

Saving the Essence of an Historic Garden

By Nan Sinton,

Member of the Garden Club of Buzzards Bay

Fine trees, orchards, colorful flower beds—a stroll along County Street in the 1840s offered many sensory delights. By 1981 only the green acre of the house built for William Rotch Jr., later enhanced by the Jones and Duff families, remained.

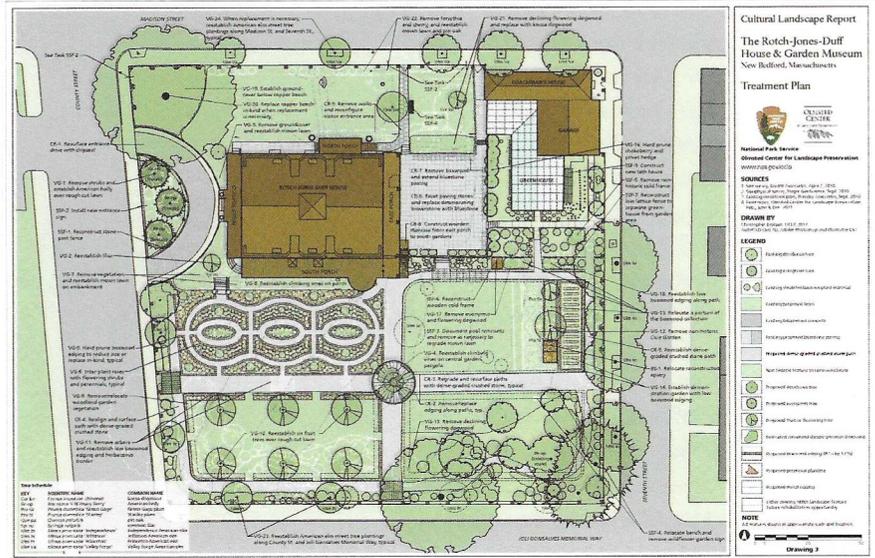
Saving the physical structure of a building is one task, but a garden is a living, changeable, ephemeral creation. Fortunately, the WHALE rescuers of the house could call on the Garden Club of Buzzards Bay, whose mission is “to educate and inspire members through horticulture, conservation, education, and community involvement.”

Established in 1930, members have included Amelia Jones, the plant-enthusiast daughter of Edward Coffin Jones, and Beatrice Duff, wife of the last private owner, Mark Duff.

In the first twenty years of the garden’s museum era, improvements took place as ideas arose. Then, when the RJD became part of the New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park, a grant-funded Cultural Landscape Report was initiated. In 2010 experts from the Olmsted Center for Landscape Preservation worked with club members, staff, and the RJD board to craft a report and plan. The garden would look to 1880–1910, during the Jones era, for its restoration, thereby strengthening the relationship between interior and exterior interpretation and displays.

The guiding principle of the “refreshed” garden would be that if William Rotch Jr. or Edward Jones were to walk along County Street they would recognize their property:

The “wild garden” would be returned to one quadrant of the



Treatment Plan. RJD House & Garden Museum

property with the extended winding path, installed in 2004, reduced and straightened.

A low boxwood hedge would define a new grass panel planted as a “gentleman’s orchard.”

The rose parterre would be replanted with boxwood edging and disease resistant long blooming roses.

Late 20th century design additions of a heath and heather garden and the civic garden would be removed. Period appropriate woody plants and additional boxwood hedges would be planted.

Working with the RJD Director, club members identified inappropriate or damaged plants for removal. New disease resistant elm trees, evergreens, and flowering plants were installed, and three American hollies planted in the entrance bed.

In 2013, as part of the centenary anniversary of the Garden Club of America, the GCBB funded the planting of the “gentleman’s orchard” containing

six heirloom apple trees: two each of Baldwin (said to have been planted in Boston’s first orchard in 1623), Roxbury Russet (a seedling from that same orchard), and Porter.

In 2018 the retiring Museum Director oversaw a total restoration of the rose parterre with fresh soil, new boxwoods, and donations of over 400 disease resistant roses.

In 2022 the boxwood collection, established at the RJD in 1986, was evaluated, re-spaced and mapped, and the 1992 *Boxwood Booklet* was re-edited and reprinted in 2024.

Propagating plants for the annual fund-raising plant sale remains at the core of club activities, with the 1982 greenhouse restoration the club’s first major project. In 2020/2021, when activities paused during COVID, members raised funds for a complete overhaul of the greenhouse interior.

It seems as though the “flowery gardens” of Herman Melville’s recollections are ready to continue for many generations.