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A Landscape Saved: Garden Club of Virginia
Continues to Keep Virginia Green
Historic Garden Week April 18 – April 25, 2020

(RICHMOND, VA) – The women of the Garden Club of Virginia (GCV) have always had their own way of getting things done. Be it wielding axes against unsightly billboards or making tree tags to properly name (and save) every tree on Richmond’s Capitol Square, the results are the same – a greener, more beautiful Virginia for all to enjoy. Today, as concern for environmental issues builds, that mission is more important than ever before.

The non-profit might be uncomfortable with the term “girl power,” just as it shies away from the spotlight. But the story of the Garden Club of Virginia and its signature public event, Historic Garden Week, is impressive. “In the early 20th century there weren’t outlets for educated women to become politically active. They couldn’t vote yet,” explains Jean Gilpin, President of the female-led non-profit. “Some worked for suffrage. For others, the formation of garden clubs was a way to be impactful in their own back yards and communities.”

The first garden club in America was founded in 1891 in Athens, Georgia. While many started with the goal of exchanging horticulture information and cuttings, they soon adopted larger missions. The garden club movement became affiliated with historic preservation when the restoration of the gardens and grounds associated with important structures became projects. “The Garden Club of Virginia was among the first and the most ambitious to undertake landscape restoration projects,” Gilpin continues.

Coming originally from England, early Virginians brought with them an inherent love of the land. They built homes with formal, extensive gardens. Without organized protection of this irreplaceable inheritance, the Garden Club of Virginia foresaw its inevitable destruction. Starting in 1929, they made it their most important work to preserve historic gardens that are now open to the public. “Historic in the name Historic Garden Week, refers not to the properties that are opened, but to the mission of the organization. The first tours were organized to support
restoration work at Kenmore in Fredericksburg, George Washington’s sister’s house,” Tricia Garner, the event’s State Chair, points out.

“From Monticello, Mount Vernon, Bacon’s Castle, Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden, to the State Arboretum in Winchester, to name just a few – a full diversity of gardens is represented in the GCV’s projects,” Lynn McCashin, the non-profit’s Executive Director says. Historic Garden Week proceeds continue to fund the restoration and preservation of nearly 50 of Virginia’s historic public gardens and landscapes, a research fellowship program that documents significant gardens, and a five-year project with Virginia State Parks, in celebration of the GCV’s Centennial in 2020. “The Garden Club of Virginia was instrumental in establishing these parks, coincidentally, also in 1929, the year of the first Historic Garden Week tours,” McCashin notes.

For nearly a century the Garden Club of Virginia has been committed to preserving the beauty of Virginia for all to enjoy. The GCV advocated for maintaining the pristine beauty of Goshen Pass and the wilderness of the Great Dismal Swamp. It has worked to preserve the natural beauty of landscapes along Virginia’s highways and promoted the elimination of billboard blight. Since its formation in 1920 it has grown from a nucleus of eight founding clubs to 47 clubs with over 3,500 members. “It is the coordinated efforts of these talented volunteers, along with the generosity of nearly 200 private homeowners each year, who make Historic Garden Week possible,” Garner explains.

“Much more than a fundraiser, Historic Garden Week is a beloved springtime tradition for the people who come from all over the world to attend tours,” Gilpin explains. “It promotes tourism while showcasing communities both large and small across the commonwealth. Perhaps most importantly, this enduring legacy brings the GCV membership together towards a common goal,” she says.

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The Garden Club of Virginia celebrates the beauty of the land, conserves the gifts of nature and challenges future generations to build on this heritage. The member organization presents educational programs and makes awards to encourage community conservation and beautification projects. Most notably, the Garden Club of Virginia is recognized for its Historic Garden Week, a statewide event that takes place annually each spring.