.

collaborated at Green Spring is unknown, though each designer clearly took the other's work into consideration. Farrand conceived the landscape in clear axial relationship to the classical symmetry of the newly-enlarged house that Macomber created. The architect's large picture window in the newly-built study was a glaring departure from his Colonial Revival-style renovation of the house, but served to frame the view of Farrand's garden room to perfection. Farrand believed that the work of landscape gardener and architect should be accomplished hand in hand.⁴⁸ However, her vision for the garden room at Green Spring was not up for debate or compromise. Evidently, Macomber had had other ideas for the space, which did not include a boxwood hedge. When Michael suggested using some of these ideas, Farrand's scornful response was clear: it would be much more prudent to betray Walter than to snub her.⁴⁹

Less than three months after Farrand drew her sketch for Green Spring and the main elements of the landscape were installed, Michael Straight joined the U.S. Army Air Corps and served as a B-17 flight instructor for the duration of the war. Belinda and their infant son returned to the family estate in Old Westbury and, in 1945, she entered medical school in New York. The Straight family did not return to Green Spring until September, 1948, when they were finally able to settle into their renovated estate.

Farrand had created the perfect garden room for Michael and Belinda Straight to entertain many prominent guests during their remaining eighteen years at Green Spring. Family photographs, written accounts, and interviews record many famous visitors enjoying the garden, including: scientists Julian Huxley and Leo Szilard; authors Aldous Huxley, Stephen Spender, and Saul Bellow; poet Dylan Thomas; CBS commentator Eric Severeid; and political leader Hubert Humphrey, as well as other journalists, politicians, and scientists from all over the world.⁵⁰

Michael developed a keen interest in landscaping. He began to develop the transitional plantings that Farrand had suggested, the informal garden rooms behind the crescent hedge, and the naturalistic landscape surrounding the ponds beyond. The Straights preserved Farrand's core garden room design in every respect except for the statue-framed passageway through the box hedge and the stairway through the wall. The Chinese statues were gifts from Michael's mother, two of the pieces his newly-wed parents had brought back to the U.S.

⁴⁸ Eleanor M. McPeck, "A Biographical Note," in *Beatrix Farrand's American Landscapes, Her Gardens and Campuses*, eds. Diana Balmori, Diane Kostial-MGuire and Eleanor M. McPeck (Sagaponack, New York: Sagapress, Inc, 1985), 23-24.

⁴⁹ Michael Straight, *On Green Spring Farm: The Life and Times of One Family in Fairfax County, Virginia, 1942-1966*, 3.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 89, 91, 98, 167.

from Beijing in 1912.⁵¹ Whether he was consciously inspired or not, Michael Straight had created a garden feature that was distinctly reminiscent of the Chinese-themed garden that Farrand had designed for his parents at Old Westbury nearly 40 years earlier.

A Fairfax County Park

Michael Straight attributed the couple's decision in 1964 to give up Green Spring to children leaving home and to encroaching development.⁵² They purchased Jacqueline Kennedy's house in Georgetown and left Green Spring in 1966. In 1970, they deeded the home, outbuildings and 18.34 acres to Fairfax County with the stipulation that the Fairfax County Park Authority "...does agree that said premise hereby conveyed shall be used solely and exclusively for public park purposes, and for no other purpose."⁵³ The Park Authority subsequently purchased surrounding land parcels to bring the park's total acreage in 2016 to thirty-one.

A community consensus to develop the park as a cultural, horticultural, and historic center emerged from the first general public meeting to discuss the vision for Green Spring Gardens, then still referred to as Green Spring Farm, in June, 1975. The Park Authority developed the first master plan for the site, which was approved by the Park Authority board in 1977. Much of the development within Green Spring Gardens occurred during the 1980s.

By the early 1990s, many of the twenty-two present day demonstration gardens had been installed, including the Mixed Border in front of Farrand's hedge. In 1994, extensive repairs and modifications were made to the Historic House to allow for public use, and in 1995 an expanded Horticulture Center was dedicated and more demonstration gardens added. Since 1996, the Historic House has offered year-round lectures and garden tours, often accompanied by a traditional afternoon English tea service.

Green Spring Gardens experienced a 10-fold increase in attendance from 20,000-30,000 in the early 1990s to an estimated 200,000-250,000 visitors in 2014.⁵⁴

The *Green Spring Gardens Master Plan Revision* of April, 2016 states:

⁵¹ Michael Straight, in-person interviews by Sherrie L. Chapman.

⁵² Michael Straight, *On Green Spring Farm: The Life and Times of One Family in Fairfax County, Virginia, 1942-1966*, 219.

⁵³ Fairfax County Park Authority, *General Management and Conceptual Development Plan* (1992), Introduction.

⁵⁴ Fairfax County Park Authority, *Green Spring Gardens Master Plan Revision* (April 2016), 5.

Green Spring Gardens serves Fairfax County residents and visitors by connecting the community to natural and cultural resources through horticulture, education, and stewardship. The garden's 31 acres offer a multitude of settings, features, and programs to inspire and educate gardeners, provide a place for quiet contemplation, and to open a window into the county's cultural past. Within the garden, the horticulture center houses a library of gardening resources, a glasshouse, classrooms, and office space for staff who cultivate an extensive array of programs to encourage generations of gardeners.⁵⁵

Rationale for Decisions Determining the Restoration of the Beatrix Farrand Garden Room

On October 27, 2011, the Restoration Committee of the Garden Club of Virginia (GCV) officially presented to the Fairfax County Park Authority the project to restore progressively deteriorating elements of Farrand's Green Spring garden room. Decisions regarding the scope of work were made jointly with Green Spring management and horticulture staff, balancing historical integrity with changes made after 1942 and with current conditions and purposes.

The elements under consideration were: the repair of the stone retaining wall and the associated treatment of the gap in the boxwood hedge and the stone steps; the rejuvenation of the boxwood hedge; and the Mixed Border.

The Stone Wall

The preservation of the curved stone retaining wall - the foundation of Farrand's garden room - was the chief concern of the project. This was completed first, in fall 2011. The structure was completely disassembled and the stones restacked and mortared on a foundation trench in the original two layers of rose quartz topped by granite.

The Gap in the Hedge and Stairway

Family photographs demonstrate that these Straight-era modifications to Farrand's original design were completed at least ten years after she was at Green Spring.⁵⁶ Could she have suggested them as a consideration for the future, when more time and materials would be available? The features were certainly in

⁵⁵ Ibid., 5

⁵⁶ Versar, Inc. Springfield, Virginia. *Green Spring Gardens Cultural Landscape Report*, 3-34.

keeping with her designs, which often called for interconnected garden rooms and linkages between formal and increasingly informal areas. However, Farrand's 1942 preliminary sketch plan for the Green Spring landscape made no provision for them and there is no indication that she ever drew an amended plan. The fact that the passageway is slightly off center from the house, in order to minimize the number of plants removed, also strongly suggests that Farrand did not have this in mind when she planted the hedge. Decades later, Michael Straight could not recall if she had ever discussed with him the potential for such future development.⁵⁷

The considerations were weighed and a balance struck. GCV planted an additional boxwood to close the gap and abide by Farrand's documented intent. However, along with the wall, the stairway was restored. It is retained as an interpretive tool to convey the lifestyle of the last family to influence the development of Green Spring's landscape and to shape Green Spring's history.

The Crescent Hedge

GCV trimmed the boxwood hedge to create a more uniform, compact look. Green Spring's horticulture staff made soil amendments and administered parasitoid mite treatment to control boxwood mites. Given the advanced age and mixed condition of the original plants, solutions for future replacement are under consideration, including propagation of cuttings from the originals and replacement with a more disease-resistant cultivar. Farrand herself recognized the need for periodic box replacement to retain a dense, rounded form.⁵⁸

The Mixed Border

A compromise was reached on the question of the perennial border. The 1980s addition of the Mixed Border in front of the hedge serves Green Spring Gardens' mission to educate the home gardener through a variety of demonstration gardens throughout the park. Though not part of Farrand's design, the border was kept and redesigned by GCV to showcase a textural and color palette that is representative of Farrand's perennial borders.⁵⁹ Throughout the flowering season, her talent for plant selection is displayed by complementary variations of

⁵⁷ Michael. Straight, in-person interviews by Sherrie L. Chapman.

⁵⁸ Diane Kostial McGuire, ed., *Beatrix Farrand's Plant Book for Dumbarton Oaks*. (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1980), 76.

⁵⁹ Rieley & Associates, Landscape Architects, "Planting plan for the redesigned perennial bed for the GCV restoration project" (July 2013): on file at Green Spring Gardens.

foliage and successions of bloom in drifts of yellow, lavender, blue, white, and pink against the dark backdrop of the boxwood hedge. In dormant seasons, the plants recede to reveal Farrand's original, spare design and the spatial composition of the garden room, as the hedge itself and its function of enclosure become the primary focus.

Plants are repeated around the semi-circular bed with the informal symmetry of texture, color, height, and bloom sequence that was characteristic of Farrand's plantings.⁶⁰ Plant selections for perennial beds for several of Farrand's commissions were considered, including the beds designed for Edward Harkness at his New London, Connecticut residence Eolia, where subdued tones of blue, pink, pale purple, yellow, and cream predominate.⁶¹ The Beatrix Farrand-inspired Mixed Border demonstrates her famous skill and technique in composing intricate perennial borders and is a fitting and relevant addition to Green Spring's Beatrix Farrand landscape.

GCV's official presentation of the restored Beatrix Farrand Landscape at Green Spring to the Fairfax County Park Authority took place on June 10, 2015.

Beatrix Farrand's Green Spring Landscape as a Representative Example of Her Work

Farrand believed that frequent site visits were essential to a designer's understanding of a landscape, both before and during development.⁶² Although, as stated by Michael Straight, Green Spring was a negligible assignment for her, she made it her business to visit several times and personally oversee much of the work. Though modest in scope and scale, Beatrix Farrand's Green Spring landscape is a pure expression of her style and technique, and her sole authorship of it is evident. Her more ambitious, large-scale projects often involved a high degree of collaboration with other professionals and with strong-willed clients like Dorothy Elmhirst, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, and Mildred Bliss. In contrast, her design for Michael and Belinda Straight was unquestionably hers alone.

As small as it is, the garden is perfectly attuned to its site and bears all the hallmarks of her design philosophy:

⁶⁰ Tankard, 131.

⁶¹ Brown, 119.

⁶² Diane Kostial-McGuire, "Plants and Planting Design," in *Beatrix Farrand's American Landscapes, Her Gardens and Campuses*, eds. Diana Balmori, Diane Kostial-McGuire, and Eleanor M. McPeck (Sagaponack, New York: Sagapress, Inc., 1985), 67.

- It shows clearly defined space and spatial relationships.
- It has a formal geometry to complement the formal architecture.
- It integrates the designed landscape with its natural surroundings.
- It has a formal garden room transitioning to naturalistic woodland.

In all this, Green Spring could be said to be a study in miniature of many of her grandiose commissions, including Dumbarton Oaks, which has been characterized as a synthesis of Italianate style and the Arts and Crafts movement.⁶³ Italianate elements such as strong spatial and geometric definition, and Arts and Crafts characteristics such as skilled construction, understated simplicity, and careful integration of the house and the landscape are all present in Farrand's Green Spring landscape, making it, like Dumbarton Oaks, a synthesis of the two styles.

Her choice of American boxwood plants for the crescent hedge was surely driven to some extent by their serendipitous scattering across the Green Spring property in 1942.⁶⁴ However, the plant was a favorite staple of Farrand's and one of her most commonly used at Dumbarton Oaks: a native that provided year-round beauty, texture, color and definition.

Beatrix Farrand was renowned for garden designs conceived on an extravagant scale for her wealthy clients and institutions. None of her few remaining gardens, even the smaller ones, show the degree of restraint that is seen at Green Spring. However, it is a noteworthy example of her work. It reveals her fundamental design principles and conveys her firmly held belief that making a garden is primarily about sculpting space. Its simplicity has preserved its integrity and, as a centerpiece of a public garden and horticultural education center, it offers insight into her talent and continued study of her career.

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⁶³ Elizabeth Barlow Rogers, *Landscape Design, A Cultural and Architectural History* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2001), 396.

⁶⁴ Nan Netherton, "Notes on Conversation with Mr. and Mrs. Michael Straight," December 8, 1968, Fairfax County Park Authority Collections: on file at Green Spring Gardens.

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Historian: Deborah Waugh
Historic House Coordinator
Green Spring Gardens

4603 Green Spring Road
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July 26, 2016

2016 HALS Challenge Entry: Documenting National Register Listed Landscapes



Aerial view of house and newly-installed Beatrix Farrand landscape, looking north. Log cabin and barn are visible to the east. (Michael Straight, winter 1942-43).



Remaining section of south terrace stone wall looking east (Brenda Skarphol, June 2014).



Garden room looking northeast across lawn from Historic House towards crescent boxwood hedge and Mixed Border (KathyTrichel, July 2016).



Garden room showing Historic House (north façade) and eastern end of boxwood hedge looking towards Farrand viewshed (Kathy Trichel, July 2016).



Viewshed looking east from garden room (Kathy Trichel, July 2016).



Deteriorating crescent wall prior to restoration, looking east (Brenda Skarphol, 2010).



Restored crescent wall looking west (Kathy Trichel, July 2016).



Restored crescent wall and steps looking west, showing new American boxwood planted in gap in hedge (Kathy Trichel, July 2016).



Rear of Historic House viewed from gap in hedge looking southwest (Kathy Trichel, July 2016).



Restored crescent wall looking south, showing Historic House (Don Sweeney, Fairfax County Park Authority Collections, June 2015).



Restored crescent wall looking east (Don Sweeney, Fairfax County Park Authority Collections, June 2015).



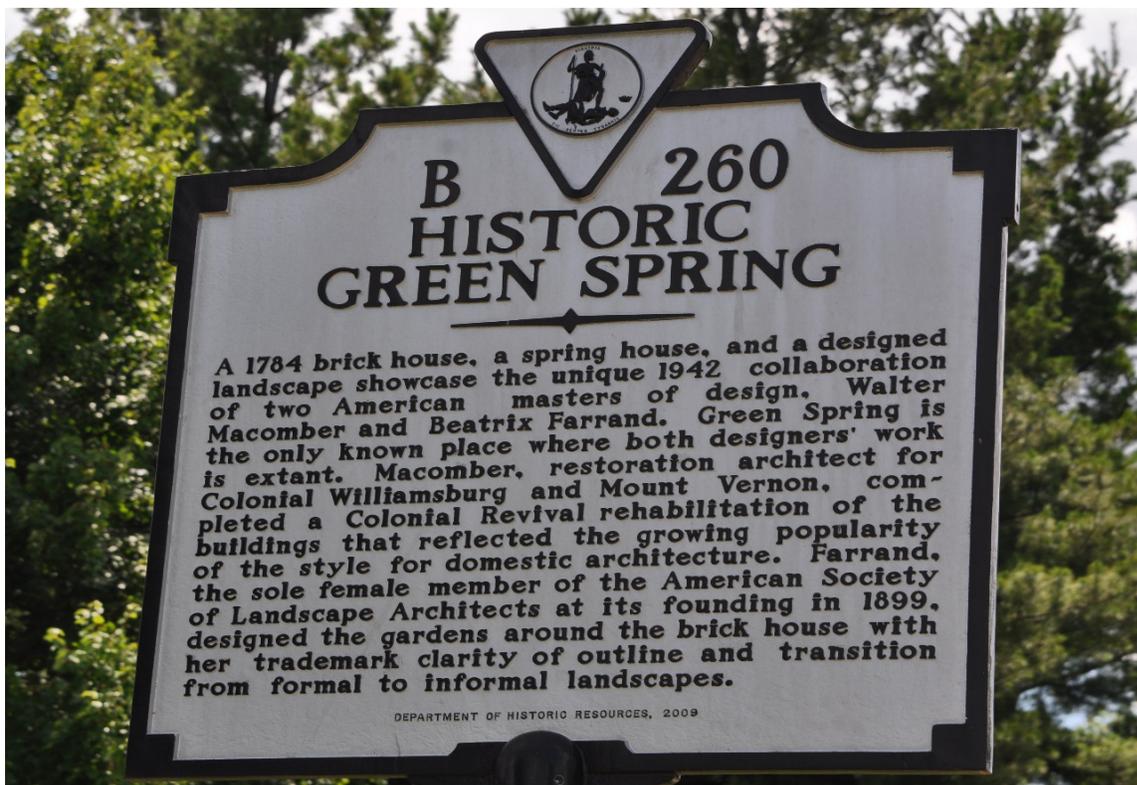
Mixed Border looking north (Brenda Skarphol, June 2015).



Mixed Border and boxwood hedge looking north (Brenda Skarphol, June 2015).



Garden Club of Virginia plaque in center of Mixed Border (Kathy Trichel, July 2016).



Historic Green Spring State of Virginia Historic Highway Marker (Kathy Trichel, July 2016).