

**Garden Club of Buzzards Bay
Conservation Committee
The Nathan and Polly Johnson House Garden
21 Seventh Street, New Bedford 02740
June 2010**

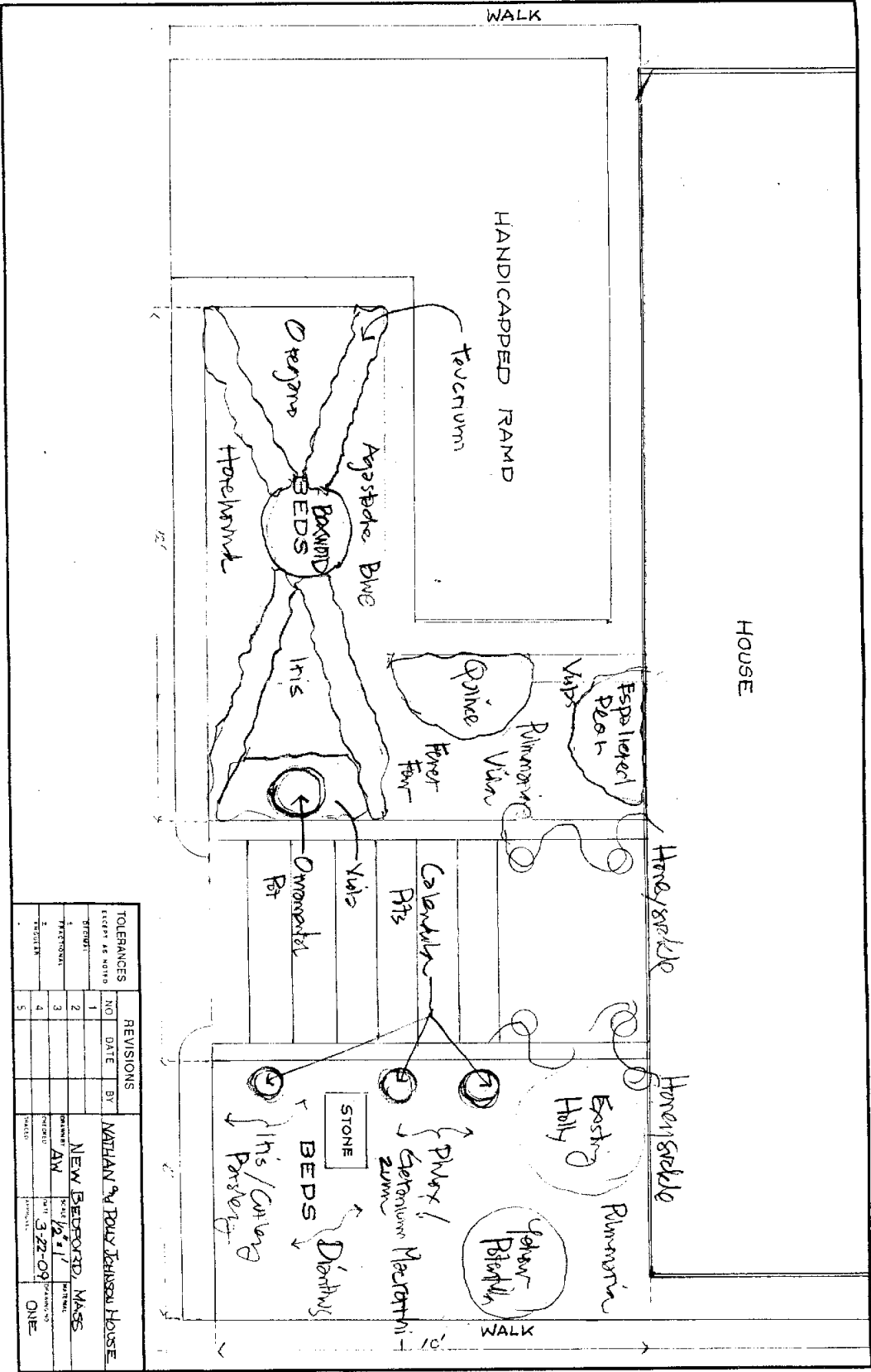
In May 2009, at the request of the New Bedford Historical Society, members of the Garden Club of Buzzards Bay planned and planted the front garden of 21 Seventh Street, New Bedford, once the home of Nathan and Mary “Polly” Johnson and now the headquarters of the New Bedford Historical Society. The Johnsons were prominent abolitionists who befriended Frederick Douglass in his first days of freedom in 1838. More than 700 slaves found freedom through New Bedford’s Underground Railroad though how many came through the Johnson house is not known.

GCBB members conferred with the Massachusetts Historical Commission and researched historic garden design, then selected species of plants that are known to have been grown and available in the nursery trade in New England in the mid 19th century for inclusion in this project. The garden plan is intended to reflect influences that Polly Johnson, who is reputed to have visited France and possibly received training as a confectioner in Paris, might have known. It also features herbs, fruits and flowers that could have been used in Mrs Johnson’s career as a caterer and confectioner. The design includes a boxwood hedge, a pear tree that will be trained as an espalier, and a flowering quince.

The intention of the plan was to focus on plants that would have been available to mid 19th century gardeners in New Bedford, adding modern cultivars where necessary. The pear (*Pyrus communis* ‘Beurre d’Anjou’) pays tribute to New Bedford’s famous pear orchards. The quince (*Chaenomeles speciosa* ‘Texas Scarlet’) is a 19th century kitchen favourite used in pies, jellies, candies and beverages. Every garden that served a kitchen needed essential garnishes and flavourings and among the most important were curly parsley and culinary sage. Included with these are popular flowers that could be used in teas – anise hyssop, feverfew and sage, and flowers to be candied by being dipped in sugar syrup -- Johnny Jump Ups – and arranged on cakes and cookies.

Flowers for table decorations and pot pourri – the classic 19th century room freshener -- are also planted here, including apple geranium (*Geranium macrohizum* ‘Ingwersen’s Variety’), Iris, *Iris germanica* ‘Sea Swells’ – the cultivar name a tribute to New Bedford’s sailing heritage, *Iris pallida* ‘Alba Variegata’ – the orris root Iris, sweetly perfumed *Phlox paniculata* and lungwort, *Pulmonaria saccharata* ‘Mrs Moon’ to attract early pollinators to the garden.

The Historical Society has a \$2,500 donation for the garden; the garden club’s expenses are covered by the donation of a \$400 grant from Past President Fran Levin, a sum that she had received as an award for her community and mentoring work. Plans to develop the garden at the rear of the Nathan and Polly Johnson house are currently on hold until a back porch can be rebuilt and additional archaeological research completed by the Massachusetts Historical Commission.



TOLERANCES		REVISIONS	
EXCEPT AS NOTED	NO.	DATE	BY
1. TREES	1		
2. FENCES	2		
3. UTILITIES	3		
4. ADJACENT	4		
5. EROSION	5		

NATHAN & BOB JANSSEN HOUSE			
OWNER:	AM	SCALE:	1/2" = 1'
DATE:	3-22-09	PROJECT:	ONE

10-20-09

Historical Background of Plants selected for the Front Garden

The garden framework includes a boxwood hedge, two fruiting plants – a Quince and a Pear, and the popular flowering shrub, cinquefoil or *Potentilla*.

- Boxwood: *Buxus sempervirens*, or common box is an evergreen shrub native to the Mediterranean. Polly Johnson spent some years living in France where boxwood has been popular in gardens since the late 16th century. It is traditionally used to make a pattern in both formal gardens and herb gardens. Boxwood was also much planted in the United States in the 19th century. It grows well in the New Bedford area where the Garden Club of Buzzard's Bay maintains a collection of boxwood selections at the Rotch Jones Duff house. In the garden at the Polly Johnson house the bed to the left of the stairs is divided into quarters by boxwood hedges, kept clipped low to show the pattern.
- Quince: *Chaenomeles speciosa* 'Texas Scarlet'. This spring flowering shrub was introduced from Asia, first to Europe, and later to North America. Botanically a member of the rose family, quinces flower in New England in early to mid spring with their fruits ripening in mid fall. Popular in Europe since the Middle Ages, the ripe fruit has a deliciously sweet fragrance. Polly Johnson would have become familiar with quince when she lived in France. They were one of the favorite fruits of the 19th century kitchen and were used in pies, jellies, marmalades, candies and beverages. When the fruit of a quince bush is ripe it looks somewhat like a golden skinned apple but one bite will reveal that it is too astringent to eat raw. Cut into a ripe quince and you'll see that the flesh is white, when cooked it turns a rosy pink.
- *Pyrus communis* 'Beurre d'Anjou'. 19th century New Bedford was famous for its pear orchards and this hard pear, believed to have been selected in early 19th century France, is one that Polly Johnson may have been introduced to in Paris. In the small town garden at the Nathan and Polly Johnson house every inch counts. This pear tree is being grown flat against the wall of the house, a method called "espalier" with the branches trained in a candelabra pattern. Not only does this save space, it brings more light and air to the branches and aids in ripening the fruit.
- *Potentilla fruticosa* 'Primrose Beauty' is a grey leaved summer flowering shrub with pale yellow blooms. This very hardy woody plant thrives in sunny, well-drained soils. The common name of "cinquefoil", referring to the five-divisions of the leaves, is used for both the perennial and woody forms of potentilla. As well as being ornamental in the garden some 19th century 'language of flowers' vocabularies translated cinquefoil as "beloved daughter".

The Kitchen Herbal -

- Anise hyssop, *Agastache foeniculum* 'Blue Fortune' is a long blooming perennial herb with spikes of blue flowers in summer. A member of the mint family the leaves, which are fragrant with the scent of licorice, can be dried and brewed as a tea or candied by dipping in sugar syrup. The flower petals are also edible and might be scattered on cakes or pastries or on a fruit salad. Agastaches can grow to 30 inches tall in sun to part shade and will attract bees and hummingbirds.

- Culinary sage, *Salvia officinalis*, has a long history in the garden and kitchen. From the days of the Roman Empire sage was revered for its many uses and was widely used for its medicinal properties well through the 19th century. Living in France Polly Johnson might have been aware of the folk remedy known as “Beggars Vinegar” – a mixture of sage, thyme, lavender, rosemary and garlic steeped in vinegar which was thought to strengthen the immune system. Although today sage is most frequently found adding flavoring to stuffing for the Thanksgiving turkey, in the 19th century it would also have been steeped for tea and used as a gargle for sore throats. Worldwide there are some 900 species of sage, but it is culinary sage that is planted in the Polly Johnson garden. A short lived perennial sage grows best in well drained soil with good sun and should be lightly pruned in early spring.
- Feverfew, *Tanacetum parthenium/Chrysanthemum parthenium* (botanists differ as to which name is correct) is a traditional medicinal herb found in many old gardens. Growing best in sun and poor soils, feverfew becomes a small bush up to 12 -16 “tall with citrus-scented leaves. It flowers in early summer with small white “daisies”. Considered to have both edible and medicinal properties, feverfew is being studied in alternative medicine where it has multiple uses including a tea made from the whole plant that has been used in the treatment of arthritis, colds, and fevers, and even as a foot bath for swollen feet. An essential oil from the plant is used in perfumery.
- Curly parsley, *Petroselinum crispum*, is said to have been the most important herb in the mid 19th century kitchen. Gourmets called it the crown of cookery – fish and cold meats were garlanded with it, finely minced parsley was scattered over sauces and stews as a final touch, and fried parsley was an essential ingredient for many savory dishes. Sprigs of curly parsley were also scattered over tea time sandwiches and buffet service foods. 19th century cooks, possibly including Polly Johnson, preferred the curly-leaved varieties called “double parsley and it is planted at the Nathan and Polly Johnson house.

Flowers for decoration, pot pourri and edible flowers.

- Apple Geranium, *Geranium macrorhizum* ‘Ingwersen’s Variety’. This hardy perennial geranium grows in shade and sun and is successful in less than ideal gardening conditions. The apple scented leaves are traditionally used in pot-pourri and perfumes. Pot-pourri – a mix of dried leaves and petals – was the classic 19th century room freshener. The French were noted for their fragrant mixes with recipes passed down in families.
- Bearded or German Iris, *Iris germanica* ‘Sea Swells’: In the 19th century it became popular to imbue flowers with a variety of symbolic meanings including sentiments and character thoughts. Using this language of flowers selected blooms would be combined in “tussie –mussie” bouquets to convey a message about the sender or to the recipient. Stems of flowers are pushed through a cut-paper doily and tied with ribbons. Iris, the Fleur de Lys --has been the symbolic flower of France since the 13th century. German Iris were said to represent ‘Ardour’. The pale blue blooms of *Iris germanica* ‘Sea Swells’ were selected for the garden at the Polly Johnson house in honor of New Bedford’s sailing heritage. Grow iris in sun with good drainage and plant the rhizomes close to the surface to prevent water-logging and rot.
- *Iris pallida* ‘Alba-Variegata’, the orris root iris, is a form of European iris that has been cultivated for centuries. The powdered iris root is used in perfume, soaps and oils both for

its sweet fragrance of violets and for a property that is known among perfumers as a "fixative quality". (When perfume extracts and perfumed powders are prepared it is essential to have fragrance gradually released – achieved by adding to the perfume preparation a substance such as orris root which delays the evaporation of the flower odor. Powdered orris root is added to the pure fat base that perfumers use in the *enfleurage* process.) In the 19th century starches and perfumed oils were mixed with orris root to make baby powders. Orris oil, which was blended with ointments to create a fragrant salve has been considered “worth its weight in gold” for centuries. When Polly Johnson lived in Paris most orris oil was distilled there and she could have been aware of its properties and value.

- Lungwort, *Pulmonaria 'Mrs Moon'*, is a woodland perennial from Europe that adds hues of blue to the early Spring garden. This perennial's leaves are typically deep-green with white speckles, (which gave rise to its common name which referred to lung-tissue) and the foliage adds interest in shaded gardens after the blooms are finished. Planting lungwort will attract the waking bees early in the season, essential to the success of the garden.
- Adding its own distinctive perfume to the planting at the Polly Johnson house is garden Phlox, *Phlox paniculata*, a native perennial that was exported to England in the early 18th century. There new cultivars were created and returned to American nurseries by the 1800's. By the middle of the 19th century garden or border Phlox was a top choice for fashionable gardens.
- The tiny flowers of *Viola cornuta*, Johnny Jump Ups, have been a symbol of spring for centuries. Thriving in part shade the flowers can be blue, purple, yellow or white and parti-colored and have been used to make yellow-green and blue-green dyes. The plants are self-fertile and are pollinated by bees. Centuries before cultivated pansies entered the horticultural trade in the 1830's, Johnny Jump Ups were known as Heartsease and associated with good thoughts in the language of flowers. The name of “pansy” derives from the French “pensee” –thought – think of Ophelia's line in ‘Hamlet’ – “...there's pansies, that's for thoughts”. What Shakespeare had in mind was Heartsease, the simple Johnny Jump Up. The charming flowers could be picked for bouquets and dipped in sugar syrup for confectionary decoration.