Edens Lost and Found

THE GARDENS OF LOUTREL BRIGGS (1893-1977)

Loutrel Briggs photo: courtesy of *Post and Courier*

Loutrel W. Briggs
Landscape Architect

Editor's Note: The following is an interview with Sheila Wertimer, ASLA. In addition to her being a member of the Society and formerly serving on our Board of Directors, she is a highly respected landscape architect with a flourishing practice – specializing in rehabilitating old and/or historic gardens plus designing new ones imbued with that elusive quality of tradition, heritage and time-proven charm. She is among a group of local professionals who have undertaken the daunting but important task of documenting the remaining Charleston gardens designed in the first half of the last century by the remarkable Loutrel Briggs – possibly the one landscape architect singularly responsible for defining what, today, is considered the "classic Charleston garden."

A formal rose garden

Q. For the uninitiated – who was Loutrel Briggs? And how did he become so closely associated with the historic gardens of Charleston, South Carolina?

A. Actually, Loutrel Winslow Briggs was not a Charlestonian – or even a Southerner. He was born in New York City in 1893. He graduated from Cornell University (as did I). His degree (earned in 1917) was in "rural art" (today known as landscape architecture) and he became head of the department of architecture at the New York School of Fine and Applied Art. His early life is wonderfully outlined in his 1951 book, *Charleston Gardens*, (University of South Carolina Press) which is out of print, unfortunately, but it's a fascinating resource for understanding his point of view. He had traveled extensively in Europe and much of what he absorbed there of the European/English traditions in gardening found an appreciative audience here.

He first came to Charleston in the late 1920s. It was a time when a number of wealthy Northerners were "rediscovering" the city's architectural charms. They were purchasing town homes and plantation properties as wintertime retreats. Briggs had a large following in New York and he was asked by some of those clients to design gardens for their Charleston properties. His first local commission was in 1929 for Mrs. Washington Roebling, widow of the famous engineer who supervised the construction of the Brooklyn Bridge. She was restoring the (1772) Gibbes House at 64 South Battery which includes one of the city's largest formal gardens. Not long after that, he opened a Charleston office and spent his winters living and working here until he retired to Charleston in 1959.

Q. Then, would he be considered among those people associated with "the Charleston Renaissance" (of the 1920s and 30s)?

A. I would say so, yes. He certainly became extremely popular among Charleston property owners during that period and remained so well past that time even into the 1960s. He was widely sought out, his work was often published in national magazines, and his book quickly became something of a local classic. Even today, when clients say to me, "I want to have a formal Charleston garden," what they're really saying is – I want a garden like Loutrel Briggs designed for Charleston's beautiful 18th and 19th century homes.

Q. Was he working from a historical context – replacing what had been here in the 18th and 19th centuries?

A. I don't think so. There's some historical record of early formal gardens being in the City of Charleston, but they weren't extensive and even they were echoes of much earlier European gardens. In actuality, the side yards and rear gardens of most early Charleston homes were small urban farms. You would have found more milk cows and chickens, vegetables and herbs growing there than exotic ornamentals. Loutrel Briggs' bias toward formal European landscape design was ideally suited to Charleston's architecture as it was "idealized" later on – in his own time. He liked to create a series of garden "rooms" divided into a hierarchy that related logically to the architecture. For instance, his more formal spaces are adjacent to the house – intended to be looked down upon from a piazza. The farther removed from the house, the more informal the garden spaces become. This intimate relationship between the garden and its architectural host was a European concept that was seen in Charleston's earliest gardens, but Briggs revived the tradition and refined it.

Q. What are the other typical characteristics of a Briggs garden?

A secluded path leads to romantic ruins ▶

A. That's really quite interesting. From his accounts, we're learning that his palette of plants and colors actually evolved as he became more adept working with this southern climate and his Charleston commissions grew in number. Still, he worked with a fairly narrow scope through most of his career. You will almost always find azaleas, camellias, a dogwood tree and usually a focal point (or points) frequently in the form of a water feature. He was incredibly prolific and meticulous in his record-keeping. That's been a boon to our study. We've identified at least a hundred Briggs gardens in the Lowcountry so far. And the number could easily grow as more documentation is found.

Q. What is the Loutrel Briggs Survey?

A. In the spring of 2003, a group of professionals and preservationists set out to survey the contribution of Briggs in a definitive way – as much of his work was seriously being eroded by changes in property ownership, poor maintenance, natural disasters and the passing of time. Even the documentation of his known work was spread over several resources. The survey evolved from dialogue between the Preservation Society and Historic Charleston Foundation over the deteriorating status of some Charleston gardens. The effort was joined by the South Carolina Historical Society, the Charleston Garden Club, The Charleston Horticultural Society, Briggs biographer and garden writer James Cothran, Clemson Architecture Center director Robert Miller, and a number of local landscape architects who directed staff time to the project.

Q. What does the Briggs survey hope to accomplish?

A. We set out to identify, document, photograph, and preserve as many Briggs gardens as are still with us. To do this, we had to devise a survey form, coordinate volunteers, contact property owners identified as owning a Briggs garden, and archive the information for the public's future use in a working data base that can be maintained and updated as changes occur. It's still a work in progress.

In my practice, I'm frequently asked to restore a garden originally designed by Briggs or we're asked how to retain the best Briggs elements while updating a garden for more contemporary use. The survey will help me (and others) know where and what Briggs designs are still out there and how best to preserve them and/or restore them, appreciate them, and live with them for today's purposes as well as tomorrow's enjoyment.

Focal point of a garden ruin

◀ This corridor of brick piers frames several garden rooms

The Preservation Society's Executive Director Cynthia C. Jenkins stressed the importance of the Loutrel Briggs Survey to the city this way. "According to the guidelines set forth by the Department of Interior, a property qualifies for the National Register through its location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association. Of these seven key "integrities" – the surrounding gardens or the landscape of a property engage three; design, setting and feeling. The remarkable garden designs of Loutrel Briggs are clearly integral to the historic fabric of this city." ■

HOW WIDESPREAD WAS BRIGGS' DESIGN PATH?

Although the complete inventory of Loutrel Briggs' garden designs is still incomplete, the impressive volume of his known work is evident in this partial listing provided by the study. His popularity with Charleston residents speaks eloquently of his sensitivity to the relationship between historic homes and the garden environments surrounding them.

Loutrel Briggs completed designs and/or actual gardens for properties on the following streets in Charleston: Anson, Atlantic, Bedons Alley, Catfish Row, Chalmers, 16 properties on Church, East Battery, 4 properties on East Bay, Elliott, Greenhill, 11 properties on King, Ladson, 4 properties on Lamboll, 9 properties on Legare, Lowndes, 9 properties on Meeting, 2 properties on Murray Boulevard, 3 properties on Orange, 2 properties on Rutledge Avenue, 3 properties on Society, South Adgers Wharf, 8 properties on South Battery, 2 properties on State, 9 properties on Tradd, and Water. He also created gardens for Mepkin Plantation, McLeod Plantation, Mulberry Plantation, Rice Hope Plantation, the Francis Marion Tomb, and Strawberry Chapel. ■