



# SCNLA Garden Profile: Historic Columbia Foundation

By Ellen Vincent, Clemson University Environmental Landscape Specialist

In the heart of Columbia are five historic houses with notable landscapes. Their steward, The Historic Columbia Foundation (HCF), has shaken off the notion that the house museum is the only historical artifact worth preserving and has placed the landscape on the front and center page. In 2006, they hired Robert and Company, an award-winning engineering, landscape architecture and planning firm from Atlanta, to help them develop a cultural landscape master plan. What led HCF to Robert and Company? Maybe the fact that Robert and Company's Director of Planning and Landscape Architecture is also the award-winning author James Cothran, who wrote *Gardens and Historic Plants of the Antebellum South*.

What's new and novel about this plan? The five historic properties are

linked into a cohesive campus-like environment through an attractive pedestrian system with strong historic and educational elements. The properties are not seen as separate from their surrounding neighborhoods. Rather, the neighboring community is acknowledged and celebrated by the use of the term the "Robert Mills Garden District." The "garden district" concept has the potential to stimulate redevelopment and cultural heritage tourism for the area that includes Calhoun Street to the north, Barnwell Street to the east, Hampton Street to the south, and Marion Street to the west.

Another break from tradition is that each historic property will interpret a different segment of 100 years of cultural landscape history. Landscape stories start in the 1820s with the Robert Mills House; continue

at Hampton Preston Mansion with the 1840s-1860 experience; unfold at the Woodrow Wilson Family Home for the 1870s-1890; reveal the entrepreneurial experience of urban African-American history at the Mann-Simons Cottage landscape from 1890-1920; and wrap up with the 1920s landscape story at the Seibels House.

Historic Columbia Foundation did not sit back while the hired firm did all the work. The Garden Restoration Steering Committee, staff, and local community all partnered in the planning process. There were focus groups, public charrettes, and consultations with local authorities to pursue the path most beneficial to the Columbia community. Robin Waites, Executive Director, clearly feels that telling the story of the landscape is the responsible thing to do. She also senses the timing is now right, and she has encountered growing support for the development of the cultural landscape master plan. "The committee has been fun to work with. People are now reinvesting in green spaces," she says. Support arrived quickly from private donors, and two large contributions were given by the Columbia Garden Club (\$100,000 in increments of \$20,000 for five years); and Palmetto Health Joint Reconstruction, Richland (\$35,000 over five years). Additional foundation grants are continually being sought.

Larry Grubbs, Director of Properties and Grounds, has also noticed the trend toward green space revival. "There's been a big shift both here and elsewhere, this emphasis on grounds. Lately I've seen more people come out here and sit under the trees and eat their lunch." Grubbs watches over seven properties, 11 acres of grounds, and eight acres of turf. There are three dedicated grounds employees, two full-time plus one part-time. Just like most green industry work cultures, flexibility prevails at HCF. "Grounds people aren't always grounds people; sometimes they're furniture movers," he reports. HCF is currently seeking

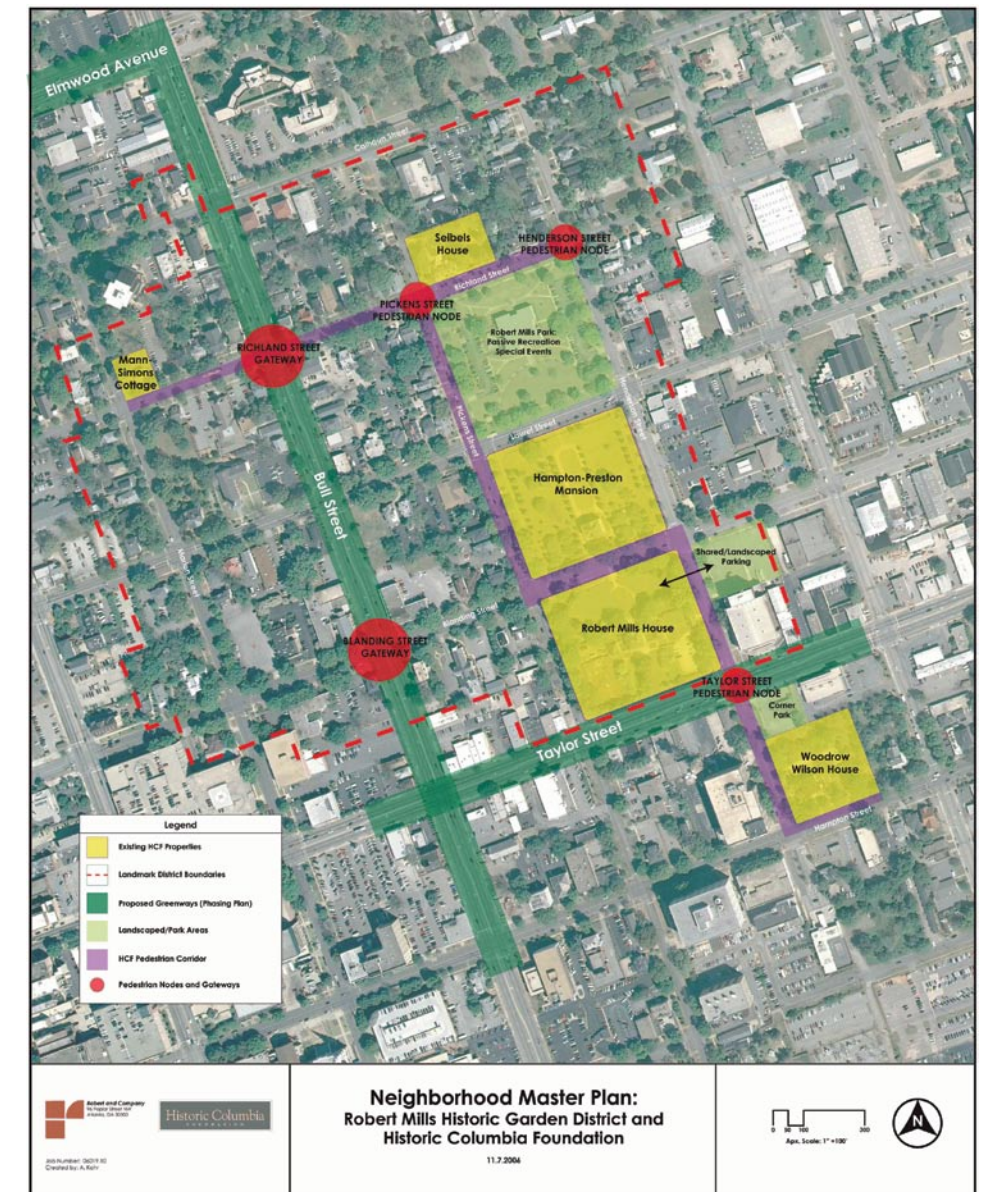
a horticulturist to join their team and is conducting interviews.

Grounds maintenance practices are easy on the environment thanks to Larry Grubbs. "I've always wanted to be green," he admits. "I want it to be as natural as possible, no broad based insecticides; good bugs are quite welcome here." Not only do they use baits for fire ants, they know to apply the bait in an X pattern over the entire property, rather than focusing on individual mounds. Nutrient recycling, an essential best management practice for the environmental landscape, is successfully implemented under Grubbs. "Our turf is centipede. We mow twice a week and don't cut off too much of the blade at one time.

Clippings are left to return to the soil and 30% of nutrients are returned by leaving the clippings."

Mulch is a must for HCF properties and they by-pass the free loads. "We purchase mulch in bulk quantities. You can get it for free but you don't know what else you're getting, there could be poison ivy in it." They use hardwood mulch at HCF because it lasts longer, "looks fresh" and retains its color longer than pine straw. Pine straw is chosen for areas undergoing change. Grubbs acquired his green skills using perseverance, the Internet, and Richland County Library. "You are only as smart as your local library," he claims.

People and inner city wildlife are



most welcome at the HCF properties. Visibility has been relatively low, due to the walls and gates that surround some of the properties. "It's nice to have a green spot in the middle of Columbia," claims Grubbs. "We're walled in—some people don't even know we're here." He admits to favoring the turf spots because of the activity they encourage, "I like the big open grassy areas. I like to see kids playing, people picnicking." Garden benches are being installed under shade trees to attract the lunch crowd. Volunteer groups are welcome workers who diligently deadhead and groom plants. Inner city wildlife is celebrated by HCF staff and visitors. Sightings of hawks, brown thrashers, and about 900 squirrels delight staff. "We let them [wildlife] have their fun," admits Grubbs.

Heavy maintenance occurs on Mondays, when the properties are closed to the public, or in preparation for a special event, oftentimes a wedding. Staff numbers are small but Larry Grubbs takes great pride in trimmed edges and sidewalks. "We want people to have a good experience and speak well of the place—not remember the weeds." Grounds conditions directly impact revenue, as an important source of income for HCF is rentals of grounds and buildings for private and company events. Weddings and meetings at the Seibels House are essential for cash flow. The museum gift shop at Robert Mills is another revenue generator.

While Larry Grubbs and his crew make neighbors and groups welcome to the grounds, Latrice Williams, Director of Communication, provides a welcome entry point to any curious customer. Her professionalism makes navigating the HCF system easy and enjoyable. Her English and journalism background result in virtuoso communication skills that allow information to pass from question to solution at lightning speed. This type of professional coordination is rare for most for and non-profit businesses. Robin Waites, Executive Director,

makes working for and contributing to HCF worthwhile. The staff claims her passion and professionalism create an atmosphere worth working in. Waites is quick to acknowledge her Board of Directors, the cultural landscape steering committee, her staff, and the supportive Columbia community for the success of HCF.

Jenks Farmer, local plantsman and gardener extraordinaire is contributing to the landscape redevelopment efforts (donating \$30,000 worth of in-kind services to HCF). The Seibels House landscape is being reconstructed using sustainable garden concepts and techniques appropriate to the time period of restoration (1920s). They didn't clear-cut the property; rather they moved existing plants around (72 camellias in fact). Low-maintenance plants were purchased from local nurseries of various scales (roadside to large scale). Native swamp azaleas were obtained from Clara Mack, a SC rare plant collector (of the *Wisteria macrostachya* 'Clara Mack' fame introduced by Woodlanders). Irrigation was installed for use during establishment and drought, but is not intended for constant use. Centipede turf was selected for its ruggedness and the low fertility fertilizer (Erthfood) was used.

Jenks Farmer reports that the project was enticing from the start. "When I first met with this group I could tell they were totally dedicated. They were prepared financially and organizationally. I knew this would be successful." Farmer is particularly interested in the project's potential effect on the urban neighborhood. "These gardens have the potential to set a positive social and cultural tone for this neighborhood." He observed a couple walking their dog in the Seibels garden the evening prior. They were careful and respectful toward the place and were prepared to clean up after their dog if they needed to. "It's a meeting place now; people play and socialize here. It's a garden that can be used as a park." Farmer is particularly delighted

that these historic gardens resemble botanical gardens. A database of all the plants will soon be available online [[www.historiccolumbia.org](http://www.historiccolumbia.org)]. He sees this as the ideal urban model—having accessible mini-botanical gardens, right in the neighborhood.

Historic Columbia Foundation's commitment to historic landscapes and to the historic community area called Robert Mills Garden District is evident through the cultural landscape master plan. The Columbia community's commitment to landscapes is evident through their support of plan implementation. Columbia Mayor Bob Coble included the Historic Garden District in his "State of the City" highlight of important issues for consideration in 2007. Stage one implementation happened at Seibels House in January through March of 2007 with a large \$75,000 contribution from Columbia Green, payable in \$15,000 increments for five years. Columbia Green claims this HCF project may be "the most ambitious garden initiative in Columbia's history" (<http://www.columbiagreen.org/pages/news.html>). Columbia Green's motto is "Because life should be beautiful" complements the mission of Historic Columbia Foundation. According to Robin Waites, "They [Columbia-Green] clearly understand tourism and quality of life issues for Columbia."

Why is this project receiving steady support? Perhaps it is because people know that this landscape installation project has the potential to make Columbia, SC a destination for southern garden history. Funding sources are being sought, as the entire project will cost approximately \$5 million to implement. Endowments for landscape maintenance are also being developed. Once HCF fully implements its cultural landscape master plan we, the citizens of SC, will have the opportunity to immerse ourselves in 100 years of garden history without ever having to leave the state. This is quite a green gift to the residents and visitors of South Carolina.

