

The Dix Park Chapel Garden - A Raleigh Garden Club Footprint

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A grand, entirely new project was the creation of a chapel garden on a par with the Rose Garden. Once done it won the National award for “most outstanding” church garden in the USA for 1957. And it was created with a mission, in the name of garden therapy.



Raleigh Garden Club members regularly conducted garden therapy at the Dorothea Dix Hospital in the 40s and 50s. Dix was the state psychiatric hospital. The Club dreamed of making a garden for the inmates for some years, but it didn't happen overnight.

In 1954, Hurricane Hazel destroyed the Hospital's greenhouse. It had been full of flowers and was a pleasant destination for Sunday afternoon walks for the inmates and visiting family.

The dream started, so the story goes, a month after Hurricane Hazel, with a frail young inmate at the hospital. She had lost husband and new-born baby at almost the same time, and she had gone catatonic. All attempts to arouse her had failed. Yet one day a Raleigh Garden Club member leading a session on making a corsage caught the attention of the young woman, who had been wheeled into the room to observe. Overjoyed at the reaction, stander by Mrs. Thomas W. Ruffin (then garden club president) asked her "Would you like to make a corsage? Why don't you try one." The pinched face brightened. A long-forgotten alertness flashed in her eyes. Then the young woman paled and dropped her head again. "But I can only use acorns and dried materials, there are no flowers," she spoke!

"Then and there," recalls Mrs. Ruffin, "I vowed they'd get their flowers back." (N&O article, 9/23/1956 – see photos for a copy)

It was another two years before the Club got the go-ahead from the Hospital, but it finally came. In 1955 it was decided to build an all-faiths chapel on the grounds.



That gave a focus to Mrs. Ruffin's dream: the Club would provide a chapel garden. She became Chairman of the Garden Committee appointed in 1956. When the garden plans were announced at a chapel service, the nearly 600 patients stomped and "nearly raised the roof" in joy.

Funds were raised. The Club brought in a nationally famous flower specialist to give a lecture and sold tickets, raising \$243. * Mrs. Earl B. White of Florida, who was the national chairman of

flower arranging for National Garden Clubs (then called the National Council of Garden Clubs, Inc.) spoke to an audience of over 400 people on Oct. 5, 1956.

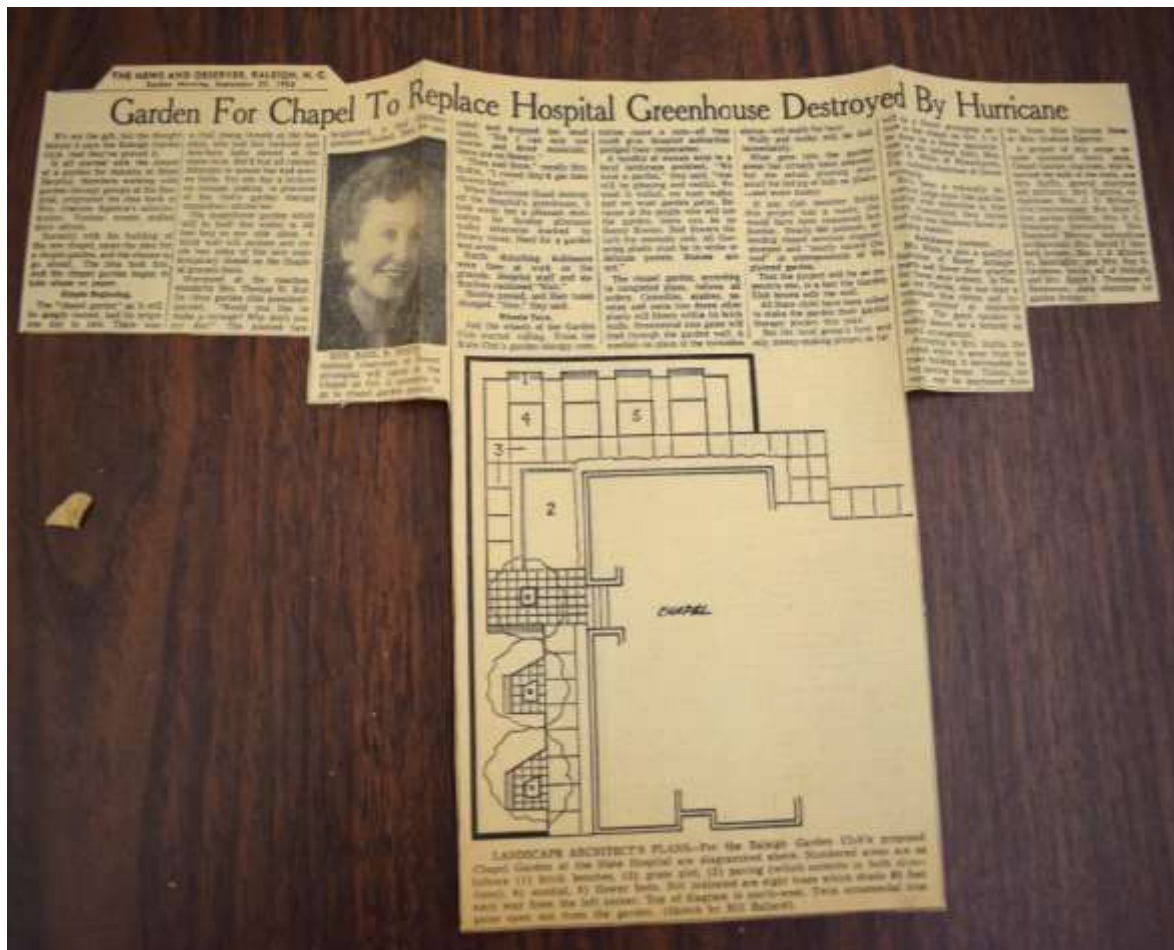
* Adjusted for inflation, that was \$2742 (<https://www.usinflationcalculator.com/>)

The state garden club, GCNC gave a donation of \$200**, and also asked all the member garden clubs across the state to donate to the garden as their own therapy project for the year. (Note full financials available in Report, 1962-3, if needed.)

** Adjusted for inflation, that was \$2257

The Club committee went to a local landscape architect, Richard C. Bell of Godwin and Bell. His work left an enduring legacy of successful public and private landscapes in Raleigh, including Raleigh's famed Pullen Park, the amphitheater at Meredith College, the Brickyard at NC State University, and the North Carolina Legislative Building grounds.

[<https://www.ncasla.org/news/2020/3/18/remembering-richard-c-dick-bell-fasla-faar-1928-2020>]



“We want a garden,” Mrs. Ruffin said, “that will be pleasing and restful. We want it walled, we want walks, and we want garden gates. Because of the people who will use the garden, there can be no thorny flowers. Red flowers disturb the mentally sick. All flowering plants must be in white or delicate pastels. Statues are out.”

The chapel garden, according to completed plans, is described as a “patio type, enclosed, and extends across the back and down one side of the Chapel. Ornamental iron gates lead through the garden wall. A sundial marked the hour. It featured plantings of Japanese maples, Camellias, Azaleas, Peonies and some two dozen other plants within its brick walls, all labeled with botanical name. The plant design was planned to provide “interest and beauty the year round.” [Source, RGC Report, 1962-3 in Archives, Chapel Garden report 62-3)

Paths and walls were begun in October 1956, and planting was ongoing from 1957 through 1962-3. The landscape architect firm of Godwin and Bell did the grading and landfill, helped with the heavy planting of trees and shrubs, and as of 1962 was still helping with maintenance of the garden.

The Club won the top “May Duff Walters Church Garden National Award as the “outstanding garden at church or synagogue in the United States” in 1957. The Club also won the “Anne Horne Little Award for meritorious achievement” the same year from the Garden Club of North Carolina.

The Chapel Garden at Dix was a hugely popular garden and was listed as a destination on the Capital City Trails tour and the GCNC State Garden Tour. The Club was still maintaining it in 1973. They planted many memorial plants there to commemorate past members, as we do trees in the park for Arbor Day now.

The garden was open to the public for the House and Garden tour of the Raleigh Garden Club in May 1957, 1959, and again for the GCNC State Convention in 1958. In 1959 it was placed on the list of Gardens and Historical places to visit in North Carolina, published by the GCNC in July 1959.

Ann Isley, Raleigh Garden Club president, wrote in a letter to members fall 1958:

“If civic improvement is your interest, then you are really in luck, for a vigorous campaign ranging from war on litterbugs to dogwood planting is under way. ... Find Your Niche. And don’t overlook Garden Therapy. Enrich your own life by enriching the lives of others.”

Today

On November 4, 2020, Raleigh City Council approved the renaming of "Greg Poole, Jr. All Faiths Chapel" in honor of the late Greg Poole, Jr., whose vision and voice helped preserve our 308-acre site to become a public park.

The garden was replanted in 2021 as part of the renovation and renaming of the Greg Poole, Jr. All Faiths Chapel under the Dix Park master plan. It is currently maintained by Dix Chapel Garden Volunteer group under the Dept. of Parks. The garden layout though is just as it was. The original Japanese maples are now beautiful specimen trees. A true Raleigh Garden Club footprint!

And the Raleigh Garden Club maintains its connection with the garden and chapel. They have now created a new Pollinator Garden right outside the entrance of the original iron gates, with a sundial at the center recalling the original plan, as well as a Monarch Waystation, though the Adopt-A-Park program with the COR Dept of Parks, Recreation and Cultural Resources.

