

Celebrating 100 Years: The Italianate Gardens at Drumthwacket

The year 2005 marks one hundred years since the completion of the magnificent Italianate gardens at Drumthwacket, signaled by the publication of the October 1905 issue of American Homes and Gardens featuring Drumthwacket's gardens on its cover.

When Moses Taylor Pyne and his wife Margaretta Stockton Pyne purchased Drumthwacket from the Olden estate in 1893, they set upon a course of developing the already important property into an English country style manor house. As Princeton grandees and leaders of the social set, the wealthy Pynes pursued the upper class leisure activities of gentleman farming, social intercourse with its requisite entertaining and clothing, and decorating a luxurious home. They obviously developed Drumthwacket with great care and careful attention to important and interrelated details. Noted architect Raleigh C. Gildersleeve was engaged to design the additions to the mansion, and additional acreage was purchased that evolved into a splendid and picturesque park where visitors were welcomed with genuine patrician hospitality.

The well-educated Pyne was interested in making use of landscape design at Drumthwacket, and the idea that it was possible to take the best from other places and cultures and incorporate it into American settings for a superior result. With the publication of the popular and influential Charles A. Platt's *Italian Gardens* in 1895, the stage was set for Pyne to adapt Platt's landscaping concepts of integrating and transitioning between indoor and outdoor spaces, planes with distinct vertical connections (walls, steps), and sightlines tying the spaces together.

Pyne engaged the prominent Morristown landscape architect Daniel Webster Langton, one of the eleven founding members of the American Society of Landscape Architects, to design Drumthwacket's entire property, including woods, ponds, lawns, paths, bowling green, lawn tennis court, and formal Italianate gardens directly behind the house. In Langton's plan, the parterres of the garden were modeled after the Villa Gamberaia in Settignano, Italy. The dimensions are identical, but the details from Italy were adapted to New Jersey. The site, with a vertical drop of about 25 feet in 260 feet, was suited to Italian-style terracing.

The back door from the central part of the house opens to a view south across the four main spaces of Drumthwacket's garden, with the woods as backdrop. The upper paved terrace drops to the main parterre which was, and is, a turfed rectangle with semi-circles at the short ends. In the center was an Italian fountain, now gone. The central path split into a twin stairway descending to the next level, eight feet down. Between the stairways was a small grotto with a tiger's head fountain (no longer in place), a symbol of Pyne's affection for the mascot of his alma mater, Princeton University. A path led from this fountain across this third terrace, between the bowling green and lawn tennis court, out of sight from the house. Completing the garden's central axis, the lowest level is a natural area and circular pool, called the Frog Pond. Trees, shrubs, and perennials were selected for horticultural perfection. And of course, a large staff was employed to mow, edge, water, rake, and prune - in particular to prune the topiary chairs on the lawn sport terrace.

Moses Taylor Pyne passed away in 1921 and Margaretta in 1939. When Abram Spanel purchased Drumthwacket in 1940, it had been unoccupied and the acreage and farm buildings already sold. The Spanels enjoyed the gardens but lived in a modern and less elaborate style suited to the mid-twentieth century. During the years between 1966, when Drumthwacket was purchased by the State of New Jersey with the intent that it be used as the executive residence, and 1990, when Governor James Florio took residence, the gardens had deteriorated. Lack of maintenance was obvious, planting beds overgrown, paths and stairs in need of rebuilding. Most dramatic was the failure and total loss of Pyne's elaborate precast concrete balustrade.

The house having been thoroughly restored in the 1980's, Mrs. Lucinda Florio and the Drumthwacket Foundation now spearheaded the drive to renovate the beautiful Italianate gardens using privately donated funds. Under the direction of Professor Connie Webster of Cook College, Rutgers University, students prepared conceptual plans, which were reference to the final design by New Jersey landscape architect Paul Dorko. Beginning in 1992, retaining walls were rebuilt, paths recreated, specimens replaced. Important in the redesign concept was retaining the original axial relationships and the overall terraced shape. The Italian fountain, unable to be repaired, was removed and placed in storage; similarly, the tiger head fountain has been buried in place, awaiting rescue perhaps by another Princeton University alumnus with a passion for historic garden preservation. The final original garden element, the Frog Pond, was restored in 1997 in honor of Agnes Pyne Davis, Moses Taylor Pyne's only grandchild.

Today, Drumthwacket's Italianate gardens are enjoyed by visitors much as they were in Pyne's day. Beautiful peonies and iris, boxwood and roses, magnolias and lindens line the pathways and frame the still lovely vistas - as the garden gently recalls its splendid history from the Gilded Age.

Portions of the content of this article were adapted from the writings of William K. Selden and Mary K. Muckenhoupt.