

# SCHLA Garden Profile: *Falls Park on the Reedy*

*By Ellen Vincent, Clemson University Environmental Landscape Specialist*

There is a place in South Carolina where natural and built features merge with one another; where architectural form and function blend; and beauty, art, culture, and commerce harmoniously co-exist. Welcome to the Falls River Park on the Reedy in historic West End, downtown Greenville.

## **Background**

Falls Park on the Reedy is a public park, owned and operated by the City of Greenville. The site was rather decrepit and people avoided it before 1965. A City of Greenville press release from 2004 described the space in the mid 1900s as in a severe decline. "The water was polluted and the grounds were littered with river debris and trash." Adding further insult to the scene was the construction of the Camperdown Bridge which blocked views and access.

Then, in the mid 1980s the Carolina Foothills Garden Club and the City of Greenville developed a master plan for the area intending to restore beauty, public access, and safety. The visually obstructive Camperdown Bridge came down and a second renovation plan emerged. Using local hospitality tax funds the grand plan became reality. The price tag was \$13.4 million.

## **Art and architecture**

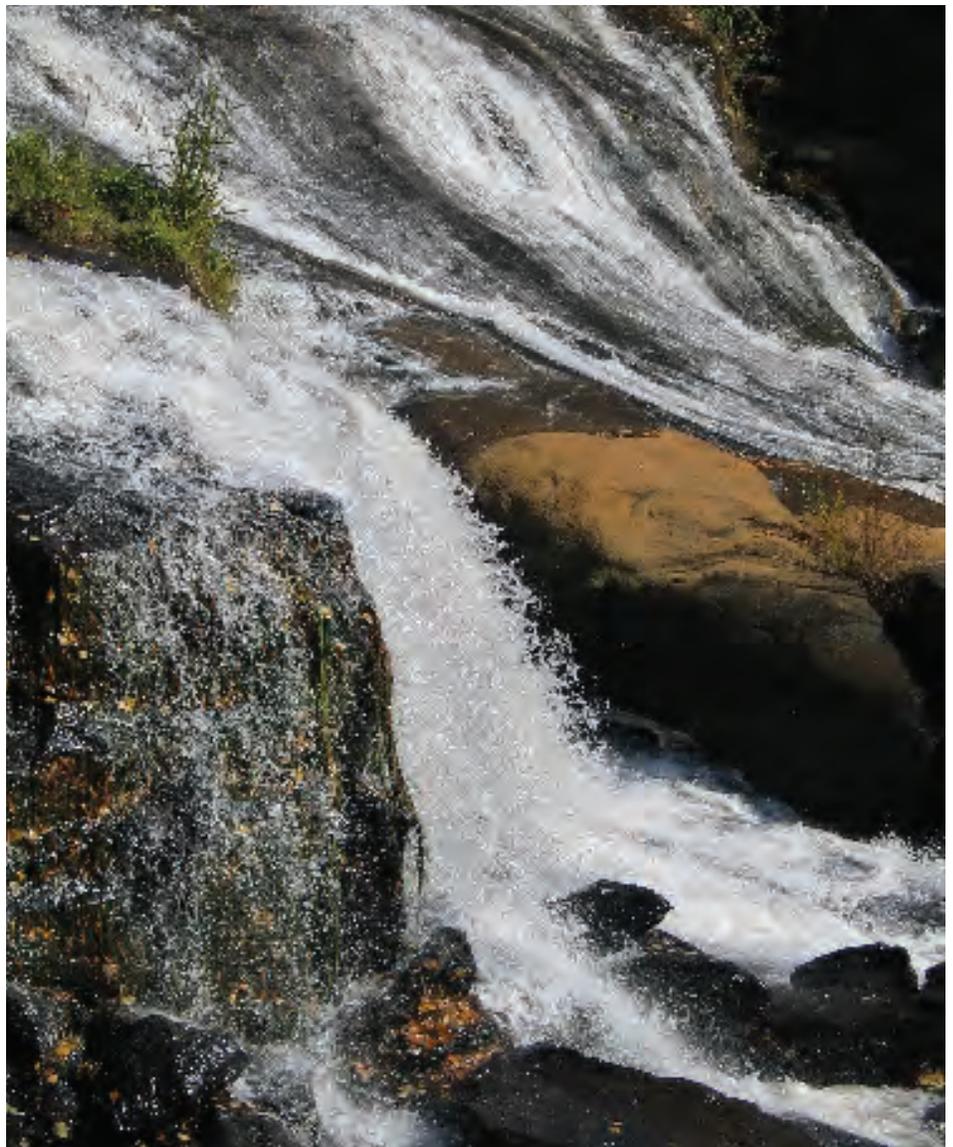
This entire 26 acre park is a work of art. The largest piece of artwork is an international award winning suspension bridge. It cost \$4.5 million. It was designed by Miguel Rosales of Boston, an award winning bridge architect who has designed both the worlds longest and widest cable bridges. Schlaich Bergermann, a world leader in structural engineering, engineered the bridge. Taylor and Murphy Construction Company of Asheville, NC built the bridge in twelve months. At the 2005 International Bridge Conference, the Liberty Bridge was awarded the Arthur G. Hayden medal for innovative vision and design.

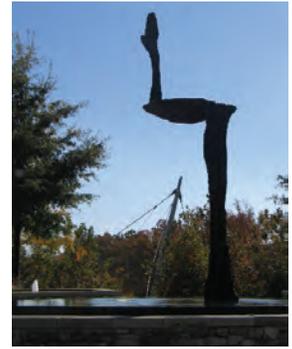
The Liberty Bridge, named for Liberty Corporation founder W. Frank Hipp and his

children, has two 90 foot tall masts that weigh over 28 tons each and lean at an appealing 15° angle. Cables hold the masts in position while steel piles and rock anchors plunge 70 feet deep into bedrock to transfer the bridge loads to the ground. The bridge is 345 feet long, 12 feet wide, and 8" thick. The deck is made of reinforced concrete and has a delightful curve that is intentionally cantilevered toward the

waterfall below. The bridge may sound like a futuristic air ship, but the curves, angles, and lightness all seem perfectly natural and approachable in this setting, floating above the waterfalls and gardens with the skyline of Greenville clearly in view.

Two other works of art in Falls River Park include the untitled piece by Joel Shapiro and





Falls Lake Falls by Bryan Hunt, both of New York. Shapiro emerged on the art scene in Soho in the mid 1970s and has since exhibited in many galleries and museums throughout the world. His work is “deceptively understated yet powerfully suggestive arrangements of simplified, rectangular elements”, reports Middlebury College Museum of Art who hosted a Shapiro exhibition in 2004. Shapiro is credited with reinvigorating the figurative tradition in modern art and has been compared to Rodin and Degas. He began working with wood beams and has progressed to cast bronze. The Shapiro sculpture is bright orange and located on the east side of the Liberty Bridge.

Bryan Hunt’s 16 ft. bronze sculpture Lake Falls Lake is located at the Main Street entrance to the park and is set above a still pool of water that spills over the edge. Matthew Guy Nichols, in *Art in America* (2005) describes Hunt’s work, “Hunt is

best known for cast-metal sculptures that translate the movements of streams, rivers and waterfalls into freestanding abstractions.” An article in the New York Times (Michael Brenson, May 22, 1997) describes Hunt as “a stylish and astute sculptor. His elegantly flowing bronzes, true to their material and engaged in the kind of dialogue with tradition that was unthinkable in the 60’s and 70’s, are hip enough to raise eyebrows and challenge some of the strictest modernist taboos.”

The architecture at Falls Park reflects both the past and the present and manages to easily blend the two. Two restaurants are located on the grounds, one historic and one modern; yet both fit perfectly in the natural scene. Mary’s Falls Cottage retains the impression of an 1800s cottage while The Overlook Grill has an extensive patio with outdoor seating and viewing opportunities. There are meeting rooms and an overlook above the Grill and the park service personnel are located below.

**Gardens and grounds**

Andrea Mains, landscape architect from Washington, D.C. created the master plan design that is the heart of the park’s popularity. Mains’ specializes in parks and gardens and manages all phases of work, from site analysis to design and construction management. Her projects include the U.S. Capital Visitor’s Center; embassy compounds in Thailand, Uganda and Kuwait; and the Winterthur Estate in Delaware. At Falls Park, Mains created a series of garden rooms using native as well as exotic plants suited to the upstate of South Carolina. The gardens showcase the 28’ Reedy River Falls.

There are 20 acres of gardens in Falls Park. The paths in the park are largely laid stone. There are stone walls with fragrant rosemary cascading down the edges. There are stone steps to walk down; stone arbors to walk through; stones along the water to sit on. There is a stone and wood wedding pavilion.



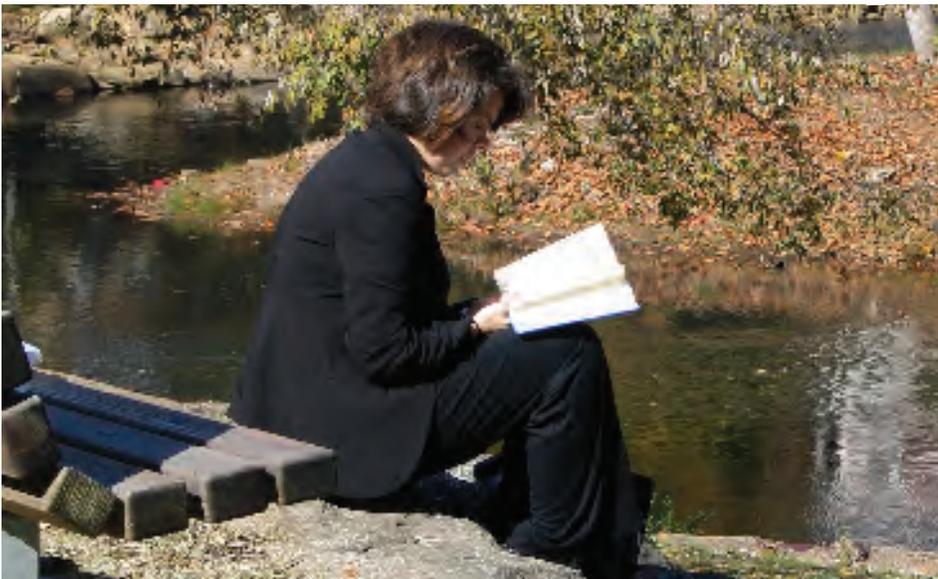
The park is layered and terraced so you can peer through tree canopy at the vistas while you stand on the patio at The Overlook Grill, or stop on the Liberty Bridge, or pause on a stairway.

Mains care with color and texture is evident by the careful placement of annuals near destinations such as the restaurants and stairs. The bold color of annuals is replaced by intriguing textures and a subdued color palette of green, beige, and mauve with the use of ornamental grasses on the bank behind Mary's Falls Cottage Restaurant. The grasses are aesthetically pleasing while stabilizing the soil on the steep slope. The grasses are at their best in the breezes. The foliage and flowers are caught by the wind and add movement to the landscape. Cardoon's thistle-like foliage and rosemary's needle-leaves provide textural contrast and are frequently placed next to one another. Native plants are incorporated into the Governor's School Woods and the Falls Cottage Garden. Jordan Franklin, Public Garden Manager, reports users' favorite plants are artichoke-like

cardoon (*Cynara cardunculus*), curly leaved parsley (*Petroselinum crispum*), rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*), Tardiva hydrangea (*Hydrangea paniculata* 'Tardiva'), and colorful annuals.

Jordan Franklin, a Clemson horticulture graduate, is the Public Garden Manager for Falls Park. The maintenance of Falls Park, the Peace Center, River Place, and several other city properties falls to Franklin and a staff of seven full time and two part-time employees. In addition to Franklin there is an Assistant Public Garden Manager, two Supervisors, and three Garden Technicians. The team includes Nick Bray, Dan Haddy, Darwin Ruiz, Jose Pena, Travis Owens and Travis Dodgens. The maintenance crew spends most of their time grooming plants, mowing the Bermudagrass and fescue turf areas, and removing or installing annuals. They plant 20,000 annuals yearly and in 2006 they planted 13,000 bulbs. Annuals are changed two or three times for three season appeal. Fall plantings include pansies, foxglove, cardoon, purple mustard, and kale. Spring planting feature zinnias,





lantana, salvia, wax begonia, caladium, and coleus. Early August planting features marigolds for gold and orange accent colors. Franklin doesn't need to create the color palette; landscape architect Andrea Mains did that for them.

The crew starts each day with a river sweep. Wearing life vests, they comb the edges and sometimes the middle of the Reedy River removing trash or debris. Their biggest catch is a plethora of coffee cups. They then clean the two sets of public restrooms and empty about 15 trash cans. The crew performs daily maintenance to the fountains, but contract full service maintenance to a private company. Vandalism is a constant occurrence but is remedied quickly in most cases. "This park has no gates, we can't close it, and there is a lot of foot traffic. At first vandalism was costly, \$5000 worth of damage occurred to a sign in the beginning. Now problems are smaller-we can quickly repair most damage with our own labor and materials", reports Franklin.



Irrigation is delivered via a combination of pop-up spray heads and rotors. Fescue is fertilized in September and October and ornamentals are fertilized with slow release nitrogen fertilizer in spring followed with a 14-14-14 product during the season if plants appear to flag. Erthfood is used as compost to prepare ornamental beds and also used as mulch. This enables the team to save on labor costs as they don't need to remove the customary hardwood or pine straw mulch from the beds during plant change outs. All beds are hand weeded and weeds are managed through intensive plantings. Most annuals are installed on 8" centers. The biggest challenges



according to Franklin are not from weeds, disease or insect pests; rather they are created by people walking or riding bicycles through the beds.

Franklin was with the Greenville Beautification Bureau before becoming Public Garden Manager. He claims, “The City is great to work for. It doesn’t get much better than this. The work is high profile, everybody sees it.” He and his crew receive a lot of praise but he also comments that along with the praise come criticisms as well. Franklin is quick to praise the team he works with. “We have a great crew, a lot of guys who really care about what they’re doing. In fact, the team kind of runs itself.” Franklin especially enjoys the regular hours he works; something denied most green industry professionals.

#### **Park use**

Franklin refers to Falls Park as the “Prize jewel of the City” and reports that the primary customers are corporate. “This is a corporate destination to showcase Greenville.” The large number of people in business suits engaged in intense conversations as they walk through the gardens on week days is testimony to the park serving as surrogate meeting space. Two amphitheatres in the park host annual

performances from the Upstate Shakespeare Festival, concerts, Art in the Park, Artisphere, and a storytelling festival. Franklin reports a recent use reassessment due to wear and tear to the turfgrass and landscape beds during public events. Now, many events are held in the streets above the park.

In addition to being a corporate destination and an event site, the park is obviously a well used local amenity. People walking briskly, joggers with strollers, joggers without strollers, elderly couples with and without canes are seen moving in and through the gardens and over the bridge. And almost everyone has a cup of coffee in their hand. A school bus of first graders pulls up and a line of brightly clothed little ones snakes through the Park. Almost everyone is in motion, except for the readers. They’re just turning pages. One reader did move from a bench to a large rock while we were there, no doubt feeling the compelling force to move in this very healthy walkable environment. Perhaps the ever present sound of falling water stimulates movement.

Franklin and his crew receive compliments from users almost on a daily basis. “Local folks tell us how nice it is here but what

is more surprising is when visitors from out of town say ‘I wish my city had this!’” Franklin gives guided tours of the park. The tours cost about \$30 for 30 people and they last about 45 minutes. Local support for Falls Park on the Reedy remains high. While hospitality tax funds paid for its design and installation, private endowments pay for park renovation and projects. There is a Wall of Honor to acknowledge individual supporters as well as plaques throughout the grounds acknowledging donors.

In addition to improving the quality of life for Greenville residents, Falls Park is credited with stimulating reinvestment in and revitalization of the surrounding downtown area. In 2004, over \$64 million of public and private development across Main Street from the park was reported in a City of Greenville press release. Greenville’s Falls Park on the Reedy story is one that bodes well for all green industry professionals. By creating a destination that features spectacular design, water, and plants; people of vision have created quality of life for local citizens and sparked economic development for the region. Visit [www.fallspark.com](http://www.fallspark.com) for directions.