

Restoring the Historic Charlotte Hilton Green Park

Our project is restoring a small inner-city park that once belonged to famed conservation author and early Raleigh Garden Club (RGC) member Charlotte Hilton Green. The land was donated to the City of Raleigh in the late 1980's in honor of Charlotte. But it had been sadly ignored and neglected since that time.

The park is a narrow strip, mostly wooded, along Crabtree Creek. At the southern tip, a two-level lawn is bordered by striking specimen trees, bulbs, and shrubs Charlotte planted.

Our goals were to restore the crocus lawn and to clear out the invasive plants on the hillside along the entrance steps.



1- A map of the Charlotte Hilton Green Park in Raleigh

Planning for Planting Led to an Archaeology Find

Planning for the workdays to accomplish our goal involves cooperation between the project chair, Laurie, and Raleigh Dept. of Parks, Recreation and Cultural Resources (Parks Dept). Together we ordered over 200 spring bulbs –“Tommies” (*Crocus tommasinianus*) and 50 of the native Dwarf Crested Iris (*Iris cristata*) – to restore the crocus lawn. We also ordered 200 daffodils for along the perimeter of the park entrance.

We knew from verbal history – a neighbor who grew up when Charlotte still lived there - that the crocus lawn was a spring highlight. Planting so many bulbs in scattered groups of 3 per hole was a labor-intensive activity. But it was rewarded by an “archaeology” discovery! We found a flagstone path that had been smothered by the turf over the decades. It led across the lawn and back towards the creek where there was still a remnant of a bench. The flagstones were massive! Easily 10 inches thick! As we uncovered them, this garden feature was still powerful enough to conjure their magic, beckoning you into the garden.



2 - The Crocus Lawn in summer before discovering the flagstone path (left), crocus and iris as they will look in spring (middle) and naturalizing daffodils along the park border

The second goal was to open up the entrance steps which were nearly obscured by rampant English ivy and many tree seedlings and invasive Japanese honeysuckle growing on the hillside. The steps themselves have been dislodged by time. We lopped, chopped, pulled, and dragged off the invasive vines and small trees – piling them into the park truck to be carried away for composting. The daffodils were planted along the perimeter of the park, on either side of the cleared entrance steps, so they would be visible to those walking or driving by. These were planted in drifts to maintain a natural look. Charlotte was not a fan of “formal” gardens.



3 - The steps before and after we cleared the invasive growth

Teamwork and Sweat Equity Restore a Historic Park

Once the schedule of workdays – 2-3 each in spring and fall – had been settled on, they were announced in our newsletter, with sign-up sheets at the Club meetings for up to 10 members to work on any given workday.

The limit on numbers was due to the Raleigh Parks Dept. COVID requirements. We also invited some of the local neighbors of the park to join in, because Laurie, our chair, lives near the park and they knew her.



4 - Workday at the Park - getting organized

The Raleigh Parks Dept. funded this project, and RGC provided the sweat equity.

The transformation of this neglected park back into an inviting garden again was our most rewarding accomplishment. What had looked like a weedy, overgrown, and neglected lot in this lovely residential neighborhood was once again a beautiful spot, and in the spring with the crocus lawn in bloom it will turn quite magical.

Connecting with one of our Club’s early gardening pioneers in spirit, and restoring a part of her garden, gave us all a deep sense of place. Charlotte was likely the first ever Raleigh gardener to set up a garden specifically as a wildlife habitat. She was ahead of her time! The camaraderie developed between our Club and the Parks Dept staff was mutually rewarding and follows a GCNC and Club goal of cooperating with like-minded organizations for civic improvement and historical preservation.

Discovering an Historic “Footprint” of RGC and How It All Started

Charlotte Hilton Green joined RGC in the 1920’s. She was an avid birder and conservationist whose monthly column for *Our State* magazine was hugely influential. She was “the one person in Raleigh most clearly identified with conservation of natural areas.”

She and her husband bought 70 acres along Crabtree Creek. Charlotte’s garden was educational and famous in her heyday back in the 30’s and 40’s. It was often visited by botany professors from NC State University for research, including pioneer ecologist BW Wells, who wrote *The Natural Gardens of North Carolina* under the sponsorship of our own GCNC.



5 - Charlotte in her garden circa 1949

In 2020, if you had asked, no one in the Club had even heard of Charlotte Hilton Green. Club historian Erica Winston learned about the park and Charlotte from our Club Histories in the NC State Archives. She mentioned at a Club meeting that she was looking for where it was. She and Laurie eventually pieced together the story of the site and the park donation. An exciting new RGC project was born! RGC formally “adopted” the park as part of the Adopt-A-Park program of the Parks Department. Club support was garnered with a big educational exhibit at the fall meetings, and the Board voted in favor of the project and made Laurie chair.

It was like resurrecting a ghost of gardens past! Recovering the story of this historic and important gardener, who led the charge as author and pioneering ecologist and wildlife habitat gardener, has brought pride and joy to the Club and a connection with our roots. Thank you for the opportunity to tell the story of restoring this special spot of historic and aesthetic beauty.

W: Thank You for Volunteering
Erica Winston <ericawinston@gmail.com>
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From: Van Noordt, Rachel
Sent: Monday, November 22, 2021 1:59 PM
To: Joyce Moses; Laurie McDowell
Cc: Wisenbaker, Neal; Sedaris, Gretchen
Subject: Thank You for Volunteering!

Hi all,

As part of the volunteer services staff, I was at Charlotte Hilton Green and Dorothea Dix Park. Here is a link to the photos that were taken at the parks so we can share our volunteer work on social media. If you have any other opportunities with the Parks Department, please let me know so we can all again and ask for help to improve our program.

Best regards,
Rachel Van Noordt
Volunteer Services

Volunteer Services Program

Volunteer Spotlight

The Raleigh Garden Club have been long time volunteers with Raleigh Parks and are even Fred Fletcher Outstanding Volunteer Award Recipients. They are very active at both Charlotte Hilton Green and Dorothea Dix Park. The club has two teams of volunteers that have adopted both parks. The CHG adopt-a-park group has not only helped us remove invasive species on the site, but has also helped research the history of the park and the person whom it was named after. The Dorothea Dix Park adopt-a-park group has helped with the same work at the park and the person whom it was named after.

Joyce Moses, Sue Sizer, Rebel Strouss, Erica Winston, Laurie McDowell, Chair

Documentation: A thank you from the Parks Dept and an article about our efforts in Raleigh Dept. of Parks, Recreation and Cultural Services Volunteer Newsletter.